



Once Upon a Rec Center Wish (City Wishes & Enchanted Dreams #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: I don't have time for wishes... but that didn't stop me from making one.

I need a new place to live. Due to neighborhood redevelopment, my apartment building will be demolished in a week. And I still don't have a new home. I plan to continue my search after I get some sleep.

Then my neighbor asks for one last favor. She needs someone to take her kids to the rec center for their lessons. I can't say no, so I'm back on the bus again with three kids in tow.

After dropping them off, I run into a strange man who hands me a card and tells me to make a wish. All I want is a place to lay my head.

That's when everything changes.

Instead of rushing for the bus, I run smack into a brawny alpha at the edge of a meadow. Wearing only a toolbelt and a trapper's hat, he promises me a place to stay and a mate if I agree to have shifter babies. It all seems like a dream, but what if I've finally found everything I've ever dreamed of?

Total Pages (Source): 20

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Falco

I stood and stretched my arms above my head as a loud yawn escaped from deep within me.

My bus stop was just ahead and I couldn't wait to get home and sleep.

I hadn't gotten much rest the day before while my neighbors were moving out, banging furniture and boxes against the wall as they made their way down the hall.

I should have been moving, too, but I hadn't found a place yet.

Sleep was my priority on that Saturday morning.

As I stepped off the bus a few minutes later, I spotted many moving vehicles again.

Some parked in front of the building, while others were lined up in the small lot beside the apartment.

Our building, along with others on the street, were set to be demolished as part of the neighborhood redevelopment plan.

In other words, the city wanted to get rid of the working-class people in the area to build condos none of us would be able to afford.

I'd been to many city council meetings, along with my neighbors, to object to the plan, citing that we would have no place to live, but the council members claimed

there were plenty of vacant apartments within the city limits, and the owners of our buildings didn't object to the buyout.

Ducking into the entrance foyer, I waved to Mrs. Barnaby, a kind older lady from the first floor who sometimes invited me down for a meal, claiming she'd made too much food and didn't want all the leftovers.

Her son was there to help her relocate, though I thought she'd told me she was moving in with him.

I climbed the stairs to the third floor, dodging and weaving past multiple people with boxes.

We had one week left in the place, but it seemed no one but me had delayed finding a new home until the last minute.

I had no vehicle and no one to help me move anyway.

Though I didn't have many belongings, I would have to abandon my mattress, but once I found a place, I could easily get everything else moved in a few trips using my duffle bag.

I unlocked my apartment door, and just as I pulled out the key, I heard my next-door neighbor open her door.

"Falco! Oh my gosh, I'm so glad I caught you." Megan hurried toward me, her hands fluttering in the air.

She was about to ask me for help. I knew the signs. Yet, all I wanted to do was sleep.

"Can you do me a huge favor?" She folded her hands in front of herself and somehow

managed to make her eyes appear glassy. “I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t so desperate.”

The same words she always used.

I sighed. “What is it?”

“It won’t take that long. I promise.” She squeezed my arm with a tentative smile.

“I need someone to take my kids to the rec center. All you have to do is drop them off. Candy would take them in her truck, but it’s only a regular cab which won’t fit all of them, and I don’t have a booster seat for the younger two anyway.”

I was confused. Maybe because I was so tired. “Um, how am I supposed to get them there?”

She smacked my shoulder. “By bus, silly. You take the bus all the time, so I figured you’d know how to get them there. I’ll pick them up after. Our new place is just a few blocks away from there.”

She used to get her boyfriend to drive them to the rec center on Saturday mornings before he’d come back to the apartment, and they’d have sex all morning.

I knew because her screams often woke me up.

But the guy had dumped Megan when she’d suggested they all move in together since she had to find a new place to live.

I sighed and closed my eyes for a few moments.

“I guess I could do that for you.” If she was moving out, it was the last favor I would ever do for her.

I doubted I would find a place near wherever she was moving.

And her kids were pretty cool. I babysat them quite often for her on Saturday nights, as I never had anything better to do.

“Okay, great!” She grabbed my shoulders and pulled me against her. “Thank you so much. They’re just eating breakfast now and their bags are packed with their lunches and everything they need.”

With my arms crossed, I nodded and gave her the best smile I could muster. “The next bus comes in twenty minutes. I’m just going to use the washroom and then I’ll be right back out to take them.”

“You are the greatest!” She smiled, her lip quivering a little. “You’ve helped me out so much while we lived here. I’m really going to miss you.”

I wanted to share the sentiment, but I was too tired. I just wanted to take the kids where they needed to be and get back home to sleep. Falling asleep on the bus was not a safe option.

By the time I returned to the hallway, Amelia, Noah, and Samantha waited for me, their adorable faces wide-eyed and their bodies buzzing with energy and excitement I wished I could absorb from them.

“Are you ready to go?”

“Yes!” They screamed with more enthusiasm than they should have for kids who were moving homes. Maybe they didn’t know. That was a conversation I was glad I didn’t have to have with them.

“Here’s money for the bus and a little bit extra as a thank-you.” Megan handed me

two twenties and a ten, probably not knowing the bus didn't give change. But it wasn't my money. I had enough to get them there plus extra to buy myself some groceries.

"Okay, let's go." I picked up little Samantha and carried her. She always got distracted everywhere I took her, and we wouldn't catch the bus if I let her walk. The other two followed along as we made our way down the stairs and outside to the bus stop.

Noah tugged on my hand as we waited. "Are you going to watch us during our swimming lessons?"

Guilt wrenched my heart. If he were my kid, I definitely would have stayed to watch him. "I need to get some sleep, but maybe another time."

Amelia crossed her arms and pouted. "Don't lie. We know we're moving and probably won't see you ever again."

That hurt even more. "I'm really sorry. I worked all night, and I'm only staying awake just to get you to your lessons."

"It's okay," Noah sighed. "No one usually watches us anyway."

My heart couldn't handle much more. With my lack of any kind of class, I doubted I would ever find a guy, let alone one who wanted kids. But if I did one day end up with children, I would try to attend all their lessons and events. Something these kids craved, as did I, growing up.

The bus came then, giving me a reprieve from the guilt of simply leaving them behind once I got them to their lessons.

Since most kids always seemed to run to the back of the bus, we took the two sets of double benches on the right side.

I claimed my spot closest to the aisle and put Samantha by the window so she wouldn't try to escape if I happened to doze off on the ride.

Amelia and Noah sat behind us, but with them kicking the back of my seat, I didn't think I would be relaxed enough to catch a quick nap.

At the Main Street terminal, we transferred from one bus to another.

The next leg of our trip was longer in terms of distance, but the bus took the expressway, so it didn't take much more time.

Plus, the rec center was only a couple stops after we exited the highway.

All three kids stared out the window with their eyes gleaming and mouths open, as if they'd never traveled on the expressway before.

Or maybe it looked different from the bus's height.

"There it is!" Noah pointed over my shoulder to the rec center in the distance, visible by the giant lit signs indicating which children's recreational programs occupied the building.

I applauded Megan for at least enrolling them in the various activities to socialize them and teach them new skills.

Maybe in her new place, and without her ex to occupy her time, she would make time to watch them. I hoped so.

“One of you can push the button.” I thought it was something kids liked to do, but I didn’t expect the three of them to fight over who got to press it, each of them shoving the hands of their siblings out of the way.

Eventually it got pressed, but I suspected someone at the front of the bus set the stop request off first. As we approached our destination, I stood and helped the kids get their backpacks back on.

“Wait!” I shouted, trying to stop the older two after they rushed past me to exit the bus.

“Get back here and hold hands.” It was too dangerous for them to run ahead.

In front of us, cars zoomed back and forth with parents dropping off their kids and patrons of other nearby businesses that shared the parking lot.

Noah tugged my hand, trying to get us all moving faster, but Samantha didn’t move quickly enough and refused to be carried into the building.

Amelia tapped my side. “You have to take Samantha to the daycare first. I’ll show you where that is. Then we go to swimming lessons, and Noah needs help getting changed.”

Great! I hadn’t been told about that. Or that I’d be grilled at the daycare because Megan hadn’t let them know that I was dropping off the kids. “She’ll be here to pick them up. She’s moving today and asked me to do her a favor.”

“Oh, yes,” the woman replied. “She did give us her new address last week.”

I sighed, just wanting to get the drop off over with and get back home to my mattress on the floor.

At the pool on the other end of the first floor, Samantha went into the girls' changing room while I took Noah into the other.

They were always dressed in their pajamas when I babysat them, I'd never had to change them, so I didn't know what to do.

I figured Noah would tell me. But he got his trunks and towel out all by himself and changed without my help.

"I ask Mommy for help just to get her to stay a little longer." Noah smiled sheepishly and shrugged. "But I know you want to sleep, so I did it myself."

"Thank you." I patted his head before taking him to the showers to rinse off before entering the pool room.

Samantha was already there, and they both gave me a quick hug before waving bye on their way to their swimming instructors.

That meant I had completed my obligation, finished my last favor for Megan.

I left the pool room then the changing room, sadder than I expected to be to leave them behind.

Maybe I liked having kids around more than I'd thought.

Lost in my feelings, and not paying attention to where I walked, I smacked into something hard. A person. An older, bearded gentleman wearing a hooded robe.

I quickly stepped back. "I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

He stared at me, his head cocked to the side. "Do you have kids here?"

“No.” I shook my head. “I just dropped off my neighbor’s kids as a favor.” I didn’t know why I told him that, but suspected him of being someone’s grandfather, probably doing the same thing.

“Ah.” He nodded. “Well then.” Reaching into his robe, he grabbed a business card then handed it to me. “Maybe you could use this. But be sure to read the back first.”

I took the card from him and quickly skimmed the back of it to understand what he meant.

I saw the words Enchanted Forest , shifter , and male pregnancy .

I wasn’t sure if I was dreaming or if my tired brain was playing tricks on me.

All that stuff was fictional. Sure, I’d read mpreg fan fiction but never expected an older gentleman to share that type of story with me.

When I glanced back up, he was gone. Not a trace of him as I spun around to catch another glimpse of the elder man.

Maybe he’d been advertising a new fan fiction site.

I flipped the card to the other side. No website. Only the words Make a Wish .

My tired mind was confused, but I headed toward the front doors.

A wish... I would love a place to live, a million dollars, and a family.

A real family that cared about each other.

Not like my parents who had beat me in a drunken stupor, trying to turn me straight.

Leaving had been the safest option, but between staying at various shelters and finally getting an apartment only to lose it again, I'd struggled ever since.

The automatic doors opened in front of me as I thought about what I would wish, truly wish for. "Right now, I simply wish for a place to live." And sleep. The two things I desperately needed.

I walked out of the rec center, hoping I wouldn't have to wait too long for the next bus.

But instead of the concrete and asphalt parking lot I expected in front of me, I stepped into a meadow.

I glanced behind me, wondering if I'd gotten lost in my sleepy daze and wandered out a back door.

But the rec center was gone. It was just me in a meadow with tall grasses and little pink, yellow, and white flowers.

A light breeze blew through them, rustling the stems. The sound made me even more tired.

The sun had started to set, which was impossible since it was still morning.

I had to be hallucinating from being so exhausted.

Maybe that meant I didn't have time to get home.

My body was making me sleep. I was about to lie on the ground—I could sleep anywhere—when I heard the quick pounding of feet. Someone rushed toward me.

I didn't have time to turn and see who before the being smacked into me. Hard. I fell over. The last thing I remembered was a bare-chested man with buckteeth, a beard, and a red-and-black plaid trapper hat leaning over me.

“Sorry! I'm so sorry!”

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Vern

I waved to the other beaver shifters, trying not to act suspicious as we all left our work site for the evening.

We'd finished adding what the outer-worlders called a bathroom to the health and healing hut.

Rauh, the healer for our village, believed it necessary for any outer-worlders who would have to stay there.

And for any of us who had to be in our human form.

While others of my kind preferred to stay in their beaver form as much as possible and live in our dam, I liked my human body.

Maybe it was because I wanted to look like the outer-worlders to find a mate.

I had a hat and a tool-pouch that I wore as often as possible, even when not working.

When I saw my reflection in the water, I definitely felt like one of them.

I doubted I would ever get the opportunity to have a mate, but I prepared for the day that might happen anyway.

Every day after we finished our project, I collected scrap wood under the pretense of taking it beyond the meadow to a spot where it would decompose and return to the

earth.

In reality, I saved the chunks to carve out little figurines, similar to the ones Lonnie had brought with him from the outer-world when he'd crossed over to become Banir's mate.

Each small statue had a special meaning to him, and while I often gave the ones I crafted to the children of the Enchanted Forest, I hoped to give the special ones I saved to my future mate.

I couldn't wait for the day I gifted them to him.

Sadness diluted my hope as I remembered I wasn't anyone special in the Enchanted Forest. Just another builder.

The youngest in my family. There were so many others ahead of me in line for a mate from the outer-world, whenever one of their kind decided to make their wish and arrive in our world.

I shouldn't hope so much, but I couldn't help it.

Those with mates seemed so happy, especially when they had children.

Plus, they stayed in their human form much more once mated.

That wouldn't be a problem for me. I looked forward to as many reasons as possible to keep my taller and less hairy form.

I paused on the path, taking a big breath before releasing it as a heavy sigh.

Maybe I would never have a mate, but that wasn't going to stop me from carving the

pieces.

I did enjoy the quiet time away from work and the dam, and more occasions to remain in my secondary body. But I would never stop hoping.

With renewed optimism, I raced to reach my favorite spot and I thought about what I wanted to make.

I'd already carved out many trees, a beaver, the sun and moons, and even created a miniature version of the house I wanted to build for my future mate.

It had all the features Walter, Nelson, and Lonnie said were necessary for outer-worlders, plus some extra space for our future children. Yep, I was already prepared.

Suddenly, a pop sounded in the air directly in front of me. A noise I had never heard before. Then I slammed into a being. Hard. I couldn't stop my own momentum and fell right on top of him. Miffs!

I quickly scrambled off. "Sorry! I'm so sorry!

" Had I been that distracted that I hadn't seen him in front of me?

But I was sure I was aware of my surroundings even as I daydreamed about a mate.

I had to be sure no one followed me to see what I was really using the wood for. So, where had he come from?

I stood then reached down to help the man up. My nose twitched, catching his pungent scent of burning rot before I realized he wore clothes that covered almost all his body. He was an outer-worlder.

“Oh gosh!” I brushed the dirt from what I’d learned was his shirt. “I really am sorry. You appeared right in front of me, and I didn’t expect you. Miffs, it’s not even my job to expect you. I’m not supposed to be here.”

The man glanced around. “I don’t think I’m supposed to be here, either. Where are we?”

I rubbed my hands together, sure I would get in trouble for greeting the outer-worlder.

It was supposed to be Holden or Chauncey who welcomed them as the security team for our world.

“This is the Enchanted Forest. Well, not exactly. The forest is there.” I pointed to my right.

“And on the other side is the meadow, the edge of our world.”

“The Enchanted Forest?” He reached into his pockets with his brows wrinkled, as if searching for something. “The same Enchanted Forest that was mentioned on that card?”

“Um, yes.” I nodded quickly before looking over my shoulder, hoping someone came quickly to find this outer-worlder so I could get going. “That card would have been given to you by Ahmed. He’s a wizard.”

“A wizard, huh?” The man chewed on his bottom lip.

“Yes.” I nodded again. “He finds mates for us in the outer-world, gives them cards, and then we all wait for them to wish their way here.”

He wrinkled his nose. “And that would make you a shifter?”

My heart fluttered a little, happy this being had at least a little knowledge of our world.

“Indeed. I am a beaver shifter. Do you want to see?” The first time I shifted as a young kit, I’d gotten stuck between forms, unable to take in enough magic to reach my human form.

Possibly one reason I preferred to stay in my bipedal body.

The man shrugged as a slow smile spread across his lips. “Why not?”

I unclipped my tool belt and rested it on the ground with my hat on top of it.

Taking a deep breath, I felt the man’s gaze travel up and down my body.

Hard to read his expression, I didn’t know if he was impressed or completely disgusted with my human form.

Though I hoped for the former, considering I tried so hard to look like his kind.

I clenched my fists then let the magic flow out of my body and into the ground, returning me to my animal form.

Everything tingled from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

Slowly, the magic drained from me as my body shrunk, my hair returned, and my tail unfolded from my back.

When I worked, the process occurred much faster, but it was strange having an outer-

worlder watch.

I glanced up at him to see his reaction.

But instead of his eyes lighting up in awe from seeing me shift, his whole body seemed to wobble before he sat on the ground.

Quickly reabsorbing the magic from the ground that provided all animals in my world with the ability to shift, I transformed to resemble his kind. “Are you okay?”

He chuckled, but it didn’t sound natural. “I must be overtired. The words on the back of that card the strange man gave me about alternate universe fan fiction have invaded my dreams. Please just make sure I get on the 72 bus.” Then he lay on his side and closed his eyes.

My chest fluttered in panic. Had I done something to harm the outer-worlder when I’d run into him?

Miffs, I was in big trouble. Probably even more so when one of the security guards arrived and realized what I’d done to him.

I thought about running away, about returning home and pretending I knew nothing about the being who had crossed over.

But I couldn’t. He needed someone to watch over him, especially as it became dark.

I would take whatever punishment I deserved for crashing into the outer-worlder, but I wouldn’t leave until someone came to properly greet him.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:07 pm

Falco

I had the strangest dream. About a beaver who looked like a man.

There was a wizard. And a forest. I opened my eyes, expecting to be on the bus, as I knew I hadn't made it home because I couldn't feel the broken springs of my mattress.

Instead, I wasn't anywhere near the city.

There really was a forest. A naked man, save for his tool belt and the red-and-black plaid trapper hat that he wore.

Was he really a beaver, or had I just imagined that?

Sitting against the trunk of a tree, he whittled away on a small log, carving out larger chunks and using a file to shape the wood.

Regular tools I remembered from shop class.

I watched him for a long time, not wanting to let him know that I was awake.

I needed to figure out where I was. And how much of what I thought was a dream was real.

The unclothed man was one hundred percent real, and a damn fine specimen, too.

He had wavy, strawberry-blond hair that seemed to be kept trimmed, and a beard the same color, also neatly kept.

Not a body-builder type, but his wide, firm chest and thick arms explained why I fell when I smacked into him.

Wait! If he lived in another world, how did he have tools from my world? The wizard?

Geez, it all sounded like some fantasy tale rather than reality, but I was definitely not on a bus, at the rec center, or at home.

And if I was at a park in the city, someone would have called the cops already to report the beaver guy for indecent exposure.

Maybe I fell and hit my head, and I was actually unconscious in a hospital.

That sounded like the most plausible explanation.

I decided to enjoy my fantasy while I could.

There was no point in missing out on such an attractive man who didn't run the other direction when he saw me.

Carefully sitting up, I decided to chat with him. "My name is Falco."

He startled, dropping his wood and tools. "Oh, I didn't know you were awake. You were in such a deep sleep and for so long, I didn't know what to do except stay with you and wait for security to arrive."

Security? Because I was the problem? "Um, what will they do when they get here?"

All I did was sleep, apparently. I didn't understand why that required security.

The beaver shifter stood and brushed off his firm, round ass and thick thighs.

“Oh, Holden will just show you around. He'll probably introduce you to Nelson, his mate, or Walter or Lonnie, who are all outer-worlders like you.

They'll explain how things work here. Then you'll get a tour of the village.

Chauncey will do the same thing, but he won't be happy with me.

I wasn't supposed to find you. Please don't tell either one of them that I ran into you.
”

So, I wouldn't be locked up somewhere. A plus for the fantasy my brain played out.
“And what happens after the tour? Where do I go then? Do I go back to my world?”

The man's face paled. “Oh, I hope not. We really need your kind to stay. After the tour, you'll get a house assigned to you while you choose who you want to be your mate.”

“Wait, wait, wait. I get a house of my own and get to pick a boyfriend?” Yep, I had to be on some good drugs at the hospital.

Because that wasn't a reality that was ever possible since leaving my abusive alcoholic parents who tried to “beat the gay out” of me.

Or maybe even earlier in my life than that.

I wasn't born into a family that would allow me a happy ending.

Though I planned to enjoy this one as long as it lasted.

“Yes.” He leaned forward and nodded like a bobblehead. “Us beaver shifters build the houses. You can pick one that’s already built for now, and, if you want, I can make sure one is built exactly the way you want it. We really need outer-worlders like you to stay.”

I pointed both index fingers to the forest. “Well, sign me up. Take me to Holden so we can get started.”

“Oh, well...” The man shuffled in front of me before heading a different direction. “Holden actually lives this way. I don’t know if he’s on duty, but we can check his house first.”

“Great.” I caught up to him, feeling surprisingly rested and anxious to find the new home I desperately needed, even if only in my head. “By the way, what’s your name?”

“Oh.” He paused, tapping his fingers on his tool belt as he stared at his feet. “I’m Vern, but my name is not important. There are many others in the village who need mates.”

“Vern.” I liked the way it sounded coming from my mouth. “Well, Vern, it is important to me, and I’m glad to know your name and to know you.” I was sure there was a reason he was the first shifter I met in my fantasy.

His cheeks flushed. “I really need to get you to Holden. He lives with Nelson and their children just up ahead, by the pond.”

We followed a well-worn path along the edge of the forest, with wild grasses on the other side of us.

The sun shone down on us, but it wasn't too hot like I was used to.

There was a strange lack of insects. On the ground and in the sky.

Even in the city parks, there were masses of the pesky things, and I was always swarmed by fruit flies when I took the garbage out to the steel bin behind the fast-food restaurant I worked at.

With a sigh, I smiled. I never wanted to wake up from this dream world.

The path ahead widened, and the grasses cleared, revealing a pond and a large log cabin.

Had Vern and his fellow beavers really built that place?

With its intricate wooden inlays around the entrance, it seemed like something only possible to be built by a decades-skilled carpenter.

The guy leading the way seemed so young, even with his facial hair.

Before we reached the door, three boys burst out of the entrance, pushing each other out of the way and shouting.

They ran past us toward the pond, and right before they reached the water, their bodies shrunk.

I squeezed my eyes shut before opening them again, to be sure I really saw their bodies changing.

In another couple of moments, they were turtles, swimming over the surface before diving down until I could no longer see them.

I shook my head. “Turtle shifters?”

Vern nodded. “Yes, Holden is a turtle shifter. They are from Holden and Nelson’s first clutch. But there are rumors going around the village that Nelson is eggbound again.”

A human laying eggs? And a person assigned male at birth at that. There was no way any of the magical world could be real, no matter how much I wanted it to be.

A blond-haired man came to the door shortly after. He seemed to be there to shut the door behind the kids but paused when he saw us. “Oh, hi. Hi, Vern. It’s good to see you. Who’s this?” He quickly looked me up and down. “Wait, are you an outer-worlder?”

I shrugged. “Apparently.”

Vern fumbled his hands together. “His name is Falco. I was walking past the meadow, and I found him there. No one came to greet him, so I brought him here.”

“Well, I’m glad you did.” The man’s kind smile moved from the beaver shifter to me. “I’m Nelson, a former outer-worlder. It’s good to meet you.”

I shook the hand he held out for me, shocked by how real his touch felt. Dreams weren’t supposed to produce the same nerve response in my skin as reality. Something wasn’t adding up.

“I know I’m not supposed to be out there, but I like to wander on my own sometimes.” Vern chittered beside me, anxiously twiddling his thumbs. “I’m not trying to steal anyone’s job. I really didn’t mean to find him.”

“It’s okay.” Nelson patted his shoulder. “You did good in bringing him here.”

“I just don’t want Holden to be mad at me. Or to tell Chauncey or even Banir. I don’t want to get into trouble.”

With Vern’s anxiousness, I worried what kind of reaction he expected from the other shifters of this world. Was it really somewhere I wanted to be? Maybe my dreams were about to turn into nightmare territory.

Nelson chuckled. “You’re not going to get into trouble, Vern.

They will all be thankful you were there to greet Falco.

” He turned to me as he released a heavy breath, still brandishing a warm smile.

“Can I offer you anything to drink? To eat? I know how confusing and unnerving arriving in this world feels. I’m sure you have a lot of questions, and I’ll answer them in a few moments, but if you want anything, please just ask. ”

I opened my mouth to tell him I just wanted a chance to sleep some more, but I couldn’t say the words.

I really did have a lot of questions. Didn’t know if I could sleep inside a dream while I pondered the world I’d arrived in.

I started to doubt this was a dream at all.

“Can I... Can I have a drink of water?” Drinking wasn’t possible in a dream.

Not without making a mess in the bed immediately after.

“Yes, I’ll get a pitcher and some glasses and meet you outside.” Nelson tapped Vern’s shoulder. “Can you take Falco out to the table, and I’ll meet you there?”

The beaver shifter nodded, though he still seemed on edge with ridged movements and short responses. "I'm happy to help. Helping is what I do."

Vern led me to a table set up closer to the pond where I'd seen the turtle shifter kids enter the water.

When I sat in one of the metal chairs, something I assumed wouldn't be available in the Enchanted Forest, my hands and legs began to shake.

I gripped the arms of the chair to try to stop the motion, but it seemed to double the bounce in my legs.

And Vern's own anxiousness didn't help my sudden onset of worry.

Part of me wanted this world to be real, especially if I would be given a place to live.

I fretted about the cost. Not money but something else I didn't yet understand.

Why was the beaver shifter so worried about having met me at all?

Who was supposed to greet me when I arrived? And why hadn't they shown up yet?

I caught movement from the house, and saw Nelson exit, walking beside a man in nothing but a loincloth. Another shifter? Vern tensed beside me, and I gulped, even though the new person smiled with kind eyes as he approached.

"Vern!" He approached the beaver shifter who stood and accepted the man's hug. "Thank you for bringing the new outer-worlder here. You did exactly what you were supposed to, and I truly appreciate that you were there to greet him."

Vern's worry seemed to diminish, though he still seemed jittery. Was it me? Did he

not like those from my world? An outer-worlder, I thought they called me.

“And you!” The man turned to me, his smile even wider as he reached out his hand in greeting. “I’m Holden, one of the security officers for the Enchanted Forest. Welcome!”

“Falco.” I stood and took his hand and felt immediately comforted by his warm handshake. Not aggressive but friendly. “Thank you, I think.”

He chuckled, as did Nelson. “I remember when my mate first arrived here. We were both rather timid around each other, and it took some time for him to accept that this world was real and not some dream.”

I nodded, returning to the chair. “Yeah, I get that.”

Nelson set a glass of water in front of me before shooping Holden and Vern away. “Okay, you two can leave. Keep an eye on the boys while I chat with Falco and let him know how things are here.”

With the two shifters between us and the pond, Nelson took a drink before setting his glass on the table. “So, ask away. I know you have a lot of questions. I certainly did.”

I released a nervous chuckle. “Um, yeah. I still don’t know if this place is even real, or just a dream.”

He gave me a smile of understanding. “I remember feeling the exact same way. I assure you, it’s very real. You received a card from Ahmed and wished your way here. Magic doesn’t seem to exist in our world, but it’s what brought you here as well as this furniture.”

I nodded, my suspicions about the chair confirmed.

Nelson leaned closer. “So, what exactly did you wish for?”

“A place to live,” I spit out, unable to hold my answer back.

“That’s it?” He sat back in his chair. “No boyfriend?”

I shook my head. “I never had the chance to think about a boyfriend. My apartment was being demolished to make room for community revitalization. I hadn’t found a place yet.”

Nelson nodded, as if in understanding. “I was living with an ex because I needed a place after I found out my boyfriend at the time was seeing others. And then I lost my job. But I did wish to find a life-long partner.”

I smiled a little, surprised by the difference between the shifters and those from my world. Nelson wore clothes I was used to, had a believable story, and lived in a home that seemed to combine both worlds. “I really get my own place?”

“Yep.” Nelson folded his hands on the table. “But it does come with some strings.”

I nodded. “Of course. What are they?”

“You’re here because all the shifters are looking for a mate. So, you’ll be expected to choose one to start a family with.” He leaned closer. “But don’t feel obligated to pick the first one who pays you attention. Some of them are jerks. Choose your mate for love. It is possible here.”

“You keep saying mate and family.” I rubbed my hands across my lap. “How does that work?”

“Ah.” He sat back and crossed his legs. “That’s where the magic comes in again.

It took me seeing it and experiencing it myself to fully believe, but I did bear children.

Or, eggs, since my mate is a turtle. But once you find a partner you want to be with, you will be united in a mating ceremony.

Shorter, sweeter, and more magical than a traditional wedding from our world.

After that, you will have the ability to get pregnant by your mate. ”

I covered my mouth as I yawned, my tiredness creeping back. “I’ve read about male pregnancy in fiction but never expected it to actually be reality. This still all seems so unreal. Are you sure this isn’t a dream?”

Nelson tilted his head to the side and smiled.

“It’s going to take a few days for you to get adjusted enough to come to terms with where you are.

But when you do, I hope you decide to stay.

Sure, we have less amenities here than in our home world, but it’s a much more relaxed way of life.

Something I didn’t realize I wanted until I got here. ”

It all sounded perfect to me. Too perfect.

That was why I had such a hard time believing.

Yet, I planned to give it a chance, as Nelson suggested.

If I woke up, it would be a huge disappointment, but nothing would have changed in the life I was used to.

And if the Enchanted Forest really existed, I would experience many of my fantasies come true.

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Vern

“I’m sorry I was out in the field last night.

I didn’t mean to come across the outer-worlder.

And I would have brought him sooner, but he fell asleep so I stayed with him until he woke.

” As much as I was glad another had come to the Enchanted Forest, I hadn’t expected to be the first one to meet him.

And I expected to be chastised by my brothers for being at Holden’s instead of working.

“It’s okay.” Holden sat on the log by the pond and patted the space beside him. “I’m glad you were there. Neither Chauncey nor I were able to get there when the arrival happened, so I’m thankful you happened upon Falco. Bringing him here as soon as he awoke was the right thing to do.”

I breathed out a heavy sigh, relieved I wasn’t in trouble. “So, what’s going to happen to him now? Who do you think will be his mate?”

Holden chuckled. “I remember being as nervous as you when Nelson first arrived.” He waved to one of his sons as they breached the surface of the water. “First, Falco needs a tour of the village and then he needs to be assigned a home. I would like you to do that for me, if you’re not busy.”

“Me?” I lost my balance, nearly falling off the log. “Why me? Surely there is someone more important to show the outer-worlder around.”

Holden gripped my shoulder to steady me. “What do you think of him? The outer-worlder?”

I didn’t like that he avoided my question, instead forcing me to answer his. “He’s nice. Cute.” My cheeks warmed with the admission. “But what I think doesn’t matter. I’m the youngest beaver in my family. There are many others in the forest. I don’t stand a chance.”

Reaching behind me, Holden squeezed my shoulder. “I wasn’t very high ranking in our community, either. Yet Nelson chose me. Maybe there was a reason you were there when Falco crossed into our world.”

My heart squeezed at the idea, but I shook my head, refusing to believe Holden’s words. I couldn’t. If I believed and Falco didn’t pick me, I would shatter. What did I have to offer him anyway?

Another of the three boys, Ellis, came to the edge of the pond half shifted. “Uncle Vern, come swim with us.”

I looked to Holden, and when he nodded, I removed my cap and tool belt before letting the magic drain out of me and into the ground.

Back in my beaver form, I hurried to the edge of the pond and dove in.

Swimming with the young turtles was fun, though not something I regularly got the chance to do.

They loved to play hide-and-seek, and sometimes, I felt more welcomed by them than

I did others in the forest. None of the children of the outer-worlders looked down on me the way some members of the community did, so I didn't mind spending time with them when they wanted.

I was too big to find a spot to hide in the pond, so when it was my turn, I headed back on land, tucking myself in between some reeds. Oswald found me first, hiding with me until his brothers found our spot.

"I'm hungry," Ashwin declared, starting to shift into his human form. "And I don't want pond plants today. Let's go back to the house now."

His brothers joined him and I followed behind, anxious about the favor Holden had asked of me. Of all the beings in the forest, how was I the right person to show Falco around? I found my hat and tool belt then headed toward the house.

The boys rushed inside, but Nelson met me at the door. "Falco had a bite to eat, and he's lying down now. While he's resting, you can eat, and we can discuss where to take him when he wakes."

Nelson's confidence in me to give Falco a tour gave me more courage than Holden asking me for the favor.

As a former outer-worlder, he knew the places that were important for a newcomer to be made aware of, and he believed I would know the best house for Falco to live in since I helped build them.

So when the sleepy outer-worlder awoke, I knew where to take him.

We started at the community garden. It was quite a distance from Holden and Nelson's place, but Falco didn't have any problem keeping up with me, even as the sun began to set for the second time since he'd arrived.

“This is where we get most of our food. Lee, a satyr, plans how everything grows and makes sure others harvest the crops when they’re ready. ”

Falco took everything in with wide eyes and his mouth slightly open. “Wow, this is amazing. We had a community garden for a bit, but it was nothing this expansive. How much does it cost to use it?”

“Cost? What do you mean?” I wasn’t familiar with the outer-worlder term.

“Cost. As in money.” He rubbed his fingers together. “What do you have to do or pay to be able to get food from here?”

I shook my head. “We don’t have money.” I did remember Lonnie using that term before. “Everyone in the community helps out somehow. We all have assigned roles and we all share the food.”

He slowed down and shuffled his feet. “What will my role be? The only thing I did in my world was clean up after everyone and take out the garbage.”

I stared at him, surprised he didn’t already know what his role would be. I assumed Nelson would have explained that to him. “You will choose a mate and have babies.”

“That’s it?” He scrunched up his face as if confused.

I gasped. “That’s the most important role in our community.” How did he not understand how pivotal he was? “All of you coming from the outer-world allow our kind to survive. Without you, we would die off. That is a lot, so we don’t ask anything else of you.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I remember thinking it would be nice to have kids one day back in my world, but I never expected it to be possible. This is...this is hard to get

used to. But I woke up here again, so I'm beginning to believe this isn't a dream."

I didn't expect to ever have my own kids, either, let alone be guiding around a new outer-worlder. Though his yearning had a much higher chance of happening than mine.

He didn't have many questions at any of our other stops, even as my brothers glared at me as we passed the various projects they worked on.

In fact, he remained silent until it came time to pick his home.

"You helped build each of these houses?" Falco ran his hand along a banister in one home and across a table in another, pieces I'd specifically worked on. "The craftsmanship is amazing."

I tried not to let his compliments set my heart racing. He was just admiring my work, which had nothing to do with how he felt about me. "Have you seen one you would like to live in?" Nighttime had fallen upon us, which meant, it was time again for all the forest beings to rest.

He shrugged and scuffed the ground with his shoe. "I'm not used to having a choice of where I live. I usually get stuck with the cheapest place because that's all I can afford."

"I can fix up any house for you. If there's something you don't like or want changed to suit you and where you want to raise a family, I can do that. That's my role. Just let me know." If he didn't pick a place soon, I would find myself in trouble for keeping an outer-worlder out all night.

He circled around, eyeing the most recently built homes. Then he pointed to the one at the far end that backed into the woods. It was my favorite, too. "That one. But I do

want changes made. Can you guarantee that it would be you working on it?”

I nodded, thankful he’d finally chosen one. “Yes, I will spend my days refitting your home until it is to your liking.”

“Wonderful.” He leaned closer and pressed his lips to my cheek. “Thank you, Vern. You have been so kind to me since I arrived, and I look forward to spending more time together.”

While I wouldn’t mind spending more time with the outer-worlder, I worried I would find some way to mess things up and make him decide to leave the Enchanted Forest. Yet, if fixing his house to suit his needs made him stay, I had to ensure that was done as soon as possible.

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Falco

I expected to sleep well that second night after my tour of the shifter village in the Enchanted Forest. I didn't.

Barely managed to doze off at all. Every time I closed my eyes, I worried I would wake up and be back in my world.

While that might have been what many from my world would have hoped for after arriving in the strange and seemingly magical land, I wanted to stay in the Enchanted Forest. Even with no electricity and water only available from a well, I had much more going for me than I did only a couple days earlier.

Thankfully, I remained in the bewitched world where animals used magic to shift into humans and that same magic might one day allow me to get pregnant.

I picked my house with that in mind. It had plenty of open space for a family but also some private rooms for my future mate and me, and our children.

The place didn't need any renovations, but I asked Vern to customize it for me simply to spend more time with him.

He was kind from the moment I met him, though maybe a bit flighty.

His interactions with Nelson and Holden's children left me in admiration and my heart fluttering.

And he looked rather hot in his trapper's cap and tool belt.

Plus, he was good at his work. So many reasons for him to stick around.

The nudity in the magical world baffled me at first. The beings all wore clothes in their human forms but not in the way I was used to.

Whereas it was illegal to have one's genitals uncovered in my world, that wasn't the case in the Enchanted Forest. Except for the outer-worlders like me, everyone seemed to pick one or two pieces of clothing and wore only them.

A shirt, a hat, a pair of shorts, leg warmers, whatever.

And they usually didn't change what they wore from day to day.

I wanted to wear less clothes, to not stand out so much as an outer-worlder nor need to use the manual washing machine I'd found in my house as often, but the self-consciousness that had been ingrained into my head from childhood kept me from even taking off my shirt in front of others.

I worried I was too pale, too skinny, and not muscular enough to let anyone see my bare chest or legs.

But with all my flaws, Vern still showed up every morning with a smile, ready to update my house.

Usually before I'd had a chance to finish my instant coffee.

Yet, one morning, I woke up early enough to make him some breakfast. It wasn't much considering beavers are herbivores.

No eggs and bacon for Vern, what most people enjoyed for breakfast at the fast-food restaurant I worked at in the outer-world.

But I had learned from Nelson to make a biscuit using aquatic plants. He said his turtle family loved them.

I had just pulled the confections off the woodstove when there was a knock on the door.

Fumbling to place a towel on the table so I didn't leave a burn mark on the wood, I set the tray of biscuits down.

They didn't look burnt or raw like the first couple batches I'd attempted on my own.

I rushed to the front entrance and smiled at the beaver shifter as I opened the door.

I was thankful it was only him that morning instead of him along with some of his brothers who occasionally came to help.

Vern wore his usual attire and I couldn't help but notice his cock in between the pockets of his tool belt.

I tried not to stare at the penises of all the forest beings, but coming from my world where I usually only saw people nude in porn or the odd time an elderly neighbor with dementia had a bad day, it was difficult not to.

And with Vern showing up semi-erect, I found it especially challenging.

Overworked and underpaid in my old life left me no time to think about sex and having a boyfriend.

Yet, my whole purpose for being given the magical card to transport me to the Enchanted Forest was to become a mate for one of the shifters.

That led to sex being on my mind often. I'd never jerked off so much in my life.

Not even when I was a young teen. And though I was told I could choose any unmated shifter in the forest to be my mate, the one I imagined the most as I had my hand around my shaft was Vern.

"Good morning."

I tried to shake off the sudden desire coursing through my veins but ended up licking my lips as I lifted my gaze to meet his.

"Good morning. Please come in me. I mean, come in." Internally, I cringed.

I didn't know if he would understand the euphemism.

Though part of me hoped he did and would decide to take me right there in the foyer. "I made some biscuits for you."

A blush crept over his cheeks and under the edges of his beard. "For me? You didn't have to go through all that trouble."

I moved to the side to allow him in then hurried over to get him a biscuit. "I wanted to. You've done so much for me since I arrived, and I wanted to show my appreciation."

He waved his hands in front of himself. "It's my role in this community to do this for you. I don't need any remuneration from you. My goal is to finish here as quickly as possible so that you can choose your mate and start a family."

His words settled as an ache in my chest, as if he'd rejected me. I hadn't asked him to be my mate, but with his rush to be finished with my house, it didn't seem he wanted the position. "Oh. Well, I got the recipe from Nelson. He said you liked them when he made them."

"Well, thank you." His cheeks reddened a little more and his eyes sparkled as he took a bite, though neither helped to ease the pain of his dismissal.

Maybe he didn't understand the gesture. Maybe I had to throw myself at him to get him to understand what I wanted.

"And I was wondering... Since you're almost finished here, would you like to join me for dinner?"

Please? It's tradition in the outer-world to feed people to show our appreciation to them.

"If I could get him to stay for dinner, perhaps I could convince him to stay overnight and to make my fantasies of him into reality.

"I..." He adjusted his hat, tilting it slightly forward. "I'm not used to your outer-world traditions. But I can honor them for you. I should be finished tomorrow unless you have any other requests, so I will accept your invitation for tomorrow if that suits you."

I didn't know whether to find more adjustments to be made to my house to get him to keep coming around, or to settle with him staying the next day for dinner and hope I could find a way to seduce him before the evening ended. "Tomorrow. Yes, that's perfect."

"Okay." He held up the biscuit. "This is really good by the way. Thank you. And now

I'll get back to work so I don't waste any more of your time."

I swallowed down the urge to yell at him that he wasn't a waste of my time, that he was far from it, but I didn't think raising my voice at him would help me win his affection.

Instead, I had to take a trip to the community garden to gather supplies for the special dinner and also figure out a way to seduce a beaver shifter.

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Vern

As I sanded the mantel in Falco's home, my heart ached.

My last day working on his house had arrived.

No more waking up before the sun rose to head to his place and be greeted by his smiling face.

No more having him watch me and compliment my craftsmanship.

Only one more goodbye where I longed to stay but knew my place in the Enchanted Forest and trudged home anyway.

I would have completed the renovations much quicker if I'd had more help, but my brothers preferred to complain about all the time I spent at the outer-worlder's house instead of assisting me.

They weren't the only ones to grumble in my presence. Other shifters had as well, claiming they wanted to woo Falco, but I was always there. I couldn't help it that I took pride in my work and yearned to give him nothing but perfection.

The invitation to eat with him caught me by surprise.

I had never expected Falco to feed me. But the day before, he'd made me the most delicious biscuits.

Even better than those Nelson baked. Once I finished for the day, I'd agreed to stay for dinner.

To eat with the outer-worlder and spend more unnecessary time with him.

Not that I didn't want to be in Falco's presence, but the more time I did, the harder it became to leave.

Though I had to. I wasn't meant to be his mate.

He needed me out of the house so eligible shifters could court him and attempt to win him over.

"Dinner is simmering now." Falco strolled in from the kitchen wearing a pair of shorts and some piece of clothing I wasn't familiar with.

It was one piece of material that covered his chest and wrapped around his hips, but left his back exposed except for where the material had strings that were tied together.

I'd never seen the outer-worlder in so little clothing before, and I wondered if he finally felt comfortable enough in the Enchanted Forest to shed some of his wardrobe.

My heart quickened as I wondered if I had been the one to help him immerse himself into our world.

No. I winced at the thought. He'd often spent time with Nelson's family and in the village when he wasn't watching me work. Time had helped him adjust to his new home. Not me.

He stepped closer and placed his hand on my shoulder. "Why do you look so sad?"

Are you worried about my cooking?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm sure it's delicious if it's anything like the biscuits you gave me yesterday."

"Then what is it?" He brushed his hand down my arm, sending a thrill of sensation under my skin. "Are you sad this is your last day to work on my house? Because I am."

"No." I stepped back from his touch, the sensation it caused attempting to break down my resolve. "I worry I've taken up too much of your time, kept suitors away when you should have been entertaining them to find a suitable mate."

He sighed and gave a quick nod. "I do have someone in mind. But I worry he doesn't want me as a mate."

My heart ached with his admission, but I swallowed my pride to try to give Falco a glimmer of hope.

"Any unmated shifter would be foolish to not want you as a mate. You're beautiful inside and out, and if the smell coming from your kitchen is any indication of the deliciousness of dinner, you're a great cook, too.

Don't worry. You'll find the right mate. "

Leaning forward, he kissed my cheek. "Thank you, Vern. I guess have to wait for him."

My heart fluttered faster and harder than I'd ever felt it before.

The feel of Falco's lips on my skin lingered even after he pulled away.

I envied whomever he ended up choosing for his mate.

Because if I received touches, kisses, and more from him every day, I couldn't help but be happy.

Though I doubted I would ever want to leave our home, instead, spending as much time with him as possible.

I glanced around the place, imagining myself as his mate. I would still be greeted by him, only after work rather than at the beginning. I could still enjoy his meals, and I wouldn't have to say goodbye, only "see you later." I sighed. If only I had a chance to wish on one of Ahmed's cards.

"Come." Falco motioned me into the kitchen where he'd already set dishes on the table while I'd been lost in my own imaginings. "Dinner is served and I want you to let me know what you think of it. It's important for me to know how to make food that you enjoy."

That I enjoy? Miffs, he must have misspoken because it was his mate who would be eating his food.

Maybe he'd meant me as an herbivore. Or perhaps he'd been eyeing one of my elder brothers as a possible mate.

I didn't know if it would make my heart ache more or less to see him with one of the beavers I shared a dam with.

Tamping those feelings down, I stood and shuffled into the kitchen. Regardless of my longing for the outer-worlder, I was thankful to have spent as much time as I had with him, and for his cooking.

Though I considered devouring the delicious vegetable stew he'd made, I ate it slowly, yearning for the evening to never end.

It was dishonest of me to take up more of his precious time than I needed to, but feared the heartbreak I would feel when I had to finally say goodbye.

Yet when Falco began to yawn, I knew the time had come for me to leave.

I helped him clean up before gathering up all my tools and heading for the door, unsure of what to say before I left.

When he met me there, he held out his arms before wrapping them around me and leaning his head on my chest. All the tingles of longing I'd felt before were nothing compared to the rush of lust that swept through every part of my body. Even my cock.

Falco noticed, cupping my sac in his palm. "You don't have to leave. You can stay the night."

I jumped back, slamming into the door, terrified that I'd led him to think I was a suitor. "No. It's best if I go. I gotta go. Now."

My hands shook as I fumbled with the door handle.

When I finally opened it, I was ready to run home, but then I remembered the gift I'd made for the outer-worlder.

I picked up the carving that I'd left outside.

"Here." I shoved the piece of wood at him.

“It’s a gift to celebrate your home being finished. ”

I didn’t wait for his reaction, didn’t even worry about how to say goodbye.

I simply left, rushing as fast as I could to get away.

Though the farther I got from his house, the more my heart ached, and I became overwhelmed with sorrow.

I couldn’t go home. Not in such a state.

My brothers would chastise me for having any feelings for Falco, for hoping for something that was impossible.

Instead, I headed toward Holden and Nelson’s place.

Not to see them. I didn’t want to talk to anyone.

But to sleep at the pond. Once at the edge, I released the magic that kept me in my human form then waddled into the reeds.

As a beaver, I didn’t feel the same longing or heartache as I did in my human form.

I simply rested until I had to get up in the morning to start a new project.

One where I wouldn’t yearn for impossibilities.

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Falco

I'd slept in my house in the Enchanted Forest for many nights already, gotten used to the smells and sounds, or lack thereof compared to my old place in the outer-world.

I should have slept soundly knowing my home was finished and officially mine.

I hadn't. Instead, I'd tossed and turned the entire night, thinking only that Vern would not be coming in the morning to greet me at my front door.

Yet, I hoped he would be there anyway. Especially after I'd made him dinner and practically threw myself at him.

I'd yearned for him to stay so I could tell him I wanted him to be my mate before we'd made love.

But he'd run away instead, leaving me with a carving he'd done of a flower.

It sat on my mantle, but that didn't seem to be a good enough spot to display more of his exquisite craftsmanship.

With a sigh, I pulled on a shirt and a pair of shorts before making my way into my kitchen.

I craved a cup of coffee to take away the sharp edge of tiredness that lingered behind my eyes.

But that meant I had to start the woodstove and I didn't want to wait for it to warm up just to boil some water.

The lack of convenience in the magical world still took some getting used to, but I learned to do without most of the time.

Something I was already used to in my own world.

After lingering on my couch for a while, hoping to catch a bit more sleep, I decided to head into the village.

Even though I didn't expect him to be there, it was still a huge disappointment to open my door and not see Vern.

My heart ached. The beaver shifter was the being in the magical world who knew me best, and if he didn't want to be my mate, would anyone else?

Was there something wrong with me? Would I be returned to my world unmated and unhoused? I dreaded that possibility.

Wishing to find Vern, I headed for the new group of houses being built.

They were on the other side of the village, and I couldn't help but notice the way the other villagers looked at me as I passed.

It was like they knew something about me.

Some big secret. Did they all know why Vern had rejected me?

Quickening my steps, I hurried to the construction site. Many beaver shifters changed back and forth between their human and animal form as they needed. Yet, only one

stayed in their human form wearing nothing but a trapper's hat and a tool belt.

As I watched Vern work, cutting wood and hammering it in place, I couldn't ignore the huge sadness that washed over me. Even in the Enchanted Forest, I wasn't enough for the man I wanted. Watching him only made his rejection hurt worse.

I decided to head back home, and when I turned around, I smacked into a hard body. He grabbed my arms and chuckled. "Whoa, little outer-worlder. Where are you going in such a hurry?"

A quick glance at the being in human form revealed rock-hard abs, a narrow and chiseled chest, and a full and long package between his legs. A much different body type than Vern. "Um, home?"

The shifter grinned, one side of his lips reaching higher than the other. "Well, let me walk you there. I've been meaning to stop by, but you never seemed to be alone."

Alone? Why alone? He could have stopped by any time Vern had been there and still been able to talk. To get to know me. Why had the beaver shifter kept him away? Was he afraid of Vern?

"Name's Hank, by the way. I'm a raccoon shifter. Want to see me shift?"

Shaking my head, I kept walking. "I know what a raccoon looks like. We had lots of them near where I worked. They were always getting into the garbage."

He grabbed my arm, jerking me to a stop. "I don't eat garbage."

I pulled out of his grasp, not even sure if he knew what I meant by garbage. Without excessive packaging, there didn't seem to be more than compost waste in the Enchanted Forest. "I never said you did. Only that I know what raccoons look like

because of the ones in my world.”

His nostrils flared. “I think I’ll wait for another outer-worlder.” As he disappeared into the woods, I felt more relief than confusion with his departure. Hank wasn’t even close to the kind of mate I wanted.

As I approached my home, I saw another man on my front porch.

He was older with thick hair on the top of his head and a long, fuzzy beard, both a combination of gray and strawberry blond.

He had a dad bod, though he wasn’t any of the fathers I’d met since I’d arrived.

And he wore a pink lace tutu around his waist. The same kind Samantha paraded around in when I babysat her and her siblings. Only his seemed a few sizes larger.

When he spotted me, he stood. “Falco! I’ve heard so much about you, and I just had to come and meet you.”

Once again, I wondered why he hadn’t come earlier. “I’ve been here for several days.”

He chuckled as he waved off my comment. “You were busy getting used to being here, but now that you’re settled, I wanted to introduce myself. I’m Victor. My other form is a porcupine. Do you know what those are?”

I nodded then waved, feeling like I should somehow greet him. “I saw one once when I was on a field trip in elementary school. All those quills.”

He rolled his shoulders back, thrusting out his chest. “Yes, and I’ll have you know I’ve never had a need to expel any of mine.”

I wasn't sure what that meant in terms of living in the Enchanted Forest, but he seemed proud of that fact. "Good for you. Would you like to come in? I think I have some biscuits made."

They were left over from the ones I had made for Vern, but Victor didn't need to know. He seemed kinder than Hank, and if I was to entertain suitors in order to find a mate, I might as well start with him. Since Vern didn't seem to want me.

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Vern

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop thinking about Falco.

I expected the change in work sites to help me forget about him, but it only made me that much more aware of how I yearned to have him near me, how much I missed him.

No amount of chastising myself for allowing feelings for him to develop made them go away.

I knew he wasn't destined to be my mate, yet I couldn't contain my immense longing to fulfil that role for him.

And after I imagined him watching me from a distance while I worked, I resolved to visit him at the end of my day.

Just to ease some of the ache. I knew it wasn't a wise decision, the same as spending the previous night with him wouldn't have been, but I needed some kind of relief from the hard ball that had been churning in my gut all day.

I would knock on his door to say hello, and when he responded, I would leave again.

Seeing him and hearing his voice would be enough.

It had to be since I could never expect anything more.

As usual, I waited until most of my brothers had left the site, cleaning up behind them.

Instead of packing up the scraps of wood to carry beyond the meadow, I piled them off to the side and planned to take a double load the next day.

With Falco's house in the opposite direction, I doubted I would find time to do both.

On my way to visit the outer-worlder, I wondered if maybe I did have a chance with him.

After all, Holden said he hadn't expected to be mated to someone from their world.

He'd taken Nelson immediately to Banir under the assumption that the first outer-worlder would become mates with the leader of the Enchanted Forest. Yet, it hadn't worked out that way.

Perhaps there was a chance for me, though I was sure many in the community, especially my brothers, would object.

Yet, Falco had asked me to stay for dinner.

He'd kissed me; the memory of his lips on my cheek still made my skin tingle.

And he'd even wanted me to spend the night at his house.

All that had to mean something. Plus, no one else had come to the house while I'd been working on it.

If someone else had wanted Falco as their mate, they likely should have been there courting him as fast as possible before he fell for someone else.

That day I'd first encountered Falco, Holden had reminded me that the outer-worlder got to choose his own mate, that no one could claim him or force him into any type of relationship.

So, maybe he would choose me. If I didn't keep running away from him.

As I approached the house, the sudden confidence I'd felt drained away, and a sense of dread replaced it. I understood why when I heard voices. Someone else was with Falco, and they talked on his front porch.

I darted off into the trees to avoid being seen.

I didn't want anyone to think I was spying on the outer-worlder, even though that was exactly what I did.

Careful where I placed my steps, I crept closer to find out who sat with Falco.

I didn't need to see the person as I recognized his voice.

It came like a punch to the gut. My older brother, Onyx, was courting the outer-worlder.

Any chance I thought I had with Falco instantly drained away.

Onyx was smarter, had a more fit human body, and had always told me that I had nothing to offer any outer-worlder.

Perhaps he'd been right all along. I'd been dumb to think I even stood a chance, even if it was only for a few moments.

Yet, the idea of Falco being with anyone else other than me ripped at my heart.

I stumbled back, and when I did, something dug into my foot.

I immediately jumped away to find out what I'd stepped on.

A wooden carving. The one I'd given to Falco the night before.

He'd accepted it from me then tossed it away.

Had he done that because I'd rejected his request to spend the night?

Or had the idea of a gift from me repulsed him?

Maybe he'd seen me as nothing more than a builder tasked with finishing his house.

Because that's all I was. That's all I ever would be. I picked up the flower and stuck it in my tool belt. Falco didn't want it. No outer-worlder would ever want it or any of the other carvings I made.

I rushed back to the building site. I did have time to take the scraps beyond the meadow after all. On my way, I stuck to the edge of the forest, not wanting to chance running into another outer-worlder. I never should have been there to meet Falco. That had been my first mistake.

No, my first mistake had been carving all the figurines, holding onto the thought that I would one day give them to my mate.

Because no one wanted to be my mate. No one would ever be my mate when there were so many others available for the outer-worlders that arrived.

I had no chance with Falco or anyone else.

After tossing all the scraps into the compost pit, I threw the carvings I made in one by one, each of them tearing away a piece of my heart as they disappeared into the mass of water, wood, and vegetation.

I vowed to no longer even entertain the idea of having a mate. I only had one purpose, and that was to build. It was the only thing I was good at and could feel proud of. Because any other feelings only led to an unbearable ache in my heart. And I never wanted to experience that pain again.

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Falco

I had to get away from my house. Every time I tried to relax, a new shifter showed up at my door, trying to woo me with whatever prowess they guessed would impress me.

Yet, none of them did. They all seemed too cocky, like I would automatically be enamored with them simply because they showed up.

And none of them were Vern. No matter how hard I tried to give the other beings a chance, none of them reminded me of the kind, thoughtful, and sweet beaver shifter I'd met when I first arrived in the Enchanted Forest. Not even any of his brothers.

Instead, they'd insulted him in front of me yet couldn't figure out why I didn't want them as my mate.

Maybe I would never find a mate in this world. Maybe it was never meant to be. The mate I wanted didn't want me, and I couldn't stomach the thought of being with any of the others.

I wandered through the woods, trying to avoid the path and anyone else who decided to visit my home.

I wasn't in any mood to entertain another suitor.

As I kept walking, the scenery became more and more familiar.

I ended up at Nelson and Holden's home, Nelson outside watching their sons swim in

the pond.

I paused, unsure if I wanted to be there. Would he tell me I had to leave if I didn't pick a mate soon? But he'd found a way to be with the mate he wanted instead of the one the community assumed he'd be with. Perhaps he could give me some advice.

"Falco." Nelson waved me over. "It's good to see you. Though you look like something is bothering you."

I sat on the log beside him and stared at the ground. "Will they send me back if I don't find a mate?"

He chuckled as he ran his toes through the grass. "I've never heard of an outer-worlder being sent back to our world unless they requested it. But all the outer-worlders I know are mated, so I'm not sure. Why? What's going on?"

I gulped, unsure if I wanted anyone to know the truth, to give them a reason to send me back. But I couldn't solve my problem if I didn't tell someone. "There's someone I want as a mate. He's kind and sweet and treats me well."

"But," Nelson encouraged when I didn't continue.

I released a heavy breath. "I don't think he wants me. Yet, he seems to be the only unmated shifter I've encountered who doesn't."

Nelson tilted his head to the side. "Okay, who is it? Maybe I can help."

My cheeks warmed as I readjusted my position on the log. "Vern. It's Vern. But he ran away from me when I invited him to spend the night and I haven't talked to him since."

Nelson clapped as he laughed. “That’s great! What are the odds?”

My stomach churned with the idea of my life being some kind of joke to him. I’d dealt with that in the other world and had hoped to escape that here. But maybe it was me. I was the joke.

“Sorry.” Nelson stilled beside me. “I shouldn’t have laughed, but I do find it humorous that we both fell for the first shifter we met. And I think I can help you.”

I turned to face him. “You can? Like actually help me get Vern and not just get over him?”

He nodded before leaning forward to check on his sons.

“Vern is probably thinking the same as Holden did. He likely believes he’s not meant for you, that there are many others that would make better mates for you.

He’s the youngest in his family, and his brothers have emphasized that hierarchy his entire life. ”

“Oh.” I fumbled with my fingers. So maybe it wasn’t me. “Maybe that’s why he kept mentioning that his presence was keeping suitors away. He didn’t understand that I wanted him to be my suitor.”

“Yep.” Nelson stood and walked closer to the edge of the pond. “Oswald, leave Ellis alone. Let him swim where he wants.” He stepped back to me. “Sorry. I love being a dad, but sometimes having three is a lot.”

I chuckled. “Yeah. I used to babysit for the three kids who lived next door. I’d actually dropped them off at the rec center before I arrived here.”

Nelson snapped his head in my direction. “They weren’t abandoned there, were they? Were you supposed to take them home, too?”

I shook my head. “No. I just had to drop them off before I slept then started looking for a new place to live. Their mom was going to pick them up. Was probably going to be the last time I saw them anyway.”

He smiled. “You liked those kids.”

“Yeah.” My heart warmed thinking about them, the same as when I thought of Vern. “They made me want to be a father one day. But I didn’t believe it to be possible aside from the slim chance of adoption until I arrived here.”

Nelson slapped the log. “Then you have to convince Vern that he’s your mate.”

“And how do I do that?” All my attempts had failed in the past.

Tapping his fingers on his lap, Nelson pursed his lips. “First, you have to find a way to get him to your house.”

“How?” I doubted inviting him for dinner would work anymore since I no longer had a reason.

Nelson shrugged. “Find a reason to get him to come that he can’t resist. If not food, then tell him something is broken. He’ll feel obligated to fix it.”

I gasped at the idea. That would work perfectly, because Vern was so proud of his craftsmanship. “But how do I make him stay? How do I convince him that I want him?”

With a smile, Nelson squeezed my shoulder. “Be completely honest with him. And if

that doesn't work, throw yourself at him."

My body jittered as I filled with a new hope. But would the plan actually work? Could I convince Vern that I wanted him as my mate? Only one way to find out.

I jumped off the log, anxious to return to the village. "Thank you, Nelson."

"Good luck," he called as I raced off.

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Vern

With a collection of tools in my belt, and a log over my shoulder, I headed to Falco's house.

Though I was positive I always built sturdy tables for the homes in the village, he claimed his rocked when he put weight on it, as if the legs weren't the same length.

Perhaps one of my brothers had built the one in Falco's home.

But I refused to let anyone believe that I had crafted a faulty table.

Part of me dreaded going to the outer-worlder's house.

I didn't want to see him with anyone else.

I knew one day he would pick a mate and start a family with that being, but the less I knew about any of that, the better.

Plus, I was still hurt that he'd tossed away the gift I'd given him.

Why had he come to me to get his table fixed if he didn't respect my craftsmanship?

Regardless, I couldn't say no, and when I reached his door, I released a heavy sigh before I knocked.

It didn't take Falco long to answer, as if he'd been waiting for me to get there.

But his smile and the delicious scent wafting from inside caught me by surprise.

I glanced over my shoulder to see if another being was coming up the path behind me.

Perhaps he'd been waiting for a suitor and he thought I was that man.

"Um, hi. It's just me. I've come to fix your table. "

His smile widened. "I'm so glad you're here. Everything is just about ready."

"Ready?" Aside from cleaning off the table and allowing me space to work, there was nothing else Falco needed to prepare.

"Yeah." His cheeks reddened. "I thought we could eat first. Before you take a look at my table."

I glanced behind me again. "Are you sure it's me you were waiting for? I'm Vern. I'm not one of my brothers."

He chuckled and reached out to squeeze my arm. "I know who you are. And I purposely asked you to come over. I just thought it would be nice to eat with you again. I've missed you."

He gestured me inside, though I remained reluctant about the encounter. There was something I was missing.

I made my way over to the table, and sure enough, it did rock when I rested my hand on it. Yet, I didn't get a chance to examine it, the top covered in a long cloth that almost reached the floor. Plus, Falco held a spoon in front of me, his hand underneath to catch any droppings. "Taste it."

I opened my mouth, hoping the concoction tasted as delicious as it smelled. When it hit my tongue, I was assaulted by flavors I'd never experienced before. "What is that?"

He drew back, a sudden pout overtaking his lips. "You don't like the stew?"

"No." I shook my head. "No. Yeah, it was unexpected. Caught me by surprise. But it's the most appetizing thing I've ever tasted."

His cheeks flushed again. "I'm glad you like it. I made this stew especially for you."

"Why?" I ignored the flutter of my heart, the hope trying to push its way into my mind.

Letting him fill me with unrequited longing would only hurt when I left again.

"Why would you make a special stew for me? Why not one of your suitors? You're supposed to be looking for a mate, not entertaining me. "

His bottom lip trembled before he stared at his feet. "I...I already found the person I want as my mate."

"That's great!" My gut twisted and I prepared to leave. I would just take the table with me. "Then what's the problem? Why am I here and not the man you want as your mate?"

He shook his head, and though he didn't meet my eyes, I could see the anguish in his. "He doesn't want me. No matter how hard I try, he pushes me away."

"Well, he's a fool. He doesn't know what he's missing. I would love for a chance to be your mate." I instantly regretted saying those words. I wasn't supposed to have

feelings for Falco, but they seemed to bring a sparkle back to his eyes as he tried to hide a smile.

“You would? You’d want to be my mate?”

I fumbled with my hands as I tried to think of a way out of my mess-up. I went with honesty instead of a lie. “Of course I would. But I’m not suitable for you. That’s why I don’t understand why you’re spending time with me, cooking for me, why you asked me to spend the night that one time.”

Falco shuffled closer, holding my arms and running his hands up and down the backs of them. “You know outer-worlders get to choose who they want as their mate, right?”

I nodded. “Some don’t like that rule, but I think it’s the way it should be. Especially since you leave your entire world behind to be here.”

Moving even closer, until there was only a breath between us, he gazed up at me. “What if I choose you?”

I jumped back. “You can’t. I’m not—”

He clutched my hand. “Not what? You just said you would love for the chance to be my mate. And I’ve had so many suitors over here, but none of them make me feel the way I do when I’m with you.”

My heart raced as I tried to contemplate Falco’s revelation. “But I don’t know how to court you. I don’t know how to be a mate.”

He smiled and squeezed my hand. “Neither do I, but we can figure it out together. And you can start by coming to my house every evening for dinner.”

“I...I...” His confession felt like some kind of dream and I worried I would ruin it all if I said the wrong thing. Yet, there was one thing that still bothered me, something that didn’t fit with his admission. “If you say you want me to be your mate, why did you toss away the flower I gave you?”

He glanced over at his mantle. “I didn’t. It disappeared one day. I don’t know what happened to it. I thought you’d come back and taken it.”

I shook my head. “I found it in the trees when Onyx was over. I thought you hated it and hated me.”

He reached up and cupped my cheek. “I could never hate you. You’ve been nothing but kind to me since I arrived here. I honestly don’t want anyone else for my mate. I only want you.” With his hands on my chest, he pressed up on his toes and kissed the corner of my mouth. “Will you be my mate, Vern?”

For a moment, I was so overwhelmed, I lost control of my magic and started to shift back to my beaver form. “Sorry,” I said, reabsorbing the magic. “Yes, I would like that. I would like to be your mate.”

“Good.” He kissed me again, this time with more power and movement from his lips.

I didn’t know what to do at first, but then a force unlike any other took over, and I pulled him closer while reveling in the contact with the outer-worlder who wanted me as his mate.

Me. The youngest of the beaver dam. The one who had accidentally run into him when he arrived.

If I hadn’t been there, would he have still chosen me?

When he pulled away, he smiled and squeezed my arm. “I’m really glad it was you there to meet me. Seems like it was Fate.” His eyes twinkled before he chuckled. “Now, let’s eat.”

“What about the table?” I just remembered the reason I’d come in the first place.

After lifting the tablecloth, he pulled a wood shim from under one of the legs. “There was never anything wrong with the table. I just needed an excuse to get you here.”

My heart fluttered at the effort he’d gone to simply to bring me back to his house. Yet, it was worth it. I was going to have a mate much sooner than I ever expected. I just had to figure out how to court Falco properly and how to be a proper mate so he wouldn’t change his mind in the future.

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Falco

My confession brought Vern to my house every evening for dinner.

In the mornings, I walked to the community garden to gather the ingredients for whatever dish I dared to make for the beaver shifter.

Mostly, I put together stews and soups, but occasionally, I tried out some cold salads, including some with beans.

Vern enjoyed them all, never complained once about any of the food I put in front of him.

During dinner, we ate and talked, getting to know each other.

Yet, after several days, I felt no closer to having him as my mate than I had when I revealed I wanted him.

After we finished, he would help me clean up, then sometimes we went for a walk and other times we chatted on the porch. And when it became dark, he headed back to his dam with a promise to see me the next day.

I wanted more. I wanted kisses that made my toes curl.

I wanted to lean on his shoulder or sit on his lap while we talked.

I especially wanted sex. Only I didn't know how to get any of that from him.

We talked so much and knew a lot about each other, but whenever I touched him, he tensed.

His reaction didn't make me want him any less, but I yearned to find a way to make him completely comfortable around me.

I was sure time would help, but in the Enchanted Forest where outer-worlders were brought to produce offspring, I didn't know how much time we had.

I didn't know if the wizard would appear and tell me that my stay was over and I needed to go back to my world because I hadn't gotten pregnant in the allotted period of time.

When I met Nelson in the village, he told me I worried too much, that everything would work out.

But I still fretted. I didn't want to go back to my world.

There was nothing there for me to return to.

In the Enchanted Forest, I had a house—that was a big plus—other outer-worlders whom I considered friends, and no need for money I didn't have.

Aside from keeping house, I had to find a mate and have children.

I was partway there but hadn't completed the mission yet.

And I really wanted to have kids. The more time I spent with the families of Nelson, Walter, and Lonnie, the more I couldn't wait to have offspring of my own.

Not every outer-worlder who arrived wanted the same, but they always had the

choice.

No one was forced to stay and have a baby with one of the awaiting beings.

Yet, it still felt like a dream to me. If only I could find a way to get intimate with Vern.

As I waited for him to arrive for another evening, I paced in front of my door. I didn't know whether to greet him naked and jump on him as soon as he arrived, demanding he take me, or to continue to hope he would one day accept my invitation to spend the night.

Lost in my thoughts, I startled when he knocked on the door.

I opened it right away, still without a plan.

Vern held out a large wooden bowl with four smaller ones inside. "Hi. I made these for you."

I couldn't help but smile as my body filled with warmth.

He'd brought a gift for me every time he arrived for dinner.

Yet, I didn't know where he found the time to make them.

As I took them from him, I pushed up to the tips of my toes and cupped the back of his neck before kissing his cheek.

"Thank you. You really are the sweetest."

His cheeks flushed and he chattered his buckteeth, a reaction that seemed to happen

when I flustered him.

Not wanting to make him any more distressed, I took the bowls and headed into the kitchen. “These are ideal for serving leafy salads. You really are the perfect mate for me.”

Though he had followed me, he froze at my words.

“What?” I set the bowls on the counter and rubbed his elbow. “What did I say? You have to let me know what makes you uncomfortable so I can change that.”

He shook his head. “It’s not that. It’s just... I thought you would have changed your mind about wanting me as your mate. I know you’re still being approached by possible suitors. And courting you is something I just don’t know how to do. I’m not fit to be your mate.”

With a sigh and a smile, I stood toe-to-toe with Vern and held him around his waist. Glancing up at him, I contemplated how to tell him everything I needed him to understand.

“Vern, I don’t want anyone else. I only want you.

I’m one hundred percent sure of my decision.

Plus, you have already been courting me for a while now. ”

He wrinkled his forehead but didn’t make an attempt to back away from me. “I have?”

I nodded and smiled. “You customized my house to be exactly the way I wanted.”

“My brothers helped. It wasn’t just me.”

Leaning my head against his chest, I listened to his rapid heartbeat. “Yes, but you were the one who volunteered to do it in the first place. And you spent the most time here.”

“It’s my job in the community though. It’s expected of me.”

I took a deep breath and cuddled even deeper into his chest. “You come for dinner every night and we spend time together after.”

He sighed. “Only because you invited me. I don’t want to seem rude.”

“I invited you because I like spending time with you. Plus, you bring gifts every time you come. That’s definitely something a suitor would do.”

He finally wrapped his arms around me. “That’s because I like to make things for you. I always wanted to be able to craft things for my mate.”

I smiled against his chest and lowered my hands down his back to just above his buttocks. “Then will you finally agree to make me your mate? Will you spend the night and be intimate with me?”

He chittered again. “But I don’t know how. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I stepped back and gazed up at him. “I don’t mind taking the lead, showing you how to be intimate with an outer-worlder.”

Though he spent most of his time in his human body, that didn’t mean he knew everything about how it worked. I had a feeling most of the shifters didn’t fully understand their bipedal form.

He gulped and I had the sudden urge to show him just how good he could feel with all that magic running through him.

“Will you let me touch you? Intimately?”

With a slow nod, he began taking deeper, more controlled breaths.

I started by reaching around him to undo his tool belt. As I set it on the ground, I lowered to my knees. “Are you okay? Still all right with me going to touch you?”

“Yes,” he hissed as he ran his hand across my hair.

I wanted to make the encounter so good for him, wanted to bring out his sexual prowess. At the same time, I didn’t want to overwhelm him if he’d never touched himself before.

Reaching for his cock, I ran my palm along the underside. I needed to know how he would react to my touch before I went much further. I couldn’t take him in my mouth right away to suck him off until I made sure he wouldn’t scream or run away.

As his shaft began to harden, he moaned and leaned his hips forward.

“You like that, do you?”

He chewed his bottom lip and nodded quickly. “Feels good. I didn’t know—”

Not giving him a chance to finish his sentence, I spit on the tip of his cock and circled my thumb around his tip.

He released a shuddered gasp. “That’s...unbelievable.”

“I’m going to make you feel so much more.” Wrapping my fingers around his shaft with a soft grip, I pumped to make him even harder.

“Oh-h-h,” he stuttered, reaching back but finding nothing. “I need... My knees are weak.”

“Come.” I stood and guided him over to my couch. When he’d settled into the cushions, I held his cock once again. “I want to suck you off, to put my mouth around your cock and bring you even more pleasure.”

“Okay.” He gripped the cushions as I found a comfortable spot between his spread thighs.

I held him gently as I leaned over his shaft and circled my tongue around his tip.

He bucked his hips, sending his cock right to the back of my throat.

I gagged and my eyes began to water.

“Sorry.” He shrank back into the couch. “Sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean... See, I’m not made for this.”

I didn’t let go of him but met his gaze with a smile. “You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m glad I could elicit that reaction from you. And I want to bring you more pleasure. Are you ready?”

“I don’t know,” he whimpered, sounding both scared and worried.

“Will you let me try?” I continued to lightly pump his cock. “I really want to do this for you.”

He sighed then nodded. “Okay. Okay, if it won’t bring you any harm.”

I didn’t answer but took him in my mouth once more. With his tight grip on the couch, he seemed to be trying to hold back his reaction. Yet, as I bobbed up and down, he lost control. His hands shook as he placed them on my back, his lap, and then my shoulders.

“Oh, something is happening.” He pushed me off him, but I retained my grip. “I don’t... I can’t...” With the combination of a scream and a moan, he released, his come shooting onto his chest, his belly, and all over my hand. “Was that... Was that supposed to happen?”

I chuckled as he tried to catch his breath. “Yes, that was supposed to happen. Are you okay? Did you like that?”

“I... I think so.” He stared down at his chest and ran a finger through his release.

“Let me clean you up.” I stood and headed to the bathroom to get a towel. When I returned, his breathing had calmed some, but his facial features were wrinkled as if in confusion.

“What is it?” I asked as I wiped him off.

“Was that mating? Is that how we make children?”

“No.” I sat beside him and leaned into him. “That was simply for your pleasure. If you’ll let me, I’ll show you what mating is like after dinner.”

He wrinkled his brows. “I think that would be good. It seems there’s more to this human body than I originally believed.”

I laughed, both amused and hopeful that I had convinced Vern to be with me, that we would soon be official mates after a special ceremony and be on our way to becoming parents.

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Vern

As delicious as the bean salad Falco had made was, I had a difficult time eating it.

Both nervous and anxious about what was to come after the meal, I hoped to prolong our time at the table.

The thing he'd done to me earlier—what he'd called a blow job—had felt amazing and managed to awaken an intense desire inside me I didn't know existed.

I wanted to mate with Falco, to have sex with him, yet I had no idea how.

He insisted it was easy and he would guide me through it, but I still worried.

Although Falco claimed I was the only one he wanted as his mate, I worried I would mess up somehow and make him change his mind.

He stood up and took my dish from me. "It's okay to be nervous. I was leading up to my first time. But I promise you, it will be even better than what we did earlier."

My stomach churned and my heart raced. "How can you be sure?" I wanted to believe him, but previous experience warned me that I had screwed up many things in the past.

After he set the dishes on the counter, he stood beside me and ran his fingers through my hair, leaving my scalp tingling. "Because it's a connection like no other. And I have a feeling we were meant to be, that there is a reason you were near the meadow

at the exact time I made my wish.”

I gulped. Falco was so sure about me and him. I wished I shared his confidence.

He held out his hand. “Come. Let’s go to the bedroom and I’ll show you how it’s done.”

“Right now?” My heart pounded so fast, I felt it in my ears. “Shouldn’t we wait until we digest our food?”

He gave me the same endearing smile I saw Nelson give his kids. Did he find my nervousness amusing?

“You didn’t eat very much. I want to do this now, so you can stop being so distressed.” He squeezed my biceps. “Maybe you’ll work up the appetite you seem to be missing.”

“Okay.” I took his hand as sweat beaded across my skin. As much time as I spent in this body, there was still so much I didn’t know about it. And about Falco’s.

Once we reached the bedroom, he dropped my hand and removed the clothes he wore.

I stared in awe at his tiny outer-worlder body.

Aside from a smattering of curls across his chest, he only had curly hair around his penis, the hair on his head always as straight as the trunk of a tree.

And he appeared even more delicate, his ribs and shoulder bones visible under his skin. I didn’t want to break him.

When he crawled onto the bed, I momentarily considered leaving. How would it look if I brought harm to an outer-worlder?

But Falco crooked his finger at me. “Come here. Touch me. Get to know my body.”

As my worry amplified, I struggled to keep the magic inside me, to maintain my human form.

I didn’t want to shift while in the process of mating with Falco.

With an uneasy nod, I forced my feet forward.

One step at a time, until I reached the edge of the bed.

I sat beside him but didn’t know what to do next.

“Give me your hand,” he said gently, not making me feel foolish for my inexperience.

He brought my hand up to his cheek before he sucked one of my fingers into his mouth.

I gasped, immediately reminded of another part of my body that had been in his mouth earlier. My cock stiffened, and the desire inside me began to overtake my hesitation.

He smiled as he ran the tips of my fingers down his chest. Then he set my hand over his penis. “Feel me. Get to know what my cock feels like in your hand.”

I took him the way he’d held me, with a gentle grip and long, slow strokes. When he hardened in my palm, I couldn’t help the pride I felt. I had found a way to arouse

him. “Is this mating?”

He moaned before lifting himself onto his forearms. “No, not yet. This is foreplay.”

“Foreplay.” I let the word roll over my tongue. “Foreplay leads to mating?”

“Yes.” He sat up before grabbing me around the waist and tugging me onto the bed beside him. Far more strength than I’d imagined he had. “But let’s try some more foreplay first.”

More foreplay? I had a lot to learn. He pressed his body against me and tucked his knee between my legs.

Holding me close, he brought his lips to mine before he gave me another kiss.

This time, he didn’t let up and I kissed him back.

The buzz in my body spread and my inhibitions slipped away.

I held Falco close to me and he cupped the back of my head.

With his tongue, he slipped into my mouth, enticing me to meet his with mine.

The connection was rousing, making me curious about the bond we would feel when actually mating.

I became lost in the sensations, enjoying the rush at being in such close contact with Falco. He made me forget everything else as I succumbed to him.

I didn’t know he’d rolled me onto my back until he pulled away and straddled my waist. I gasped, getting air instead of breathing him in. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head, his cheeks flushed and lips swollen. “I think we’re ready to mate. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes.” I nodded, only a pinch left of the nervousness I’d felt earlier. Yet a stronger need filled me, one that vibrated from deep within.

Falco reached into the drawer of the nightstand I had built for him.

After withdrawing a bottle, he poured some of the liquid inside onto his palm before rubbing his hands together.

“I’ve been told that after we go through the mating ceremony, I will produce slick on my own.

Until then, I need lubrication in order for you to slide nicely inside me. Without this, mating will hurt.”

“Oh.” The last thing I wanted was for him to experience any pain during our encounter. “How much do you need? What do you want me to do?”

He smiled as he encircled my penis in his palm and spread the viscous liquid across my shaft. “Let me put this on you, and if you want to reach around and put some on the pucker of skin in between my ass cheeks, that would really help.”

“Okay.” Sitting up, I took the bottle and repeated the same motions as Falco before holding him closer to find the spot he mentioned. As I rubbed the entrance to the hole he described, Falco moaned, leaning into my chest.

I went to pull away, but he grabbed my wrist and held it there.

“Are you okay? Am I hurting you?” I didn’t know what to think of his reaction.

“No. This feels so good.” He rubbed his body along mine. “It’s been a long time since someone touched me there. Please don’t stop.”

Anything to bring Falco the same pleasure he’d brought me earlier. I circled around the entryway before gliding my finger across it.

“Yes,” he hissed. “Now, push gently inside.”

With a deep breath, I slid my slick finger into his passage. It was a tight entrance, but he never let go of my wrist or tried to pull me back out.

He began to rock his hips over my thighs, his belly gliding along my shaft at the same time. Closing his eyes, he had his mouth open as his breaths became heavier.

“Is this mating?” I hoped it was since he seemed to be relishing in the same pleasure I had when he’d given me a blow job.

“Not yet,” he huffed out. “Almost there. Are you ready? You’re going to experience this, too.”

I gulped. “Like what you did earlier?”

Falco nodded. He gently tugged on my wrist then pushed on my chest with his other hand. “Lie back. I’ll guide you in the beginning. Then you can pick what position you like best to fuck me.”

“Fuck?” I didn’t know what that word meant, had never heard him use it before.

“It’s another word for the process of mating.” He raised onto his knees and shuffled forward until my penis was behind him. “In my world, we have many words for it, including sex.”

Gripping my shaft, he slowly lowered himself onto me. I felt his puckered hole against my engorged tip. And then I was sliding into him. Clutching the blankets on his bed, I tried to maintain control of myself as my lower abdomen rolled with fire and sparks ignited in my head.

“Are you okay?” Falco placed his palm on my chest.

I sucked in a deep breath. “I’m not sure.”

He chuckled. “Does it hurt? Are you in pain?”

“No.” I held his hips as he settled even deeper over my shaft. “I just... It’s incredible.”

He gently rocked over me. “This is mating. This is what I want to do with you and only you.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, adjusting to the new sensations in my body.

As he gyrated his hips, I helped him, holding him and guiding him back and forth.

A phenomenon unlike anything I’d ever known streamed through every portion of my body.

At one time, I believed the magic of the shift to be the most incredible experience, but I’d been so wrong.

When Falco stopped moving, I worried he wasn’t feeling the same sensations. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No.” He shook his head with a soft smile. “I just know I’m not going to last long

since it's been a while since I've been properly fucked. And I wondered if you wanted to try a different position."

Some of the elation faded as I worried about giving him an answer. "I don't know. What do you want?"

He moved to kneel beside me and grabbed the bottle again. "Let's try something else. I think you'll like it just as much."

"Okay." Whatever he wanted. He knew far more about the process than me and hadn't yet brought me anything but pleasure.

"Stand at the corner of the bed."

As I did so, he remained on his hands and knees and slid his feet between my legs.

After rubbing more of the liquid across his glorious entrance, he lowered his front shoulders and chest to the bed so his rear end pointed at me.

"Now, fuck me like this. Push your cock slowly into me and grab my hips. Then you can rock in and out as fast or slow as you want. Whatever your body tells you to do."

With a ragged breath, I lined up my tip with his hole. Gently, I slid inside, feeling resistance and his grip for more at the same time.

"Yes, that's it." He pushed against me even more, taking me deeper. "You fill me so well."

I swelled with pride at his compliment, but an instinctive longing took over. Holding onto Falco's hips, I plunged in and out of him, letting the fervor of the motion consume me.

On the bed, Falco moaned, constantly asking for more and for me to push harder. I mated with an uncontrolled frenzy until a fire flashed through my body. Once again, I exploded out of my tip, this time into Falco.

He continued to push against me, stroking his own shaft.

With a cry that sounded like it might be heard by everyone in the village, Falco released his own burst of cream before sinking into the bed. “You are amazing. I knew you were the one for me.”

My heart beat hard in my chest as I tried to comprehend what we’d done and Falco’s words. “You liked that? I was good?”

“More than good.” He rolled onto his back with his arms spread. “You were perfect.”

Though I’d heard the word used to describe my craftsmanship, I’d never had anyone use perfect to describe me. “So, does that mean you still want to be my mate?”

“Of course.” He sat up and pulled me to sit on the bed beside him. “Let’s get cleaned up, and tomorrow we’ll go into the village together to figure out what we need to do to make it official.”

“I would like that.” After experiencing that connection with Falco and the bliss afterward, I finally understood why he believed we were meant to be mated.

Once we’d wiped away the evidence of our fucking, I slipped out of the room to claim my tool belt and hat.

Falco appeared in the doorway of his bedroom. “Don’t you even think about leaving. If you’re hungry, go ahead and have some of the salad I made. But you’re not going anywhere until the morning. And not without me. I don’t care what form you prefer

to sleep in, but I want you with me at night.”

I gulped away my guilt. “I... Okay.” Never in my life had I slept indoors, but I could do it for Falco.

Having a mate had always seemed like an impossible dream, but now that the possibility was within reach, I would do whatever it took to bring it to fruition.

Falco had experienced changes when he came to our world, and I would accept the changes I needed to make, too.

Letting my hat and tool belt fall to the floor, I met him in the doorway. He wrapped his arms around me and pushed up to his toes to kiss me. “I never used to believe in Fate until I met you, but I’m happy she brought us together.”

“Me, too.” I held his hips and guided him back to the bed.

“If you’re ready to sleep, I am, too.” A wave of exhaustion had swept over me shortly after my release.

If I wasn’t leaving, I needed to find a spot to settle for the night.

Especially if I let go of the magic and slipped back into my beaver form.

Falco

Moments after Vern left to work on the school that would one day be used to educate our children and the many others of the Enchanted Forest and surrounding area, I put on a pair of pants and a long-sleeved shirt before slipping on my shoes.

Normally, I would have visited the community garden, but I had other plans for the day.

I had to find a special gift for my soon-to-be mate.

The day after we'd been intimate, we arranged for our mating ceremony, and Vern moved his few belongings into the house I lived in.

We became a couple in every way except for an official service.

It took him a few nights before he decided to join me in bed, but I think I had worn him out that day.

Sex with him became less about me telling him what to do and more about enjoying the euphoria he managed to fill me with.

Once he figured out what to do, instinct seemed to take over, and he fucked me better than the few partners I'd had in my former world.

Not once did I ever yearn to go back to that place. Sure, I'd had to get used to living without some conveniences, but the Enchanted Forest proved much more fulfilling.

And my upcoming mating ceremony with Vern would ensure I wouldn't be sent back to the outer-world. Something I dreaded.

But I had to find Vern a gift. It wasn't part of the actual service, yet I felt it necessary with all the presents he'd brought for me and the extra time he spent to customize the house. I wanted to give him something back.

Heading out the door, I wracked my brain for any gift idea.

I wanted it to be something from this world, not the one I'd left behind.

Instead of going to the village, I took a slightly overgrown path through the woods.

I had no idea what lay ahead, as I'd never heard anyone talk about what lay beyond the village in that direction.

I knew the bear shifters along with other mystical creatures lived in the east. The meadow I'd arrived in was to the west, and many ponds and lakes could be found south of the village.

Yet, the area north of us remained a mystery.

One I planned to solve while on the hunt for the perfect present.

The elevation sloped upward as I traipsed over fallen logs and around overgrown bushes along the path.

My legs got a workout they hadn't had since I'd had to climb stairs in my apartment in the outer-world.

My new home was one-story and the village was on flatland.

When I returned, I would have to remember to stretch or I would cramp.

Farther into the woods, I still had no idea what to bring back for Vern. I considered a nice log, but I didn't want to put him to work with the gift.

The land eventually flattened out before I heard the sound of rushing water.

Perhaps a different body of water could contain something not found around the village.

Leaving the path, I searched for the source of the sound.

The trees thinned out and the vegetation became more sparse before I reached the origin.

A breathtaking waterfall. I stood on the cliff face to the side of it.

Somehow, I had to find a way down to the pool at the bottom.

Not only did I hope to find what I searched for, but it would be nice to bathe in moving water again, something I missed from my former world.

Though the land dropped off in front of me, it did slope downward to my left.

With my anxious heart racing, I headed that direction.

I gripped the tree trunks on my way down, trying to prevent myself from slipping.

Hurting myself out here when no one knew where I was would not be ideal.

Taking my time, I finally reached the bottom, only a few slides and scrapes along the

way.

At the bottom of the falls, the water sparkled in the sunlight. I contemplated perusing the shore for Vern's possible present, but the urge to soak and splash proved too great. I stripped off my clothes and raced into the water.

Though I expected the water to be slightly cool, it had a different feel to it than the water from my world and even the water I drank from our well.

As I ran my palm through it, I realized it seemed thinner than normal H₂O.

When I took my hand out, no water dripped from it, and my skin didn't seem wet at all.

Stepping carefully back to shore, I worried I wasn't supposed to be in the pool at all.

Would my skin break out in a rash? Or worse, would contact with the strange liquid kill me?

Putting my clothes back on, I waited for some kind of a reaction. Yet, my skin didn't feel any different and remained the same pale color. Strange.

I chuckled at myself considering I'd easily accepted shifters existing, yet the liquid at the bottom of the falls left me worried.

Instead of heading back in for a swim, I scoured the shore.

Overturning driftwood and running my bare feet through the pebbles initially brought no results.

Then I caught a glimpse of something shiny where the pebbles turned into bigger

stones.

Squatting down, I pushed away the rocks on top to see what lay underneath.

Another rock. But it caught the sun and sparkled like no other I'd ever seen.

I plucked it from the ground and examined it closer.

Maybe it held diamonds inside, or just simple quartz.

Perhaps it was a jewel that was only found in this world.

Regardless, it was exactly the type of gift I had been searching for.

I placed it in my pocket, and after putting my shoes back on, headed back toward the village.

I needed to get to the community garden before dinner.

But the clouds suddenly grew dark. A strong wind came out of nowhere, tossing the foliage of the trees around.

Though I'd gone off the path to get to the falls, I was sure I knew my way back up to the top.

Rain began to fall. Not a light shower like I was used to in the village but heavy drops, making the rock faces slippery.

I used tree trunks to pull myself back up and eventually found the path I'd abandoned.

The rain came harder. Somehow, even through the canopy of the trees, it hit me like millions of tiny grains of sand. Nothing like the liquid at the falls or the sun showers in the village.

I dashed as fast as I could along the path, but eventually, I wasn't sure I was still on it. Everything around me appeared wet and flattened. And with the sun gone, I couldn't tell the trail from the rest of my surroundings.

Back in my world, I could find some building to dash into to get out of the rain, or even an overhang to hide under.

But here, nothing stopped the assault from the pounding liquid.

I didn't know where I was or how to get back.

Sure, I'd found a gift for Vern, but it seemed the forest wasn't going to let me escape with it.

I dropped the rock to see if it made a difference, if the rain would let up.

No change. After picking it up again, I hunkered down at the base of a tree and removed my soaked shirt, holding it over my head to ease some of the onslaught.

I had no idea what else to do other than wait it out and hope I managed to find my way back home when the skies cleared again.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:07 pm

Vern

After a day when nothing seemed to go right, I dragged my tail home.

My home with Falco. Not the dam where I'd grown up and continued to live into adulthood with my brothers, but in an actual house with an outer-worlder who would soon be my mate.

Everything had already been arranged. We just had to wait for the date to arrive.

The thought made me feel a tingle of the magic from the land, but I still couldn't absorb enough to shift back to a human.

Not yet. Though I was sure when I saw Falco again, the capability would return.

As the front of the house came into view, the sky became dark.

Much too early to be nighttime. I hurried inside, a flap in the door allowing me to enter without shifting to my human form.

Sniffing around, I tried to locate my future mate, but his scent was faint as if he wasn't there and hadn't been for a while.

Terror clenched at my gut. Had he finally realized I was a bad choice as a mate? Or worse, had he decided to leave our world completely? I rushed back out and returned to the village for answers. I needed to know what had happened to him.

Struggling to fully shift to my human form, I asked anyone I came across if they'd seen Falco.

"Yeah, he headed north into the forest earlier today." Carson shrugged, stepping up onto his porch. "I didn't think anything of it. Assumed he wouldn't go far on his own. It's a shame you actually got a chance to have an outer-worlder as a mate, and now you seem to have lost him."

A new panic filled me. I had no idea how far Falco could have gotten in the forest during the time I'd been at work. And with the impending rain, north of the village wasn't a place any being wanted to be lost. A different kind of magic resided in that area.

Not wasting any time, I scurried into the woods.

Thankfully, I managed to catch a faint trace of his scent on a path no longer used.

I followed it as fast as my four feet would take me.

When the rain started, I pushed to go even faster.

I needed to find him before his odor washed away.

He'd traveled quite far, but I was grateful to still pick up his path.

Then the rain pelted down. All hope of locating him by smell alone disappeared.

I didn't know how much farther he could have traveled.

Why had he voyaged out on his own in the first place? Though my main goal was to locate Falco, I was still haunted by the worry I'd done something wrong. Something

to make him run away.

The rain didn't let up. It came down hard with a gritty texture, nothing like the rain that fell on the village.

Everyone in the Enchanted Forest grew up being told never to travel north, that the land contained a dark magic even Ahmed didn't understand.

I'd failed Falco by not telling him. But I couldn't give up in my search for him.

Sitting up on my hind legs and using my tail to support me, I glanced around for any sign of the outer-worlder.

In the distance, I caught a hint of orange.

At first, I thought it might be a flower, but it seemed too big.

I scampered in between trees toward it, slowly filling with hope.

As I got closer, I thought it to be Falco's shirt and hoped he was nearby.

Then I realized he was underneath the material.

When I poked my head under the fabric, he screamed and swatted at me.

Backing away, I willed the magic into me so I could take my human form, but it was too heavy, much different than what I was used to. Instead, I chittered at him, trying to make Falco realize it was me.

He peeked out from under the shirt, but just as his facial features turned from fear into recognition, heavy footfalls reverberated the ground around us.

I surveyed the landscape then glanced up, terror filling me as I took in a large, scaled creature with a long neck, flared nostrils, wings which it had tucked into itself, and a tail I couldn't see the end of.

It seemed too big to move among the trees, but somehow it had, and I feared what it planned to do with us.

"It's a dragon," Falco whispered.

A dragon. I'd heard whispers of the fantastical creature, but the tales told of an even more fearsome being with large, pointed fangs and claws that would tear one to shreds.

"You seem to be far from your land," it said with a deep, gravelly voice. "And not at an appropriate time."

I didn't know if it meant to help us or planned to eat us for dinner. As much as I yearned to scamper away, I stood my ground between it and my future mate. "We're sorry. We will leave right away."

"It's my fault." Falco pushed up from the tree and stepped forward, seemingly not at all afraid of the dragon. "I went looking for a gift for my mate to give him at our mating ceremony and I got lost. He just found me."

"Hmm." The dragon lifted one of its front feet to rub its chin, and that's when I saw the pointed claws. "That would explain why you took one of our rocks."

I scuttled in front of Falco. "We're sorry. He'll give it back."

The dragon shook its head. "No need. We have plenty more. I was simply curious as to why your kind would be here." It pointed a claw at Falco. "But he's different. I'm

curious about him.”

“From the outer-world. Our wizard. He gave him a card, and Falco used it to wish his way here. To be my mate.” Rambling on, I hoped I could somehow save us from the beast.

Falco stepped in front of me. “Now, are you going to let us be? We will leave your land and never come back.”

With the dragon in front of us, I hadn’t noticed the rain had lessened. If I’d been able to shift into my human form, I would have grabbed Falco’s hand and ran. I doubted the dragon would be able to make it through the trees at the same speed we could, but I still couldn’t grasp the magic I needed.

The dragon sighed. “You think I want to hurt you?” When it shook its head, its whole neck swung back and forth. “You couldn’t be more wrong. It’s a lonely life up here in the north. No one ever comes to visit. And when you did, I wanted to see who you were, see if you needed help in the rain.”

“How would you help us?” Falco asked.

“I would fly you above the clouds and back to your land. I do believe you have a lovely meadow with the prettiest of flowers.”

The same meadow where I’d first met Falco. “And how do we know we can trust you?”

With a chuckle, the dragon released a puff of smoke.

“If I wanted to bring you harm, I would have by now. My name is Max by the way.” Suddenly the air around him sparkled, and he shrunk, as if every part of his body was

miniaturized and reshaped into a new form.

I'd seen many beings shift before, but Max's transformation seemed more extraordinary. "Is this a less scary form for you?"

I gulped at the man before me. He was definitely an exquisite example of the male form, more toned and bigger in all the right places, with shimmering skin the same color as his dragon's scales. I worried Falco would decide to leave me for him.

But my mate leaned down and stroked my fur. "I'm sure you are nice," he said to Max. "And many in the village would get a kick out of meeting a dragon, especially those from the outer-world like me. But it's best if we get back now. It's getting late."

"Let me escort you." He leaned over and petted my head.

With Max's touch, I felt the magic once again, and I absorbed it to shift into my human form.

I saw his eyes scan me from head to toe before he nodded.

"And maybe you can tell me more about your village and how I can meet an outerworder. It sure would be nice to have some company for a change."

Falco tucked his arm around mine. "Sure. And I can tell Ahmed exactly where to go to find someone who would love to be mated to a dragon shifter."

Reluctantly, I walked south through the forest with my mate and Max, relieved I had found Falco and that he was safe and still wanted to be my mate. Yet, I worried about the reaction from the villagers when they learned of the existence of a real-life dragon and how he wanted a mate, too.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:07 pm

Falco

When I was really young, before I knew what it meant to be queer and my parents tried to “beat the gay out” of me, I did dream of getting married.

In kindergarten, we used to have pretend wedding ceremonies, and no one argued that boys weren’t allowed to marry boys and girls weren’t allowed to marry girls.

Not until a teacher or parent interfered to push their beliefs on us.

I remember one time wearing a white dress and a veil and walking down the aisle between the desks to pretend marry a boy in my class named Tommy.

The day of my actual mating ceremony felt a lot like that.

It started as a fun and happy morning where Lonnie, Walter, and Nelson arrived at the house with all kinds of white clothing to get me to try on.

I settled for a pair of white pants and a lace button-up coat with a train that flowed behind.

The kids had run to the meadow to pick a bunch of flowers for my bouquet, and after Nelson tied them all together, we left for the ceremony.

The gathering in the center of the village was bigger than I’d expected.

Vern was convinced many would refuse to attend because they believed he’d

somehow skipped the line in finding a mate.

He didn't accredit our meeting to Fate the way I did.

Yet, it seemed the whole village had turned out, including two new outer-worlders who had arrived when I'd been lost in the woods, the Forest Council, all of Vern's brothers, and Max.

The villagers seemed to accept the dragon shifter so long as he remained in his human form while in and around the village.

And Ahmed had spent much time with him, asking many questions about how the magic from his land worked.

As I reached the crowd, the beings parted to make way for me to walk toward my soon-to-be official mate.

There was no one dropping flower petals in front of me or carrying a pillow with rings tied to it.

Just me, stepping along the path to where Vern waited, wearing nothing other than a black top hat with a matching bow tie and cummerbund.

As he smiled, I caught the glint of a tear as it fell down his cheek before he wiped it away. Definitely my fated mate.

When I reached him, we joined hands with each other, along with those who stood as our witnesses on either side of us, Nelson and Holden.

Ahmed stood in front of us with a golden robe and a matching pointed hat.

His white hair and beard glowed as if they had recently been washed and trimmed.

Banir, the Head of the Forest Council, stood beside him wearing only a patchwork-pink stole over his shoulders, ready to officiate the ceremony.

Maybe it wasn't the wedding I'd imagined as a young child, but it felt just as magical.

Ahmed raised his hand and the crowd quieted.

Banir cleared his throat. "We are gathered today to witness the magical union of one of our own with another outer-worlder who graciously decided to stay in our world and make it his new home." He turned to my mate.

"Do you, Vern, understand that by mating with an outer-worlder, you are responsible for them and any children they may bear in the future?"

Vern tucked his thumbs into his cummerbund and nodded. "I do. And I gladly accept the responsibility."

Then the Head of the Forest Council turned to me. "And do you, Falco 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 Vern but to our world."

Reaching for Vern's hands, I smiled up at him. "I do. I love you, Vern, and I cannot wait to have babies with you."

Banir stepped back to address the others with us. "Do you, members of the Forest Council, promise to accept this union and bear witness to the magic that will unite them?"

“We do,” those immediately around us voiced.

With a sweep of his arms, Banir addressed everyone. “And do you, beings of the Enchanted Forest and beyond, 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!” the crowd hollered, Vern’s brothers seeming to be loudest among everyone.

Occupying the spot directly in front of Vern and me, Ahmed raised his arms before resting his palms on each of our heads.

“With the magic granted to me by the Enchanted Forest, I declare Falco of the outer-world and Vern of the Enchanted Forest to be mates. May the magic of this world keep you happy and healthy and bring us many more little ones.”

A loud cheer erupted, and Holden acted as a blocker to part the celebrating crowd for us.

When we reached the edge of all the beings in attendance, he clasped Vern’s shoulder.

“Go home and finish the ceremony by yourselves. Enjoy this time, because once the kids arrive, finding time for just the two of you will become much more difficult.”

With Megan as my neighbor in my old life, I understood what he meant. That was why I had babysat her kids so often. I just hoped she found someone who treated her the same way Vern treated me. For her sake, and her kids.

Holding Vern’s hand as we walked back to our home, we swung our arms gently.

My heart felt huge in my chest, and I couldn’t help but smile, holding the tears of

happiness that threatened to spill.

I had a mate, a home, and children were very likely in our near future.

Something I never believed possible only a couple weeks earlier.

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Vern

Mate. I had a mate. For real. A dream I never expected to come true.

Yet, it had. I only had to finalize the mating by being intimate with Falco.

My stomach twisted as we rushed toward our home while holding hands.

It wasn't the sex that made me nervous. Falco had taught me well what he liked and how to pleasure him at the same time as giving me my own share of bliss.

No, it was leaving my mark on my mate that left me worried.

Everyone with a mate had told me my teeth would elongate the way they were when I was in my natural form.

As a human, I had big front teeth already.

I didn't want them to grow any longer and bring harm to Falco.

Yet, I had to use them on him to complete our union.

The instant we reached our home and I shut the door behind us, Falco shucked off his borrowed clothing and launched himself at me. I barely had time to catch him but managed to grip his buttocks as he giggled and nuzzled into my neck. "We're mated, Vern. We did it."

He giggled again as he leaned back, wrapping his legs tight around my waist. I moved my hands up his back to prevent him from going too far and knocking me off-balance.

“We are.” His excitement helped to quell some of my anxiety, but not fully. “And there were many beings at our ceremony. More than I expected.”

After tossing off my hat, Falco ran his fingers through my hair and kissed my forehead. “The whole village was there along with some from the lands beyond. No one objected the way you thought they would. Everyone is happy for us.”

“Yeah,” I sighed then tried to hide it with a smile. “It was nice.”

Falco loosened his leg grip on me and slid down my front until his feet touched the floor. Cupping my cheeks, he gazed up at me. “What’s wrong? We’re supposed to be happy and having sex right now. You know how to do that, and you do it well. No need to be nervous.”

I shook my head. “It’s the bite. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Placing his hand over his heart, he smiled with his head tilted to the side. “You really are the sweetest ever. That is why I wanted you as my mate, why I love you.”

“Love?” I’d heard him use the word, but never quite knew what it meant other than a term of affection.

“Yes, love.” He placed his palm over my own heart.

“An intense affection and a strong attraction. It’s how I feel about you.

Why I didn’t want anyone else to be my mate.

Why I'm willing to let this world change my body to bear your children, and why I want you to bite me to finalize our mating.

Being in a relationship isn't perfect all the time, but I want to be with you no matter what, even if it starts with a little pain.

"He ran his finger down my chest. "Besides, I heard from some of the other outworlders that the moment of the bite leads to the most intense orgasm ever."

My cheeks warmed as I remembered the previous orgasms he'd had with me. "Okay, let's do it, but tell me if it's too much."

"I will." He reached behind my neck to remove my bow tie then did the same with the thing around my waist that I couldn't remember the name of. After tossing them aside, he took my hand and headed toward the bedroom. "Let's go."

When we reached our room, he scrambled away. "Wait! I forgot something." From the drawer of his nightstand, he pulled something out and cupped it in his hands as he carried it to me. "This is for you."

Confused, I held out my hands, palms up, to receive whatever he had. "I didn't think we needed lube anymore. Aren't you supposed to be able to produce slick now?"

He grinned and slowly shook his head before placing the item in my palm. "It's not lube, but a gift for you."

Though I believed the greatest gift to be Falco wanting to be my mate and have a family with me, I glanced down at the solid item he'd given me.

It was the rock he'd found in the northern part of the forest. One that shined with a vibrance I'd never seen before, almost as if it contained some of the magic of the

land. “Thank you.”

Falco placed his hands behind his back and dug his toes into the floor.

“It may not seem like much, but it reminded me of you. I found it among all the other rocks, but that one stood out to me, shining brightly among all the others. That’s how I feel about you compared to everyone else I met here. ”

I wasn’t one to cry, but I had to swallow down a sob that threatened to escape.

I really lucked out in running into Falco that day.

Maybe he was right. Maybe Fate did bring us together.

“I will treasure this forever.” After setting it on the nightstand, I drew my mate into me.

“But now I want to show you just how much of a treasure you are to me.”

He giggled and nuzzled into my neck. “Take me. Make me yours forever.”

Though it had taken me a bit to get used to the euphemisms he used before and during the mating process, I’d grown to enjoy them and found they made me want Falco even more. Holding him close, I walked us to the edge of the bed as he stared up at me, his eyes pleading.

Turning us around so my back was to the bed, I sat, knowing his favorite position meant him on top of me. One I rather enjoyed myself. It proved to be a much more intense release for both of us when Falco had more control. Plus, it meant easier access to his neck to leave my mark.

“Oh, straight to the point, huh?” He rubbed his palm along my hardening shaft before crawling onto my lap. “I can appreciate that.”

He still used a lot of sayings I did not understand, but I could feel his own erection against my stomach, knowing he was just as anxious as me. “We must finish the mating.”

With a half sigh, half laugh, he rubbed his cheek to mine. “I love you, Vern of the Enchanted Forest,” he whispered into my ear, sending a shiver up my spine. “I’m going to sit on your cock and ride you while you leave your mark on me to show everyone that I’m yours.”

A growl came from deep within me, along with a feeling of pride and possessiveness.

Holding Falco against me with one arm, I reached behind him with the other.

I ran my finger between the globes of his buttocks and found he had indeed gained the ability to produce slick.

And a lot of it, it seemed. I rubbed the liquid around his puckered hole, enjoying his whimpers and quiet moans.

He cupped my cheeks before bringing his lips to mine.

He kissed me deep and long as he slowly drove his hips up my thighs.

When he dragged his tongue along my lips, I let him in, quickly becoming lost in the pleasure of his motions.

His sweet invasion made my mind reverberate with need.

I enjoyed the connection, the way he used his talented tongue to make me forget everything else, but I yearned for more.

I pressed lightly against his taut ring and he pushed back, allowing my finger to slip inside as he leaned away from me and moaned. “Fuck, I can’t wait. Let’s do this now. I feel like something is buzzing under my skin and it won’t be satisfied until you’re seated deep inside me.”

The same sensation filled me ever since we’d left the ceremony, but I continued to hold back, not wanting to harm Falco in any way.

Rising onto his knees, he drew up to position his entrance above the tip of my cock. I used his slick to coat my shaft before he cautiously lowered himself over me. With his eyes closed, he bit his lip and pushed down, taking me even deeper into him.

I held him there, my chest pounding against my ribs with an erratic beat.

“Feels different.” He opened his eyes and laid his palms on my shoulders. “Better.”

As he began to rock his hips, I couldn’t help the strangled cry that escaped from my lips.

Everything else before seemed minimal compared to the sensations piquing every nerve in my body.

Holding his hips, I hoped to assist in his hurried rhythm, but my groin raged with a burgeoning intensity, and it was all I could do to hang on and wait for Falco to arrive closer to his peak.

With every restraint possible, I watched my mate as he rode my cock.

The way his mouth hung open between his flushed cheeks as he kept his eyes closed and tilted his body slightly to the left.

The way sweat beaded across his forehead and down his chest as his stomach muscles contracted and loosened with every thrust. He was the most gorgeous being I had ever seen in my life, and I couldn't believe he was mine.

Suddenly, I couldn't hold anything back.

I sucked in a strangled breath then pulled him into me as I took aim for his neck.

I bit hard, the fire in my belly no longer contained as I released into Falco.

He cried out, but instead of pushing me away, he wrapped his arms around my back and spilled his pleasure between us with a long moan.

When I pulled away, I quickly covered the bite mark with my hand, hoping I hadn't made him bleed too much. I tried to wiggle out from under Falco so I could get some cloths to clean him up, but he held me still.

"Let me catch my breath first."

I shook with worry and intense pleasure at the same time. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

Shaking his head, he glanced up and cupped my cheek. "I don't think you could ever hurt me, Vern."

The intensity of the adoration I saw in his eyes brought on another sob I had to restrain.

I had never expected anyone to feel any kind of affection for me, especially with such

an intensity.

But I felt the same about Falco. I wanted to love him, protect him, and keep him happy for the rest of his life.

And as his mate, it was now my duty to do so.

Falco

Awoken by the light coming in around the edges of the curtain covering the bedroom window, I squinted before pulling the blankets over my head and pulling my body pillow tighter into me.

One of the many pillows I needed to sleep with lately.

Perhaps that was my body's version of nesting.

Though most of the pillows ended up on the floor by morning.

Vern snuggled in behind me then kissed the back of my neck as he reached around to rub his palm across my belly. "How are you and the little ones doing this morning?"

I nuzzled into my pillow, not ready to get up yet. "Good."

It hadn't taken long for me to get pregnant.

In all the mpreg fan fic that I'd read, the male who could get pregnant went into heat.

Yet, I don't remember that ever happening to me.

I didn't know if it had to do with the fact that I was human and not a shifter, or if I'd simply gotten pregnant right away.

The same day as our mating ceremony based on how much my stomach had grown

already.

Vern stilled his palm on the side of my belly where I felt one of my babies pressing from inside me. “I think someone’s feeling a little crowded in there today. I’d better get up and get the birthing center finished before our little ones decide they’re ready to meet the world.”

With a chuckle, I held my hand over his and lightly tried to push the little one back into place.

I didn’t know how many babies I carried, but there were at least two of them.

And they seemed most active when I tried to sleep.

As if my movement caused them to rest, but they didn’t allow me the same courtesy.

“I’m going to stay in bed a little longer. See if I can get a bit more sleep.”

The baby on the other side of my belly didn’t like that idea, choosing that moment to object with force. It felt like the little one kicked my belly with all four paws. I gasped at the sudden discomfort.

“That one seems to want you out of bed.” Vern flung the covers off himself and sat up. “Did you get any sleep at all last night?”

“Yeah, some.” I got out of bed, too, inundated with the sudden urge to empty my bladder. “But I’ll likely be walking around half asleep all day.”

By the time Vern was ready to leave, I’d managed to waddle out to the door to see him off.

Before having my own babies growing in my belly, I'd always wondered why pregnant people in my world walked in such a manner.

The experience made me sympathize with them, especially those who carried more than one at the same time.

With his trapper hat and tool belt in place, Vern cupped my elbows as he kissed my forehead. "Are you going to Walter's again today?"

I nodded. "In a bit." Being as far along as I was, Vern didn't want me home by myself.

He would stay if I asked him to, but I knew his work was also important to him.

As was the completion of the birthing center for both of us.

So, I went to the home of one of the other outer-worlders where they could keep an eye on my pregnant self and answer more questions I'd come up with about raising babies, especially ones that would be born as an animal and eventually shift to human form.

I would be the first outer-worlder to give birth to beaver shifters, so no one knew exactly how my delivery would go.

"Okay, good." Moving to my side to get around my big belly, he kissed me on the lips. "If you have any problems at all, have someone come get me. I think Rauh was planning to visit you there today, too."

"Good, I do have questions for him." The village healer had obtained books from the outer world about beaver and human deliveries and read them when he wasn't supervising the building of the birthing center.

“You sure you’re going to be okay?”

“I love you.” I pressed my palm to Vern’s chest and pushed him out the door. I knew he lingered with worry, but I didn’t yet feel that my babies were ready to come out.

“I love you, too.” He walked backward for a bit before he turned around and headed to work.

With my mate gone, I washed up with the water he’d drawn from the well the night before.

After getting dressed in a loose-fitting pair of shorts and a tank top, I headed to the kitchen to figure out what to eat.

Pregnancy had led to some strange cravings, some of which couldn’t be satisfied in the Enchanted Forest, and a repulsion toward foods I used to love.

Biscuits were always a safe bet, and I found one left in the basket on the counter.

Lonnie, Banir’s mate, made a delicious berry spread, and I added some of that to my breakfast. After a quick tidy, I slid on a pair of sandals and headed to the home of the outer-worlder who’d been in the enchanted world the longest.

The day was beautiful. While the sun shone bright in the sky, it didn’t feel too hot with the cool breeze.

Being pregnant, I was thankful I had yet to experience any humid days like what we often endured on summer days back in the outer-world.

I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to suffer through that weather in my condition.

I would likely stay indoors in my bed with ice packs all over me.

Or find a spot to camp out in the part of the forest with the thickest canopy.

The wind rustled through the tall grasses as I approached Walter's place.

He really did have a nice location, but I preferred to be closer to the village.

Sudden movement around me snapped me to attention.

Not one thing rushing through the vegetation but several.

And all heading in my direction. Panic clenched my heart until I saw the reddish-brown hair of one of Banir and Lonnie's children.

"Hello, kids." I glanced around as several youngsters giggled as they popped their heads up from the grassy field. "Were you trying to scare me?"

"Yep." One of them stuck his tongue out then took off toward the house. The rest seemed to follow except Ellis, one of Nelson and Holden's sons. He took my hand as we walked together on the path.

He glanced up at me. "Are your babies ready to come out yet?"

I smiled. Ellis had been so shy and timid when I first met him even though he adored Vern, but he always came up to me to ask about my babies once he found out I was pregnant.

"Not yet. But soon, I think. There's not much room left for them to grow.

They'll have to come out before they get any bigger. "

With a giggle, he tugged my hand. “Can I touch your belly and talk to them?”

“Yes, you can.” Teaching kids to ask to touch was a lesson I was thankful his parents had taught him, and one of the many things I mentally made a note of to make sure my kids knew growing up.

Placing his palms on the sides of my stomach, Ellis leaned so close that his nose nearly made contact with my protruding belly button.

“Hello in there. This is Ellis speaking. I’m a kid like you.

I want you to come out so we can all play with you.

I know you’ll be too little at first, but we’ll have lots of fun once you’re big enough.

And don’t worry. Everyone out here is super nice.

Especially your dad whose belly you’re in.

I can’t wait to meet you.” He grinned up at me then skipped ahead on the path.

“My dad and the healer are waiting for you. They sent us to make sure you were okay. Hurry up now.”

With a chuckle, I tried to walk a little faster.

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Vern

“Uncle Vern, Uncle Vern, they’re coming!”

The piercing voice startled me from my intense concentration while framing the large tub into the far corner of the birthing center.

I knew I had to get it done soon, knew it wouldn’t be long before Falco went into labor.

Though I recognized the voice, I glanced past the open door of the center to see Ellis racing toward me.

Was I too late already? Would this be the day the village declared me a fraud because I hadn’t been ready for my mate to give birth?

Ever since Falco had gotten pregnant, I was sure every being watched me closely, looking for some reason to prove I wasn’t a good mate.

I loved him with everything I had, but it still seemed unreal that he chose me.

And now he carried my babies, soon to deliver them out into our enchanted world.

All the doubts I’d had before being mated seemed amplified at the idea of becoming a parent.

Not only did I worry about not being good enough for Falco, but I also worried I

wouldn't know how to raise children properly.

The other parents in the community told me I worried for nothing, that I was great with their kids, but having little ones of my own seemed a far bigger undertaking.

Ellis came to a stop at the entrance, panting as he held onto the doorframe.

"They're coming," he huffed out. "I talked to them in Falco's belly.

I told them to come out because I wanted to play with them, and now they are.

They listened to me. Uncle Walter sent me ahead, and Rauh said you're supposed to fill the tub. "

Miffs. I knew I wouldn't finish in time.

But what I'd accomplished would have to do for the moment.

"Okay, I'll get right to it." With Falco and those accompanying him on their way to the village, I had to hurry.

First, I wet a cloth to wipe the dust and other debris from the construction of the building out of the tub.

Once I was sure it was clean enough, I pumped in the water.

We had drilled a well under the building for the sole purpose of using it for the birthing center.

It was supposed to be faster and meant no one had to haul water from a central well shared with others in the community.

Except the water came out cold, pumped out from deep in the ground.

I paused the flow of water to light the stove underneath.

Unlike in Falco's realm, we didn't have what he called electricity to heat things up, but we did borrow some of the technology from the outer-world to find alternate ways to do things.

Plus, Max had taught me to stretch my magic to not only keep me in my human form but to use it for simple tasks as well.

So, after getting the tub filled over halfway, I stuck my finger into the water and swirled it around.

If the length of time between Ellis disappearing and reappearing at the door was any indication of how long until my mate arrived, the fire below wouldn't heat the water in time for Falco to use the tub.

As I weaved my finger through the water, the liquid produced a faint red glow.

I hoped it provided enough warmth since I heard the shuffling of many feet before I turned around to find my mate with sweat beading across his forehead and being held up by Walter and Rauh.

"It's time," the healer said.

I nodded, immediately knowing what I had to do as I rushed toward my mate, like a new kind of instinct kicked in that I didn't know I possessed until that instant.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:07 pm

Falco

The pain radiating along the bottom of my belly and at the base of my spine was unlike anything I had ever felt before.

My heart raced and the sound pounded in my ears.

I didn't know if I wanted to vomit or cry, but my body failed to stop torturing me enough to do either one.

If not for Walter and Rauh holding me, I would have been crumpled in a ball on the ground.

While the idea of being pregnant and having kids of my own seemed like a wonderful idea when I first arrived in this world, I feared I'd made a grave mistake, one that would be the end of me.

My labor had come on quickly. I'd arrived at Walter's place and sat with him and Rauh to review all the healer had learned about how beavers gave birth.

Some of the information wasn't relevant since I didn't live in a den and I couldn't reach down to lick myself.

But Rauh believed my delivery would happen quickly as it did with Lonnie whose mate was a squirrel shifter, since both squirrels and beavers are rodents.

Just as the healer shared that piece of information, I felt the first twinge.

I didn't believe it to be much different than one of them kicking.

Not until the next one came only moments later with a little more force.

They kept happening. Each one more distressing than the previous.

Though it wasn't until the fifth contraction that I groaned, causing Rauh to stop talking.

"Is it time?" he asked, setting down the book from the outer-world. "Are you in labor?"

"Maybe." I winced and wrapped my arms around my belly. "Something is definitely going on down there."

Walter walked outside to where the kids were playing while Rauh stood in front of me. "How long have you been experiencing pain down there?"

"Not long." I braced as my insides tightened again. "But they keep getting worse with each one, and there's not much time in between." I thought that was important information based on the shows I'd seen from the outer-world that involved laboring women. "And I'm starting to feel it in my back."

He moved to my side and placed an arm around me. "We need to get you to the village. To the birthing center. Otherwise, you'll be giving birth right here."

I didn't want that. I wanted Vern to be with me, needed him by my side to get through the ordeal. He was my reason for all of this.

Without the help of Walter and Rauh, I wouldn't have made it to the village. My legs gave out multiple times, and I needed to stop each time a contraction beat my body

from the inside. They picked me back up after each one and carried me as far as they could get before the next one hit.

Seeing Vern's face inside the birthing center was a temporary reprieve. I wanted to kiss him until the next bout of agony rocketed up my spine and I remembered he was the reason I experienced the pain in the first place.

"Let's get you in the tub." My mate took Walter's place beside me and helped Rauh lift me to stand in the tub.

Walter closed the door to the center and Rauh collected what he needed for my delivery while Vern helped me to remove my clothing and get comfortable in the tub.

The buoyancy of the water proved some relief from the constant torture, but it seemed my body was doing everything it could to expel my babies.

Another contraction hit, and I grabbed Vern's arm, clinging to him as the pain ricocheted around my lower torso.

"It's too much." I gasped, barely able to breathe as the torment held on. "I don't know if I'll survive this."

"Chew on this." Rauh held a bunch of leaves in front of my face.

I gladly accepted whatever it was, hoping it would somehow help. It had a familiar flavor, but I couldn't focus enough to place it.

"And, Vern," the healer ordered. "Get into the tub and rub this on Falco's lower back and up his spine. It will help with the pain."

My mate quickly removed his tool belt and hat to do as Rauh ordered.

With shaky hands, he rubbed the magical lotion into the skin across my hip bones and along my spine.

It seemed to numb those parts so the next contraction only felt like a twinge back there compared to the previous ones, focusing its efforts more on my lower belly and groin.

With the slight ease to my misery, I caught my breath and looked up at Rauh. “How much longer? If I’m suffering this much, what are our babies experiencing inside me?”

“They’re being pushed out.” Rauh stepped into the tub with us. “If you’ll let me, I’ll check to see how far along you are to know if you can push yet.”

I nodded. “Please.”

The healer reached between my legs and pressed against my opening, the skin there feeling as if it were on fire.

“You’ve dilated enough. On the next contraction, go ahead and push.

It may take a few contractions to get them all out, but we’ll see how it goes.

Vern, if you want to keep massaging his back, I will catch the babies as they come out. ”

I felt my mate hesitate. Was he torn between helping me and being the first one to greet our babies? I would be in his position, but instead, I got to experience all the pain of the process.

The next contraction hit with a new force.

Vern's touch did nothing to alleviate the stress on my body.

But I managed to push. Felt like I had to.

I pushed with all the effort I could. I didn't know if it was enough, but I felt a new sensation between my legs.

Something was there. Something was coming out.

The contraction eased, but I didn't stop pushing.

I wanted to see my babies. I needed to know all of this was worth it.

Unfortunately, it took one more contraction to push my first baby out. And three more to deliver the second into the waiting hands of Vern.

Two babies. That's what I had. Two little beavers that would one day be able to absorb the magic of this world and shift into a human form to look like me.

They were both adorable and fuzzy like a stuffed animal.

But they were born with sharp teeth, so nursing them was out of the question.

Instead, once Rauh helped get me cleaned up and I changed into dry clothes, Vern and I fed our babies a soupy mixture made from water, tree bark, and pond vegetation.

Not something I would personally consume, but it was what they needed to start their life until they could eat the bark and vegetation on their own in a few weeks.

Holding one of my babies in my arms made me realize what I went through was

worth it to bring both of them into the world.

In fact, I started to forget the pain, instead focusing on how precious my mate looked with our other child in his arms. I really did get lucky in running into him on the day I arrived in the Enchanted Forest. I couldn't imagine experiencing my first days here or raising our kids with anyone else.

And I remained thankful to Ahmed for giving me that card in the first place.

Vern

I never expected to be a father. Heck, I never expected to have a mate.

Yet, I ended up with both a mate and children.

Two children who rarely stopped moving. For the first couple weeks, they slept in between eating the special beaver mush Rauh had provided the recipe for, food that would give them all the nutrients they needed to help them grow and fill their little bellies.

Their naps gave Falco time to sleep in between as well.

I didn't spend as much time away from home during that time, trying to finish up the birthing center in between helping my mate with our babies.

But as our two little ones grew, they started to refuse their kit food, wanting to eat in the forest or at the pond instead.

And their nap time disappeared. We were lucky just to get them to sleep at night.

Yet, neither one of them had shown any indication of being ready to shift.

Though Falco had nicknames for them both, we struggled to keep their real names a secret until they were finally able to absorb the magic of our land and take human form.

While at the pond, Holden and his children offered to watch our two kits to give us a moment to ourselves, or time to sleep, but we were afraid we would miss their first transformation if we did.

So, in our exhaustion, we waited. Some of my brothers even stopped by on occasion, surprising me more than Falco.

They no longer held any animosity toward me for being the first to have a mate but hoped to be the uncle who caught the first shift in order to brag to the others.

And it just so happened that Bucky stood at our front door, having just knocked when one of our little ones changed form for the first time. Though I didn't know it was him.

I was on the floor, in my beaver form, playing with the boys while my mate slept, when I heard the rapping.

I immediately shifted to my human form to answer the door, but I didn't expect one of my children to rush past me, looking very much like a little human boy.

No cry of pain during his shift. No getting stuck in between forms as I had my first time.

Just a beaver one moment and a human boy the next.

It made me wonder if he'd shifted on his own and neither Falco nor I had noticed.

My boy brushed his dark-brown hair away from his blue eyes, the same color as my mate's. Then he reached for the door handle. "I got it, Papa."

"No, wait." I didn't want him opening the door when I didn't know who stood on the other side at that time. Plus, I needed to wake Falco and show him that one of our

boys had shifted. “Hang on a minute,” I shouted to the person on the other side of the door.

Our other son remained in his beaver form but stood on his hind legs and reached up for me like he wanted to be picked up.

I patted his head. “You hang on, too. I must go wake your daddy.”

Rushing into the bedroom, I contemplated the best way to wake my mate.

He was always so tired and needed rest, but he would be hurt if he didn’t see either of our boys in their shifted form before someone from outside our household saw them.

I didn’t want to jolt him awake, instead running my palm across the side of his face. “Falco?”

“Mmm?” He squinted at me and turned onto his side. “Did I sleep for too long?”

“No,” I whispered. “Probably not long enough, but I thought you might want to see our boys in their human form.”

His eyes widened and he shoved off the covers before sitting up. “They’ve shifted already?”

“One of them.” I stood, anxious to get back out into the main part of our house.

“But there’s someone at the door, and I wanted you to see our boy first before anyone else.

” I didn’t care if the person at the door left.

The moment was too important for our family for either of us to miss.

And if one shifted already, the other shouldn't be too far behind him in learning the ability.

At least, not according to what the other parents told me.

“Let me grab my robe and I'll be right out.”

The only time Falco went without any of the human clothing was when sleeping or when we mated, so I wasn't surprised he wanted to cover up. But the sight that greeted us upon leaving the bedroom made both of us falter.

Both of our boys were in their human form, with wavy and fluffy dark hair, blue eyes, and golden-beige skin. And they grinned while sitting on either side of Bucky, my brother and their uncle.

“We let him in, Dadda and Papa,” one of them proclaimed with pride while the other nodded his head.

“I guess today was the perfect day to visit.” My brother ruffled the hair on their little heads with a big grin on his face.

Falco gasped and fell to his knees beside me. Our boys were off the couch and in front of him before I had the chance to comfort my mate.

“Dadda, are you okay?” One of them held his hands that had been over his mouth. The other boy wrapped his arms around him from the side.

“My boys,” Falco whispered. “It was one thing to see you as beaver kits, but to see you as little boys... This makes it feel so much more real.”

Though it had felt very real for me the day they were born, I could understand my mate's sentiment.

Being from the outer-world, he'd only seen human babies.

All the rest were what his world called animals, which were seen as less by some.

And though he treated our boys as precious even in their beaver form, that mindset was still ingrained in all outer-worlders.

Plus, Falco couldn't shift and communicate or swim with them as I could.

So, he missed out on some parts of their early days.

My mate hugged them both tightly and kissed their foreheads. "I love you both so much and I'm happy you've learned how to shift. Did it hurt? Are you okay?"

Our son to his side giggled. "We shift when you sleep."

As Falco gasped once again, I tried to comprehend how I'd never noticed any signs that they'd learned to shift. They must have been very careful about when they changed form and what they did as human boys.

Bucky chuckled and slapped his lap. "Didn't expect all this when I left the dam this morning. So, what are their names? Since I'm here, I can be your witness."

The one holding Falco's hands turned around to face my brother. "I'm Tommy," he proclaimed, placing his fisted hands on his hips. He seemed so proud of his name and so confident. Much different than I felt at his age.

"Yes." Falco rubbed his back. "You heard us using your names, did you?"

Tommy faced my mate and nodded. "Yep."

"And what about you?" Falco ran his thumb along the cheek of our son still clinging

to him. “Do you know your name?”

He stuck his fingers in his mouth and mumbled. Though I was sure he, too, knew his name, I couldn’t tell what he’d said.

“Are you named after me?” Bucky asked.

He shook his head then buried his face in Falco’s side, reminding me very much of myself at his age.

My mate smiled and ran his palm over his head. “No, you’re our precious Artez, aren’t you?”

He looked up at Falco and smiled. “Yeah.”

Bucky clapped his hands together then stood. “Well, let’s make their names official, then.”

Though we didn’t have Ahmed, the wizard, or Banir, the head of the council in attendance as we did for our mating ceremony, Falco and I stood behind our boys, and when Bucky asked what each of their names were, we both placed our palms on their heads and called out their names to make it official.

My brother stayed for a little longer, but then left to brag he had been the first of my brothers to see them shift and had attended the naming ceremony when the others were left out.

Tommy and Artez no longer hid when they shifted and asked to play with the other children since they knew how to change forms. Though they were still smaller than the older boys, they still ran hard. And they slept hard, too, which proved a relief for Falco and me.

Finally reaching this milestone, I felt what Falco had insisted on all along, that we were meant to be.

That Fate had somehow put me alongside the meadow at the exact moment that my mate crossed over into our world.

Though still not sure why they chose me, I accepted once and for all that Falco and I were always meant to be.