



Unrequited Mate

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Paranormal

Description: Welcome to Turnskin University...

Hayden Raferty is ready for a fresh start. Leaving Window Rock to attend college in Colorado is as far away as she could get from her mate, Nico Lopez. In a single incident, he crushed all of her hopes and dreams of being with him. Now, years later, Hayden has decided to move on and start over. Nico Lopez knows he screwed up, but letting his mate walk away isn't in his plans. It's time to make his move. With a little help from his family, Nico obtains a spot in the Greek Shifter Games and is determined to show his mate there isn't another wolf worthy of her. Can Hayden forgive the man she gave her heart to all those years ago, or are some betrayals unmendable?

Unrequited Mate is the first book in the TSU series. This book has gone through a large rewrite and re-editing process. It is recommended you read the series from the beginning.

Total Pages (Source): 55

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

1

Hayden—17,two weeks after being kidnapped...

Everything hurt. Her face. Her body. Her legs. She'd been chained up for so many hours, abused because she wouldn't answer her captives, she didn't think she'd ever erase the sensation of cold steel wrapped around her wrists and legs. Of the large manacle around her neck, trapping her like a dog.

Beg Hayden. Beg for your life...

She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate on her classwork. It was a losing battle. Her mind wandered. Her hands trembled. The evil reminder of what happened to her started when she woke that morning. The aches and pains came later once she was in school. She chalked them up to being so bad since she hadn't been at school since the kidnapping. Of course, she didn't have to go to school anymore. She could have taken the rest of the year off and no one would've said a word.

She could have even graduated the year before too.

Yet, Hayden had wanted to be there. She wanted to graduate with her friends and her brother. Today, however, she wished she'd have stayed home. Someone behind her laughed and she cringed. The noise was too much for her. The sound vibrated through her setting her teeth on edge. She'd never experienced anything like it before. The shredding of her senses. The cruel shrillness silencing everything else around her. Even her skin prickled, becoming too tight for her liking.Maybe I should have listened to Danielle and talked to Brie about everything.

After being kidnapped, Jace and Loraine along with Danielle and Kalkin believed she should talk with a therapist. Holly had been hesitant, leaving it for Hayden to decide, which surprised her more than the rest of her family. Hayden hadn't believed she needed it. Unlike when she'd been five, scared no one would find her or save her, this time, she had Nico and Logan in her life. Nico had rescued her, and Nico had stayed by her side for as long as he possibly could. Now, they were back to their regular lives. Hayden had school and Nico was a deputy.

Their time together had become limited due to their schedules being so different, so what time they did have together, she'd treasured. They were mates after all. A subject she tried hard not to dwell on, especially since would turn Nico twenty-one in a few weeks, and she was still seventeen.

After everything with Lindsey and Claire had done to Hayden, there was no way Nico couldn't tell her the truth. Same with her fathers and Kalkin. The knowledge was a heavy, though comforting weight on her conscience. Nevertheless, Nico allowed her to explore a little. He might be her mate, but at such a young age, she still had time. The rest of her life seemed like forever into the future, even though it could also start tomorrow. While she'd been held captive, scared out of her wits, she clung to the idea of Nico finding her and him being hers. The one person no one could ever take away from her.

The ache in her sides and middle had her biting her bottom lip to keep from whimpering. Today was not the day to be at school. Hayden wasn't ready. Her body was still a marbled pattern of bruises. Closing her eyes, she took several deep breaths in hopes of quelling the pain.

"Miss Raferty," her teacher said, drawing Hayden from her concentration.

"Yes?" She glanced up and saw the concern in her instructor's eyes.

“Why don’t you go to the nurse’s office or better yet, go home. You don’t have to be here.” She gave Hayden a sympathetic glance.

Hayden didn't want to. Being home meant being alone. No one was there. Everyone was at work or in therapy. If she was alone it would give her time to dwell on what happened to her and she didn't want that. Thinking about being trapped, chained, and threatened with rape, would do nothing for her. If anything, it would make healing ten times harder. Plus, the less she had time to remember what happened, the less she'd get lost in the miasma of pain and fear.

“I’m okay.” Hayden grinned, trying to push aside the muscle deep tightness. “I guess I should have taken a pain pill before school.”

Yes, she should have healed by now. Kalkin had given her the choice of either riding out the injuries or allowing him to force her shift, something she hadn’t been able to control since her first Strawberry Festival three years ago. Now she regretted not taking him up on his offer.

“You’re not even focusing on class.” Her teacher sighed. “You’ll be fine. I’ll give you slip.”

Reluctantly, Hayden took her advice. The longer she sat in the cold plastic chair, the more she hurt and the more uncomfortable she became. By now she should have found some relief, the bone-deep pain only seemed to get worse until she worried it would never go away. As she stepped out of class, she bypassed the office and the nurse's station. She had a pass, after all. The few classes she had for the day wouldn't miss her either, and she could always get the work from one of her friends later when she felt better or even from the teachers.

Hayden started for town with the idea if she moved more, she’d feel better. Stiffening up during class only made her situation worse and would take a longer recovery time.

She could—should go straight to Kalkin and have him help her, instead she kept going until she ended up outside of Nico's apartment. Deep down she knew she shouldn't be there without her parents or anyone else knowing, but at the moment, his place was home for her. If anything, she could pop a couple of pain pills and catch a little sleep or Nico could help her shift, so she'd heal faster.

As she knocked on the door, she worried maybe he'd be sleeping. He was, after all, on night shifts, and he needed to sleep during the day. Worry ate at her gut while she stood there, second-guessing her decision. Convinced she'd made a horrible mistake, she turned to walk away, not wanting to burden him with her problems.

"Hayden?" Nico's sleep-addled voice did things to her. Naughty, dirty things to her. She turned around and there he stood. His hair was rumpled from sleep. His muscular chest was exposed to her perusal and the grey sweats he wore, hung low on his hips. He was a feast for her eyes and a new ache took root deep within her. "What happened?" Instantly he was at her side, going on full alert.

He'd been the one to find her. To see her naked and shackled to the table. He'd been the one to rip his shirt off then put it on her. He'd been the one to cradle her to his body then stay with her for hours on end until finally, Kalkin made him go home. She licked her bottom lip and opened her mouth, but what did she say? Instead, she acted on instinct. She kissed him. The simple meeting of their lips pushed away the pain coursing through her. Kissing him was natural and forbidden for them. If they got caught, not only would she get into trouble, so would he—more so Nico.

"Shit, little wolf," he murmured across her lips. "We shouldn't be doing this." He pulled her into his apartment. "Do you know how much trouble we can get into if your uncle finds out?" Yet, instead of pulling away, he nuzzled her nose with his while pinning her to the apartment door. "You're not eighteen and smelling you right now is like pouring lighter fluid on embers."

“I hurt all over.” Was all she managed. “I came here because...” She inhaled drawing in the scent of cedar and pine. “I didn’t know where else to go.”

“Where do you hurt, Hayden?” he coaxed, bracing his forearm to the door, as he stared down at her. “Show me.”

She hated the fact her hands trembled as badly as they did. The aggressive side of Nico, the part of him he kept in check whenever he was around her family had slipped away revealing this man... This wolf. He was dangerous and exciting. Her sex ached. Her panties were damp. Even her nipples were hard points and hurt. Every time she breathed in; her lungs were filled with his natural perfume. He was intoxicating. Was this what she’d been looking for when she left school?

She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and Nico growled. "Here," she motioned to her breasts, "and here." She placed her hand over the crotch of her jeans. "Here too." She motioned to her midsection where most of her bruising was.

“Jesus, little wolf.” He pressed his lips to her neck and breathed deep. “Sunshine and cotton candy. Makes my dick hard. Are you saying you’re in heat, baby?”

She shook her head. Heat was still a mystery to her. Unlike the others, her cycle was all screwed up. In that sense, she was more human than a wolf. So far, since she arrived in Window Rock, she never experienced the pull of the full moon, and even with it a week away, she still didn't understand the ramifications. "No."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Are you saying you want to have sex?” Nico’s gaze flashed to hers. “Because I’m not sure that’s a good idea, sweetheart. As much as I want you—as much as my dick might hurt right now—I won’t take advantage of you. Not after everything you’ve been through the last few weeks.”

Tears burned at the corners of her eyes and behind her nose. Of course, he wouldn’t. Nico, for as much as he might appear to be a bad boy, he followed her uncle’s rules to the T. He’d never do anything to jeopardize them. “Right. This is stupid. I shouldn’t be here.” Embarrassment swamped her. In all honesty, she didn’t know why she ended up at his door. Going to the station would have been better. Kalkin could have helped her. Jace too. They’d make her shift to heal, and everything would be right as rain. “I’ll go. This was a mistake.”

“Little wolf...” The desperate way he said those words tugged at her. “Tell me what’s wrong so I can help you.”

If she knew, she’d tell him. She didn’t understand it herself. “It’s nothing. I’m fine. I’ll go back to school. You should be sleeping anyway.” She turned to face the door and placed her hand on the knob. “Could you move for a second, so I can go?”

Nico growled. “What have I told you about lying to me, little wolf?”

A shiver shot down her spine chased by a thrill. The longer she stood there, the more her pain morphed into something else completely. What she was supposed to call it, she didn’t know. But a sweet aroma assailed her, spurring on the thread of excitement. “I’m not lying. Besides, I should go. The school has probably called Kalkin by now or worse Jace.”

“Stop making excuses, Hayden.” Nico turned her to face him.

She lifted her chin in defiance, not willing to let him see how confused and anxious she was. “I’m telling the truth.” Hayden crossed her arms, trying with all her might to pull forth some of that Raferty intimidation her family was so famous for. “I need to go before this ends badly.”

Nico grinned, closing the distance between them. “You did come here for sex. Little wolf, are you giving me your virginity?” He tipped her chin up so their gazes clashed. She loved his brown eyes. Some days they were dark pools of the most beautiful shade of sierra. Other days they were gold, but right now, his body pressed to hers, the thickness of his erection press to her hip, his eyes were amber.

"No," she huffed, shaking off the spell he wove around them. "As you said, we shouldn't. I don't want to be taken advantage of." Low blow on her part, however, she also couldn't seem to shut her mouth either. "It's fine. I'll call Adam. He'll know what to do."

Rage flashed in Nico’s eyes before a coolness smothered the fire. “Little wolf, stop pushing me. You’re seventeen, and I’m twenty. We could get into serious trouble.”

She froze. He was right. She was pushing her luck being there. She needed to leave. “I’m sorry. I’m taking your choice away.” She closed her eyes. Warm wet drops slid down her cheeks. “I’m sorry. I need to go.”

“Hey...” Nico tugged her into his arms and pushed her backpack from her shoulders. “You’re not doing any of that. I’m fucked up in the head right now, Hayden.” He pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. “Seeing you chained and naked, knowing full well if we hadn’t arrived when we did, what would happen to you. It fucked me up.” He carried her over to his couch and sat down with her in his lap. “I killed for you. I destroyed that hellhole for you.”

She knew. He didn't have to remind her. Saying such only made her feel more guilty than she already did. "Nico I—"

"I wanted to fuck you that night," he whispered against the shell of her ear. "Right there in the middle of the warehouse. I didn't care if there was blood on the floor or if there were corpses littered around us. I wanted to bury my dick inside of you and claim you—cum deep inside you so you were marked by me and only me."

She shivered, knocked speechless by his words. "I—"

"You weren't ready for me then. I don't think you're ready for me now. Once I get a sample of your sweet little pussy, Hayden, I'll want you every day. I'll knot you during the full moon. I'll fuck you like a wolf in heat. I'll keep going until you're pregnant carrying my pups." His hold on her tightened.

A tingle of something foreign wiggled through her belly causing her to hurt even more. This time in a good way, if that was even possible. "I hurt."

He nuzzled her ear again. "It's called arousal, little wolf. You're in a state of arousal. Your little pussy is creamy for me and only me. Your nipples want my mouth on them. This is why being here right now isn't good for us. I won't be able to control myself with you."

She jerked in his arms. "What is it with everyone and control?" Her uncles, her fathers, even her aunts all talked about balance and controlling herself? Why should she? Why did any of them for that matter? She wasn't human. She was a wolf. A Raferty wolf which meant more in the grand scheme of things. "I'm tired. I hurt. I don't know what I want but being this close to you makes it all worse and all I want is to let go and forget about everything." Her vision blurred as fresh tears began to flow. "You don't understand me. No one does. You can't possibly understand how I am feeling right now."

He chuckled. The dark, rich tone had her peering up at him between her wet lashes. "Can't possibly understand? Oh, little wolf, that's where you're wrong." He took her hand in his and placed it against the front of his sweats. The thick length of his dick strained against the material and when she ran the pad of her thumb over the crest, a wet spot formed where she'd touched him. Nico hissed. "I am in the same boat as you, baby."

"I hate this," she muttered. "I hate that we are stuck this way." The first time he kissed her, she'd been sixteen. It'd happen so quickly and so unexpectantly, she sometimes wondered if it'd happened in her imagination. Since her first kiss, they'd shared several more in secret when no one was around. They were playing with fire, she knew that. She understood the rules, but couldn't they, for once, break them all?

He inhaled deeply and nodded. "Yes, I know. I feel the same way." He flicked open the button on her jeans "Spread those pretty thighs for me."

Hayden stared up at him. "Why?"

"Because I can't have you leaving here like this." He waited for her to do as he asked and when she did, he slid his hand down past the band of her panties. "Fuck you're soaked." With his free hand, he flicked off her shoes then ripped her jeans off without even trying. "How long have you been this way? Why didn't you get yourself off, little wolf?" Concern laced his words as he waited for her to answer.

She shrugged suddenly embarrassed by her state and the fact she hadn't thought about masturbation. "I only thought of you." Her lips barely moved as she spoke.

"Damn it, Hayden." He growled again, this time the sexy rumble shot straight to her vagina and her clit. "You should be taking better care of yourself."

She peered down at herself, the rainbow hue of molten bruises broken by Nico's

golden skin, did funny things to her lower belly. Butterflies battered her insides while a wriggle of excitement spread through her. "I can't."

Nico shoved her panties out of the way and slid his fingers along her slit. Her hips rose off his lap and a strange keening fell from her lips. It was as if a thousand volts of electricity shot through her body and instead of it causing pain, she felt good. Really good. "What do you mean, you can't? I thought Adam was your little toy?"

She frowned. She hated what she'd done the previous year to make Nico jealous. Adam was an omega in the pack. He didn't have many friends and because he'd been so shy and quiet, like her, she'd used his kindness. She began experimenting with him hoping to learn all of the different, crazy techniques adults used for sex, so she, in the future, could please Nico. However, when he tried to reciprocate, nothing happened. It didn't feel good. Hell, she could officially say, she never felt the bolt of lightning as she had with Nico. "He couldn't either."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Nico's hand stilled. "Repeat what you said."

"H-He couldn't either, Nico," she said. "I'm broken."

"The fuck you are and I'm going to prove it." He placed her hands above her heads. "Don't move them."

She gasped. "Nico..." He'd never hold her down. It wasn't his style, but not allowing her to move. A bit of worry pushed back the hot rush of need pounding in her veins.

"Do you trust me, little wolf?" He stared at her hard, demanding her answer before he did anything else.

"Yes, of course, I do," she replied. "I'll always trust you."

"Good girl," he said, his voice rumbling in his chest.

She gasped, arching to him when his fingers glided across her sensitive flesh, gathering up more of her wetness. The coil of heat tightening in her lower belly unfurled marginally, giving her some semblance of relief, but it wasn't enough. She still yearned for more of his touch. Nico took his time, his gaze on hers while he explored her body. It was too intimate. She was exposed. Open. He could see all her faults. Instinct demanded she cover herself up, yet the minute she tried to shield herself, he growled, stilling her movements.

"Are you scared, little wolf?" His middle finger rubbed her clit in a circle, and she sucked in a breath. "Worried I won't like what I see?"

Her toes curled as he added more pressure to the hard nub at the top of her sex. “I don’t know.” She licked her bottom lip straining against him.

“Are you afraid you still won’t be able to orgasm?” He cocked a brow while he continued to toy with her.

"Yes." Her heart pounded. Her hands were slick with perspiration. The more his fingers manipulated her sex the tenser she became. She couldn't pinpoint the feeling or explain how she felt other than she sat on the edge waiting for something to happen, even if she didn't think it would.

“Trust me?” He peered down at her. A fierceness she’d never seen before filled his features.

“Always.” Nico never let her down. Never broke her trust, especially when trusting people didn’t come easily for her.

He laced his fingers with hers, holding her hand. "We do this easy, little wolf. Be brave for me, little mate of mine." He pushed his finger into her. A foreign ache took root then. It hurt a little but not bad. Then he added a second before going back to her clit. Over and over, he teased her, bringing her to the brink, and then he'd back off.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please stop toying with me.” She shook in his arms the pain in her middle had steadily grown worse until she thought she’d die. All she wanted was to be normal to feel like herself again, not whatever this was called.

“Are you ready, baby?” Nico crooned.

She nodded unable to speak. She swallowed hard, wiggling against his lap. Craving the relief, she knew only he could give her. “Yes.” She pushed the word between clenched teeth.

“Me too.” He removed his fingers from her pussy then licked them clean. “The next time we’re together, I’m going to eat your little cunt until you scream my name and come all over my face.

She gasped. “Nico.”

"Don't act so shocked, little wolf. I'm dirty. Filthy. I know you heard about me. I know it makes you jealous and hurts your feelings. I know you want this dick. I know you want to wear my mark." He chuckled softly. "I also know you want to put your claim on me too." He lifted her momentarily to release his dick from his pants. "Now's your chance. Will you take it, Hayden?"

Hayden sat up. She removed her shirt and her bra. “Yes.” She was excited. Aroused. Hyped up. She placed her hands on his shoulders, nervous about what came next while also eager to get it over with at the same time.

“I’m in control,” he snarled, snaring her gaze. “Not you, Hayden.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“We do this my way. Slowly. I won’t hurt you. Not after everything. Not after almost losing you.” He pressed his forehead to hers and took a shaky breath. “If you feel overwhelmed or scared, tell me. We’ll go slower.”

She wanted it hard and fast so she couldn’t think. She wanted him to take her choice away so the voices in her head, the doubt, the loathing, and the guilt were silenced. She wanted to forget for a minute who she was and what happened to her. Just once she wanted to indulge in her mate, properly. Experience what everyone else experienced.

When she didn’t say anything to the contrary, Nico positioned himself at the entrance

of her vagina. "Please don't regret this." How could she ever? Yet the strain in his voice and the fear also gave her pause. They were both in the same predicament.

"Never." Her breath hitched as he filled her. The burning pain of being stretched open caught her by surprise. Nico stilled. He held himself within, waiting for her to grow accustomed to him being inside her. Hayden buried her face in his neck and inhaled deeply before settling. "Okay." She didn't know who she said it for, him or herself, but the minute the word left her lips, he retreated then filled her.

Her inner muscles rippled around him. She whimpered his name while trembling in his arms. This was more than what she imagined it could be like with him. His low groan of approval sent pleasure ripping through her. Relief and a lightness she hadn't realized she'd been looking for, bloomed in her chest. She gave a tentative rock of her hips and Nico growled. His grip on her hips tightened, and she looked up at him.

"Sweetest little pussy," he murmured, his face contorted in pain and ecstasy. "You're all mine now, Hayden. My dick is all you'll crave. You'll come back to me every time your clit tingles and your cunt is slick. You'll beg me to fuck you. Got it?"

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Why did his words affect her so much? She should have told him to get bent or deny what he'd said, instead, she nodded her head. She'd do whatever he told her to do if only to feel this euphoria again. "Yes. Please, Nico."

"As you wish, little wolf."

He set their pace. She expected a hard, fast, frantic rhythm. Yet, for as much as he said he was holding on by a thread, he took his time. He touched her. Licked her. They kissed. His mouth touching hers sent sparks of bliss across her skin. She swore he mimicked the way he filled her with each kiss, adding to the bubble surrounding them.

I'm having sex with Nico...The awareness of the situation startled her, leaving her in awe of what was going on. This wasn't a dream. Or her imagination. "This is really happening."

He groaned. "Yeah, it is."

"We're having sex." She trembled in his arms.

"Yes, we are." He gave her an amused look. "Are you okay?"

"More than." She kissed him again, trying to quicken his pace. Their tongues tangled and their breaths mingled. This, this was what she needed. "I want to try to—you know."

"Orgasm?" He cocked a brow.

She nodded.

He brushed his lips across the shell of her ear. “Say it, Hayden. Say make come, Nico.”

She shuddered at the delicious tone of his voice. “Make me come, Nico.”

“Get off on my dick, little wolf. Make me creamy.” He changed the angle of his thrusts then added his thumb to her clit once more. Between the two sensations, she tensed in his arms. The groan he let loose with as he buried his face between her breasts, only spurred on the knot coiling within her.

The harder he worked her, the more she cried out. It was too much. She didn't know what she was trying to grasp for or how to hang on, but the minute she stopped trying was the minute the rush of adrenaline returned, and she was floating. A tingle took root in her lower belly then spread outward becoming a quiver of pleasure so intense it frightened her, but didn't stop her from experiencing what came next. She cried out shaking and bucking in Nico's arms. The prick of something at her right breast drew her attention for a split second before he began to manipulate her clit and she was tumbling end over end in the warmth of her release.

Below her, Nico became more frantic. His soft growls and moans were erotic and singed her senses. He was every bit the dominant wolf she knew he would be and when he growled loud and hard then howled, she felt it. The wet heat of his climax filled her. He held her flush to his lap while he continued to throb within her. His gaze locked with hers, proving his point as they came down together.

She was his.

Only his.

When he began to rock her over him again, she gave him a curious look. “Not finished yet. I’ve been waiting since the day I met you to do this. I’m going to get my fill of your perfect little body.” He kissed her once more as they moved slowly. Hayden continued to shake in his arms. Though some of the achiness had receded, she wanted more too. She didn’t want to stop just yet. Ending whatever was building between them meant going back to the real world, and she wasn’t ready. “I warned you, Hayden. I told you what would happen if I got deep inside you. Don’t make me regret this.”

Never. She’d never regret any of this. “Keep going.” She tangled her arms around his neck and Nico stood, changing their position. He flipped her over, taking her from behind like their wolves. Sparks of bliss skated through her. She cried out, gripping his thigh and couch for purchase.

“Fuck yes, little wolf. You’re mine. All fucking mine.” He nuzzled her neck and hissed. “When you’re completely ready, I’ll bite you here.” He licked her neck and moaned. “Then everyone will know you belong to me.”

“Yes.” She couldn’t wait.

Hayden didn’t know how much time passed before she was able to get up and grab a shower. Nico was passed out in his bed, where she’d also been laying. She got up and the first trickle of something being wrong, smacked her in the chest. She hurried to the bathroom, not wanting him to fret over her. Damn it, why now? Why here? When she wiped herself, she knew instinctually before even looking down what happened.

The symptoms all made sense. The pains. The feeling of burning up while also being cold. The bone-deep ache she never really could get rid of whenever her cycle decided to show up. She knew there would be some blood involved with her first time, but this was different. She understood what was happening to her. Thankfully, everyone, from her parents to her aunts and uncles kept what she needed at their

places, including Nico.

When she was finished, she turned on the shower to get cleaned up. She realized she'd have to go home soon, and she couldn't go smelling like Nico or like sex, though the first one, was a given, even if removing his scent repulsed her. Hayden stepped under the warm spray and whimpered. The warm water eased some of the body pains she'd had since being kidnapped.

"Hey," Nico said joining her. "Are you okay?" His arms banded around her. "There's blood and I—"

"I started my period."

He spun her around, pressing her back to the cool tile in the shower. "So you are in heat." His nostrils flared. His eyes blazed with arousal and fear. "I fucked you raw, Hayden. Tell me the truth."

She shook her head. "No, Nico. I don't know what heat feels like. I told you, my cycle isn't bound by the full moon yet. My menstrual cycles are like a human's. Not like my wolf counterpart." Fear gripped her by the throat as she stared at him. "You're scaring me."

"Fuck." Nico let her go. "Baby, I fucked you raw. Do you understand what that means?"

She scrubbed her face trying to get her erratic emotions in check. "Yes." There were always chances of unwanted pregnancy. However, she knew wolf genetics more than human by now, and if she wasn't in heat, she wouldn't get pregnant. Period. "I'm not in heat, Nico. You'd have smelled it. I would have too. This is just the way I am."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

He pressed his forehead to hers. "I'm so fucked up right now. I don't know what to do."

"We do nothing," she said. "I wanted this. I needed you, Nico. Like our kisses, it's our secret. No one has to know."

He chuckled roughly and his voice was thick with emotion. "Oh, they'll know. Sooner or later, they'll know."

Hayden didn't want to contemplate his statement. She wanted their last few minutes together before she had to go home to be just them, in the shower enjoying each other. Later she'd worry someone might find out. Later, she'd fret over whether or not she'd get pregnant. Once she was cleaned off, she got out of the shower with Nico's help then redressed. When she was ready to leave, she stood in the middle of Nico's living room, the place where it all happened, where their lives changed and gave him a small smile.

"Thank you, Nico." She pressed her lips to his. "You know I meant it when I said I love you, right?"

He tugged her into his arms and grunted. "I fucking love you too, Hayden. You got me in all kinds of knots right now. What the fuck have we done?"

"Nothing more than what we've wanted from the very beginning." She brushed her lips over his and a sense of calm washed over her. "I'm not in heat. You don't have to worry, mate. I promise."

“I’m going to worry. I wasn’t easy on you. I took more than I should have and I—”

She placed her finger over his lips. "I wanted to be here. I had a choice. If anything comes of this, it is my fault too. Not yours alone." But it wouldn't. Deep down she knew the truth before she even stepped foot in the door, Hayden wasn't like the rest of them. As it stood, she might never be.

“I’m buying you a pregnancy test every week until your cycle starts again,” he said, and she believed him.

“Deal,” she agreed. “When four come back negative, then you’ll be free and clear.”

He gave a sad little chuckle. “Oh, little wolf, I’ll never be free and clear. If anything, I’m going to want you every chance I get from now on.”

She grinned. “Well, bring it.” She opened the door to his apartment. “You know where I’ll be.” She didn’t wait for him to reply. Hayden closed the door behind her and headed home.

She had a feeling as she walked down the corridor to the stairs leading out of the building, her family would be looking for her, and she also knew Nico would call Kalkin too. She didn’t care though. She’d had the best afternoon of her life and it was all courtesy of her mate.

2

Six weeksbefore Hayden’s eighteenth birthday...

Finally, in a few short weeks, she and Nico could go public, and they wouldn't have to hide anymore. A bubble of excitement expanded in Hayden's chest as she skipped her way down the street to Nico's apartment. After their first time together, she'd met

him at his apartment every week to take a stupid pregnancy test, and as she'd told him, each one came back negative. Yet, even with the negative results, they both agreed their little trysts could land them in hot water with Kalkin, so they stopped for the time being. Once her eighteenth birthday arrived though, all bets were off.

So, until then, they went on about their lives as if nothing happened, even if it was the hardest thing Hayden had ever had to do. Upside for her, they continued to hang out when they could, and today, they were supposed to go to meet up with everyone at the clubhouse so they could go swimming together.

Even though Nico had been stuck working in the jail at night, three times a week, he still had four days off to take courses at the local college and spend with her. Seemed like yesterday she arrived in town and met him. She'd been so enamored by him. Over the years, after she figured out he was her mate, she'd fondly watched him graduate then go into the Sheriff's Academy to become a deputy for Apache County.

They'd been practically inseparable from the beginning. At the time, she hadn't known what drew her to the boy with whiskey-colored eyes and a cocky grin. Maybe it was because, even though he'd been in trouble when she met him, he didn't have a care in the world. Or perhaps it had to do with the fact her uncle Kalkin liked him too. Whatever the case may be or, better yet, been, her family reluctantly gave in to them being friends.

It'd been the single best thing her family had done for her too. In all the time she'd been on the road, she hadn't made very many friends. Mostly, it'd been due to her not being in a regular school. Being on the run for so many years, her aunt had taken to schooling her via homeschooling. By the time she arrived in Window Rock, and she'd enrolled in the high school, she tested out for junior classes. Mentally though, she'd been stunted, and she decided to take half sophomore classes and half junior classes. By the time she finished her junior year, she'd been ready to graduate. However, she stuck around and waited for Bell and Zoe and Tate and Henry to finish.

Of course, if she'd finished when she'd been qualified to graduate, she would have had a free year to go and come as she wanted. But, she also found, after the first couple of months she'd been there, she really did enjoy school. The high school gave her a chance to learn how to not only be a wolf and socialize as one. She got the full teen experience being there too.

The thought of leaving after finally figuring out where she belonged, sucked. But, she also knew she had a full-ride scholarship to Turnskin University. The place was made for shifters by shifters. They were all-inclusive. The students ranged from human to other, including vampires and demons and such. The idea sent a thrill through her. Because of how her life had been all those years, she never knew there were different kinds of supernatural beings out in the world, along with psychics abilities.

Talk about a crash course. Her aunts Danielle, Caden Raferty's mate, and Keeley, Kalkin Raferty, the Alpha's mate, taught her everything about their gifts. They were kind of like yin and yang. Their powers complemented each other, especially when one might need it most. So, being able to go to a college where everyone co-existed together... she couldn't wait. The only downside was leaving Nico for four years. Yes, she would come home for every break. Yes she would text and call him all the time and yes, they were mates, but it didn't seem right going off without him. She wished she could finagle a way to get him to TSU with her.

Then everything fell apart. She'd been kidnapped again. This time, she'd been taken Phoenix and left in an abandoned warehouse, naked and chained to a table. She didn't know who her kidnapper was or why they wanted her, other than they'd known her. Later, when she recalled the details she could piece together for her uncle Kalkin, they were PBH. Which meant all the work and effort Kalkin put into making his town safe, and shutting down PBH through the government, didn't do a damn bit of good.

However, all those men who'd been in the building with her when Nico and her family arrived, were dead. Keeley had been able to track all of them down and turn

the information over to Senator Jefferson Winters, Charisma's father, so he could get to the bottom of it. Hayden should have felt better, safer, yet there were days when she feared walking out of her home. Well, not today. Today I'm going to have fun with my mate and forget about everything else.

As she rounded the corner of Nico's apartment building, she spotted his vehicle in the lot. A sense of relief flowed through her. She had nothing to worry about, logically. Physically though... She and Nico were still years apart from each other. He'd turned twenty-one a few weeks after they'd had sex. He had a job, a place to live, and friends who were older than her. She'd heard about his exploits around town. She knew he went out to enjoy himself. It would be stupid for them both to not experiment. Heck, she'd done it too. Well, technically, not done it, done it. She made out with a guy and did other things, but never sex with Adam. And, for some explicable reason, she never chose another Alpha.

No... Her wolf shifted her curiosity to someone who didn't possess a single ounce of Alpha or alpha-potential within him. Adam was a little taller than her but much more subdued. He was kind and caring and before she stopped going to see him, she realized it was too easy to take advantage of him. Hayden didn't want to hurt him. Nor did she want to lead him on either. What they did was for fun, plain and simple.

When the time came, she'd given her virginity to Nico, albeit in an unconventional way. Their single afternoon together had split her world in two. As much as she craved her mate, she also knew he was right. Eventually, they'd get careless, and her family would find out. Yet, the memory stayed at the forefront of her mind. She wouldn't change a single moment of her experience. What they did together was special, and she knew Nico felt the same way. She'd even stopped visiting Adam, knowing nothing good could come from their messing around together.

Hayden walked across the short hall between the mailboxes and mailer bins to the gate where she used Nico's code to get in. Once she was inside, she went up the stairs

to the second floor and continued down the hall. Nervous butterflies built in her stomach. No matter what kind of day she was having, the minute she knew she would be visiting Nico, this small flutter would begin in her belly then gradually becomes this swirl of excitement. She had a bad habit of sporadically giggling when she was happy and right now, she chewed on the inside of her cheek to keep from doing the same.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Lifting her hand, she hesitated when an unfamiliar scent hit her nose. It was rancid. Putrid almost. She inhaled again and grimaced. Either someone forgot to take out their trash or a dead something was lying around. Hayden pushed aside the smell and cleared her throat before knocking. When Nico didn't answer, she became worried. She knocked again before calling out, "Nico? Are you here?"

She waited for what seemed like forever then Nico opened the door. He stood in front of her with a sheet over his hips, looking rumpled and sexy. His skin was a little pale and his eyes were glassy. But she chalked it up to working a long shift or being called in on his night off.

"Hayden," he said, his voice rough from sleep. "Shit, I'm—"

"Nico? Who's there? I thought you were coming back to bed?" a woman's voice filtered out of the apartment and everything inside of Hayden shattered. Her heart broke. Her stomach pitched and rolled.

"Fuck," Nico growled. "Hayden, I can explain."

"What?" Her vision blurred as her feet carried her away from the door. "You can't explain this, Nico." She heard his feet pounding behind her and she ran faster, needing to get away from him.

She didn't understand what was happening to her. This inexplicable yearning to run away and never come back. The disgusting smell made sense now. She remembered his words all those years ago it seemed, sex smells bad to those who aren't mated, especially when it's two mates who are doing it. Had Nico been lying this whole time

to her? Had he lied to her so she would have sex with him? Was it some prank? Hayden pushed out of the fence pulling at her clothes as Nico continued to call out to her.

No. No way, she couldn't look at him. Couldn't bear to see him standing there in nothing more than a sheet, knowing there was a woman up in his apartment. How stupid of her to think people like her, who endured tons of bullshit all their lives, got their fairy tale ending. Her wolf howled in outrage. The bone-crushing weight of knowing her mating—if it was that—had been severed or in fact, never was. He called out to her again. She couldn't stay there. She couldn't hear what he had to say. She'd given him her virginity. Been told since she was fourteen he was her mate. No. She had to leave. If she stayed, she'd throw up. If she stayed, she'd beg him not to leave her. If she stayed, she'd be the fool.

Hayden fell toward the ground. Her wolf finally took over after all those years, and she headed for anywhere but there.

Six more weeks and she would have been eighteen and they could have started their lives together without hiding what they'd been doing. Six weeks and she'd be ready to graduate. Now, it seemed like none of it mattered anymore.

Without Nico; what was life?

Nico Lopez stood in the parking lot of his apartment, not only hungover as a mother fucker, which couldn't happen for shifters but also disoriented as fuck. When he heard the pounding on his door, he'd winced in pain then felt the unmistakable weight of a person next to him who shouldn't have been there. He cracked his eyes open then mentally cursed a blue streak, because the sunlight hurt like a bitch and because the woman in his bed, he couldn't remember bringing home, let alone ending up naked with her, stirred.

The knock came again, and he fought off a wave of nausea, again, not something shifter experienced often, before starting for the door. What had he done the night before? He went out with the trainees from the jail. All of them, like him, would be promoted to deputy in a few short weeks. Yet, what no one knew was that he couldn't stand touching another woman since he'd had sex with Hayden. That afternoon changed everything between them, whether she wanted to acknowledge it or not.

He'd been so fucked in the head that afternoon, he hadn't realized he marked her until she'd been in the shower, cleaning up. There on her right breast, near her nipple, was his bite. He'd gone deep too, making sure it would stay. If she ever saw it, he didn't know. They'd promised each other never to talk about the moment until she was of age, and no one could say shit to them. After that incident, he'd made one promise to Kalkin, knowing full well he couldn't fulfill it. He'd never allow Hayden to see him bring home another woman. If Kalkin knew the truth while he made the empty oath, he didn't say a word. Nevertheless, Nico didn't break the promise he made with his Alpha. So, how did he get back to his apartment last night and where had the woman come from?

Fuck.

He couldn't stand there all day, Hayden was hurting, but so was he. None of what was going on made a lick of sense. Why couldn't he remember? Nico hurried back into his apartment and found the woman who'd called out to him while Hayden had been waiting on him, laying suggestively on his couch. Shit, I was supposed to go to the pool. Double fuck.

“What's her problem?”

“None of your concern. You need to get the fuck out of here.” He brushed past her, storming back to his room while calling himself all kinds of names—stupid fucking asshole being the best—and gathered her clothes. He threw them at the woman now

standing in his living room with a dumbfounded look on her face. “Sex doesn’t make a relationship, sweetheart.” His stomach pitched and rolled with a mixture of nausea and rage.

“Don’t be like that,” she whispered, reaching out for his hand. “We had fun last night. Bet I can make it a better morning too.”

Nico growled at her, swallowing down the bile traveling up his throat. “Get dressed and get the fuck out. Now.”

She jerked as she quickly dressed then scrambled out of his home. He didn’t care if she feared him in those moments, it was probably for the best. She wouldn’t be coming back around. When the front door slammed shut, he rushed to the bathroom, just in time to puke his guts up. Fuck, he hadn’t felt this bad, in a long ass time. As he braced himself against the toilet, he tried to remember what happened to him once he left his apartment, but most of it was a blur. He went to the usual place with the guys and ordered a beer. While they were having fun with the ladies, he had their backs.

Then what?

Nico's head pounded with a skull-splitting migraine the more he tried to recall the evening's events. His stomach rolled again and gave a hardy heave. He groaned as he vomited, his whole body shaking with the force. Something wasn't right. He let out a shaky breath as he trembled. What’s happening to me? He couldn't move. With his stomach still churning, he knew if he got up, he'd fall back over, and this time, throw up all over himself. His stomach rumbled and he dry heaved twice before bile stung the back of his throat. Now, he was just hurting himself.

Fuck.

He crawled across the floor to his room and grabbed his phone off the table. He had

to call Kalkin. He knew the conversation he was about to have would tear a few years off his hide, but he'd deserve it. He broke the cardinal rule. He brought a woman to his home. Plus, Hayden was out there somewhere, alone, hurting, and upset and it was all his fault.

Nico gagged. He hurried back to the bathroom, wobbling on his knees as he dry heaved once more. "Fuck me." After flushing the toilet, he curled up on the cool tile and closed his eyes. He needed a minute to gather himself before he hit send.

Wasting time is only going to make this worse...Nico let out a shuttered breath and connected the call, using the speaker function.

Kalkin answered on the third ring, "You want to tell me why I've had several reports of my niece running through the middle of town howling like a banshee?"

Son of a bitch, word got around quick in Window Rock. "Hayden came here this morning because we were supposed to go swimming."

"Why do I have a feeling the next words out of your mouth are going to piss me the fuck off?" Kalkin snarled.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“There was a woman here,” he stated then hurried to add, “but, I don’t even know how I got home or who the woman is.”

The low rumbling growl vibrating through their connection stopped abruptly. “Say that again.”

Nico repeated himself.

The pounding in his head increased when he stared out his bathroom window overlooking their little town. “Kalkin, something is definitely wrong. I can’t even stand the light.” His stomach picked that moment to give a heavy roll and saliva pooled in his mouth. He dropped the phone and scrambled back to the toilet, just making it in time to puke once more. He heaved the contents of his stomach several times, grossed out by the smell of his puke, before finally flushing the commode. He didn’t want to move. The pounding in his head amplified and the churn in his gut remained. However, he still had Kalkin on the phone waiting for him.

When his head was clear enough, Nico could hear Kalkin yelling at him to answer. “Sorry.” He winced at how weak his voice sounded. “Had to puke. Don’t feel better either. Should be anything left in my stomach. Where’s it all coming from?”

“Fuck kid,” Kalkin muttered. “Hang tight, I’ll have Danielle come take a look at you while I go find Hayden.”

Nico’s throat clogged with emotion and his vision swam. He thought he was about to pass out until he felt the wetness on his hand from the tears tracking down his chest. He cleared his throat and swallowed three times before he could manage, “Thank

you. I'm sorry." In those moments talking to his Alpha, he wanted to spill everything to the man. Tell him the truth. However, he made a promise to Hayden. They'd never speak about their afternoon together. No matter what.

"Give her some time," Kalkin assured him. "She'll come around. We'll help her through this."

When Kalkin said "we," he knew he wasn't included. His wolf howled in outrage. He'd fucked another woman other than his mate in his apartment, defiling the sanctuary he was building for him and Hayden, especially since they'd spent that special afternoon together. Every inch of him hurt. Every fiber of his being felt as though it was being snapped in two, tearing him apart from the inside out.

He hung up the phone and laid back on the floor, his body throbbed and ached in places that shouldn't. He couldn't make the pounding in his head stop. His stomach still roiled in disgust. There'd only been one other time he'd experienced anything like this. It'd been the first time after he and Hayden had sex, and another woman touched him. Nico closed his eyes knowing full well he'd single-handedly destroyed everything between him and Hayden, and he didn't know if his little wolf would ever be able to forgive him, let alone love him again. Hell, he'd seen it in her eyes, the minute her world came crashing down around her. He saw the soul-crushing anguish of realizing her mate betrayed her then watched the last flickering flames of her love for him die out.

No. This was the end for him and Hayden. He'd broken their mating. He didn't give a shit about what Kalkin said concerning matings never being able to be broken, because he'd just watched it happen. His stomach turned and he jumped up, heaving the remaining contents into the percaline bowl, which was more bile than anything.

Fuck.

He was a worthless piece of shit and there was no coming back from that.

3

Hayden Raferty sat at her desk and stared at the unopened letter from her father. The forced cheerfulness of his inquiries grew tiresome, the questions always the same. Had she made new friends? Seen any familiar faces? Did she like her professors? Blah, blah, blah. What would happen if she wrote return to sender on the envelope? Would they back off then?

From the moment she ran away from Nico's apartment until the day she left for school, her family tried to make her understand what Nico went through. Hayden didn't want to hear it. It was an excuse. She'd heard it all before and stupid her, she fell for his lie hook line and sinker. Forgiving him almost instantaneously reaction. He probably thought she would do the same this time. Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, shame on you. Then she remembered it'd only been a short time before that fateful afternoon when she'd showed up at his apartment, desperate for his touch. In a single act of weakness, she'd given him her virginity, and he threw it back in her face.

Throw it away and be done with it. The longer she stared at the envelope, the curiosity about what her family wanted this time got the better of her, and she opened it. Maybe just a little look. God, she was a fool.

Pictures of her cousins tumbled out of the accompanying note, landing on the desk in front of her. Their happy faces stared back at her with such wide-eyed hope. Excited for the next stage of their lives, and they should be. In the coming years, they would all join her and Bodhi along with Bell, Zoe, Tate, and Henry at Turnskin University, aptly named since most of the students were of the shifter variety and then some.

Her uncle had made sure cousins were following in their family's footsteps. They

were creating a legacy, Kalkin's words not hers, as Bodhi and she set foot on campus. She couldn't complain. Being different was the norm. She didn't have to hide as she did in the human world all those years while being on the run. For the first six months after she arrived in Window Rock, learning she was a wolf, she'd tried to shift, but nothing happened. Then during prom, something inside of her snapped. Nothing like the morning she found Nico with another woman, no, this was from being bullied.

Her wolf had had enough.

That was also the night she found out her wolf was like her Uncle Kalkin's. Since then, she'd grown, as had her wolf. However, her shifting was still unreliable. Although her wolf rivaled her father's when it came to size, the beast was more content to hang out within Hayden, hardly showing her face.

Still a bit shell-shocked when she arrived in Colorado, she been surprised by the freedom of being out in the mountains of Colorado Springs. A spark of joy took root within her. Maybe it was all the different scents or seeing all the different shifters and others co-existing on campus, but she wanted to be a part of it. If she decided to shift, throw her backpack over her back, and trot to class, she could.

Of course, she didn't. Because being naked in front of people was still a long way off for her. Sure, shifters were supposed to be proud of their bodies and not give a damn, but after all of the torture she'd been through, she didn't dare to open herself up like that again. Maybe that was the reason why seeing Nico with someone else hurt so bad, besides the whole issue of them already having sex together. Hayden had waited almost four years to give herself to him. He'd been the first person to see her naked and vulnerable. He'd been the first one to see what truly happened to her in that warehouse, and she'd stupidly thought he'd treasure her. Now, she didn't know if she could ever make the same commitment to anyone else.

Shit. She wasn't supposed to be thinking about him.

Nico.

After placing the photos into the edges of her mirror, she came back to the letter waiting for her. And now you're putting off the inevitable. No doubt they'd ask about Nico again—since the asshole followed her to Colorado Springs to keep an eye on her, not because he was wanted there—and, honestly, she didn't have an answer for them. Hayden opened the letter, and, instead of her father's bold script, Blake's chicken scratch jumped out at her. She smiled. When she met her father, he had already mated both Blake and Loraine. Bodhi had been with their father the whole time. Hayden could admit there'd been some growing pains with her twin. The idea her father would take one of them, but not her too, cut deep. It took a while to understand why Holly had Hayden and Jace had Bodhi. What was worse, they were twins. Just like her uncles, Kalkin and Caden—they carried a special bond, neither of them were sure about.

Supposedly, no one knew about her until the day Holly's car broke down in Window Rock and she asked the sheriff, her Uncle Kalkin, for help. At first, it shocked her how much she resembled her family then, seeing her twin brother for the first time, she lost it. But, her dad... The man had been inconsolable. He held both of them for hours and didn't want them out of his sight for nothing.

Then she worried about Holly. All she'd known all her life was Holly. The anxiety and fear of losing the one stabilizing part of her life had complicated matters too, because she worried Holly would leave, and she'd be all alone. Stupid, really, thinking back on everything. However, something miraculous happened and Holly became her Uncle Mackenzie's mate allowing her family to remain intact.

She traced Blake's handwriting. He was the rascal of her two dads. Blake was her nurturer and over-indulger. He spoiled her and Bodhi while Jace taught her about her wolf, and Loraine had been the loving mother she'd always wanted. Loraine was also the disciplinarian. Hayden loved her family—as much as she loved Holly—even

if they did enjoy playing matchmaker with her.

The letter started as per normal. Window Rock is growing, blah, blah, blah. We miss you and Bodhi. We hope you're doing well. Yada, yada, yada. When her gaze lit on the next sentence, she squealed—a noise she hadn't made since she'd been a kid.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

We have good news to share this time, and that is why I am writing you. Your father is sitting with Loraine at the doctor's office. We're having a baby.

Hayden jumped in a small circle while giggling and shaking the letter. She and Bodhi were going to have a sibling. She settled herself and continued reading.

The baby will be born in the middle of spring. We hope you can come home for break and meet the new addition to the family. We miss you. We love you. Call home when you get this.

When she finished reading the letter, she placed it in the notebook marked for that particular year and slipped it into its spot. She kept every letter and birthday card her family sent her. She kept the pictures and newspaper clippings Loraine sent her when her uncles solved high-profile cases. And, whenever she got homesick, she opened up the folders and read everything, including the questions only smothering parents—who were naturally curious about her time away—asked. While occasionally wanting to know if she'd seen him.

Perhaps she still had a little crush on Nico.

She first saw him at the sheriff's department the day she arrived in town, and her tummy had done a funny little flip-flop. He had been behind the counter, sitting in one of the chairs, hands cuffed behind him, a cocky grin on his lips.

Bad boy.

The Sheriff's Department was too loud and smelled of people and stuff she probably

didn't want to know about. The thought should have confused her more, but she'd been too much of an anxious ball of energy. Her aunt pushed the call button again while tapping her foot. They could be caught in the middle of nowhere with the PBH gaining on them.

Hayden looked at the boy again. His whiskey-brown eyes were alight with sparks of humor and freedom. She wondered what it would be like to be free. To run wild without hesitation. He winked at her, bouncing his knee as he sat there.

She looked away, embarrassed by her reaction to him. Her tummy warmed. Her palms were sweaty. She'd only ever had that reaction when she was scared, but this was different. She wasn't scared. Sure, she'd been nervous about breaking down in the desert, but this place felt—homey. Like she was home. Like she belonged there.

Again, she stared at the boy unable to look away as her aunt began knocking on the glass partition separating them from those in the back. She wondered briefly why the place was built like that—like a vault. She'd been in a few Police Stations and Sheriff's Departments over the years, but none of them compared to the security in this place.

“I’m coming. I’m coming,” the deepest, darkest most richest voice Hayden had ever heard growled from somewhere unseen by her.

“H-Hayden?” She spun around as a man she hadn’t seen in years stepped inside the building followed by a woman. “Is that really you?”

She knew that voice. She'd only heard him once, but she swore she'd never forget him or the way he cradled her to his body and got her to safety. “Lucas?”

The boy handcuffed stood then, peering at her with open curiosity. She ignored him for the moment and stared at the man who'd saved her life all those years ago. “It’s

you.” Her voice came out smaller than she intended before her feet carried her toward him. “I thought I’d dreamed you. I thought I’d never see you again.”

“What is all the ruckus going on in my station?” A man, bigger than a mountain, stepped up to the glass separating the lobby from the department. His cobalt blue eyes, eyes she saw every day when she looked at herself, peered at her in disbelief. “What...”

“Jace Raferty?” Holly spilled the name as though she too couldn’t believe who she was looking at.

Hayden frowned but the boy behind the man named Jace stepped forward, his hands still cuffed behind him, confusion written all over his face. “Hey, Kal, why did she call you Jace?”

Or was his real name, Kal?

This Kal or Jace or whoever he was, shook his head. “Don’t know. Better question is, why does the little girl look like us and why does Lucas know her?” He pointed to Hayden, his gaze boring into hers as if he could see down to her soul.

Lucas laughed, letting Hayden go. “I’d know her scent anywhere, Kalkin. Sunshine and cotton candy.”

Kalkin. Hayden liked the man’s name. He had curly black hair like hers, but different and a black beard shot through with white. The man could squish her if he wanted to and by the look on his face, he probably wanted to.

"Hayden, come here," Holly said, her gaze bouncing off of Kalkin and Lucas as she spoke. "I need to introduce you to someone." She looked up at the bigger-than-life man and licked her bottom lip. "This is your uncle. Kalkin Raferty. Your father's

brother."

The world stopped at that moment. Hayden froze where she stood, and she knew no matter what came next, her life would be irrevocably changed.

"I'm Nico by the way," the boy standing beside her supposed uncle said. "It's good to meet you, Hayden."

At eighteen, even for an adolescent wolf, he'd been all muscles and tall. Hayden's fourteen-year-old heart had tripped a beat. Nico had been caught as a wolf chasing the chickens from Mrs. Jamison's henhouse—or so she thought. Not completely out of character for a teenage boy, she'd rationalized later, after she learned what happened. Nonetheless, he spooked some of the hens and the stress from his "fun," killed a couple of others. She'd pleaded with her uncle, even though she didn't know the guy, not to let Nico be unfairly punished for his actions. Instead, she'd asked if he replaced the chickens, would he still be in trouble—irrational thinking for a girl who didn't know Nico from a hole in the wall. Yet, her uncle must have talked to the judge because, a few days later, Nico came to her home and thanked her. Then she found out the truth. Nico had been helping her uncle. He'd been detained with a group of boys who'd been going around vandalizing property in the county. Nico's "arrest" had been for show, but her instinct to vouch for him had endeared her to him.

After that, they'd become fast friends. Hayden and he would either watch movies or hike the canyons behind where they lived. Then as she grew older, he began to train her. He knew how fearful she was about being captured, and he wanted to help. Hayden didn't want to be a victim ever again. They didn't do much, paintball at first, target practice once she got the hang of shooting the pellets. What they had figured out, after teaching her some mixed martial arts techniques, was she'd been a natural. Nope, don't go there. Every time you think about the past, you remember all the reasons why you should forgive him and forget the reason you left home so quickly.

She couldn't help it. A part of her still loved him. Her father had called it puppy love, to begin with, but the day she went to Nico's apartment, she'd repeated the words she said when he found her in the warehouse. She loved him. Loved him with every bit of herself. He was her mate.

The growing bond between them spiked six months after she arrived in Window Rock. Even though it had been late in the year, her aunt and her uncles, even her dads believed she needed to go to public school to learn how to socialize. It'd been one of the hardest most rewarding things she'd ever done. Most of her friends were on some sport team which garnered a lot of unwanted attention from some of the girls, however, after learning who Nico was to her before prom, put into perspective some of the hate.

From that day forward, they were two peas in a pod, as her aunt Keeley would say. They spent more time playing video games and watching movies together. They hung out at their clubhouse, which was a masterpiece, went swimming when it was too hot and when they needed a study buddy they were there for each other, no matter what.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

He broke her the day she stood outside of his apartment and heard another woman's voice calling for her mate. Hayden had thought it was impossible to continue living. Every day was as if she crawled through glass and nails, clawing her way to the end of the school year, so she could leave home and never come back. Then it had taken another two years to muster up the courage to move on with her life. Now, as a sophomore in college and at twenty years old, the urge to have sex and finish the mating poked at her. But the guys she sat through class with or in her study group did nothing for her. She found herself comparing them to he-who-shall-not-be-named, and didn't that just suck donkey dick?

A low growl of irritation passed her lips, and she balled her hands into fists. What's done is done. He made his choice. She opened her notebook and wrote a quick note to her dad. She needed them to understand she moved on, and she would appreciate it if they didn't ask about him—Nico.

Blake,

I got your letter. I am so excited. You have to tell me whether I will have a little brother or sister when you find out. I will make sure Bodhi and I are home in time for the birth, don't worry. I need you to know something and it's pretty important. It's a big step for me, after all, and I hope it will make you happy to hear.

I am moving on. I need to. I am going out this weekend with Bodhi to check out a local club for shifters. I hope to meet someone or, as in your case, perhaps someones.

Give my love to my dad and Loraine.

She closed the letter, grabbed an envelope, and stuffed it inside. Before she could chicken out—like she'd done ninety-nine other times—she addressed the envelope and placed a stamp on it. She would drop it in the school mailroom on the way to her last class.

Hayden nibbled on her lip and stared at the letter on her desk. Already, doubt clouded her decision. “No, I’ve got to do this.” She walked to the hook by her closet where her backpack hung and grabbed it. “I’m doing the right thing. Bodhi would agree with me.”

Slinging the bag over her shoulder, Hayden picked up the envelope and gripped the door handle. She had one more class before she could come back home and decompress. As she stepped out into the hall, her cousins, Bell and Zoe, greeted her.

Both girls looked a little too hyper for their own good.

If she thought she had a rough start to life, both of them had it worse. Most of the information she learned about them came secondhand. They didn't talk much about themselves, but who could blame them. She also learned the first time she met a thirteen-year-old Bell, the girl was putting up a front. A shield. She had some deep issues, and Hayden often wondered if she'd ever let anyone in.

“What’s going on?” Hayden closed the door behind her.

“Tell her, Bell,” Zoe prodded her sister. “Or I will.”

Bell blushed, and her blue eyes went wide. Her hair had been pulled back in a messy braid and some of the strands hung in her face, giving her an innocent quality.

“Tell me what?”

“I’ve been asked out,” Bell whispered. “To the mixer.”

“You have?” They walked down the short hall together, heading out of the dorm.

“What’s his name?”

“You’ll never guess in a million years,” Zoe said with a snort.

Where Bell’s complexion reminded her of fine porcelain, Zoe’s midnight hair, mischievous midnight-blue eyes, and bow-shaped lips resembled her father—Rapier. Whoever mated her would be in for a roller-coaster ride for sure.

"I don't know guys. Just tell me." She stopped and turned to them. "You tell me who it is, and I'll tell you my good news."

“You’re getting back together with Nico?” Bell chirped. She hated letting down her cousins when it came to Nico and her, but the sooner they understood there was no coming back from what happened between her and Nico, the better off they’d all be.

“No.” Hayden started walking again, itching to drop the letter off at the dorm mailroom. “I actually wrote my parents to tell them I’m taking the leap and finding a suitable mate.” She grinned, be damned what her uncle said or what her wolf wanted. “Should be interesting to see howthatgoes over with them. So, about this date?” Hayden changed the subject, knowing she was lying to them and herself.

“Right, her date,” Zoe started. “This lucky bitch is going out with the lion Alpha, Christoph.”

“Zoe!” Bell gasped. “What has Mom told you about your mouth?”

She shrugged. “Hey, take it up with Dad. He taught me everything I know.”

“So, the lion Alpha, huh?” Hayden got them back on track. “Congrats. There will be several brokenhearted girls.” Christoph was one of the biggest jocks on campus. He was part of the football team and reminded Hayden of some beach bum guy. He had a bigger-than-life presence, and he always seemed to have a holier than thou complex. It rubbed Hayden the wrong way, but if her cousin was happy, she'd try to show a little joy for her.

“Yeah.” Bell pushed her hair behind her ear. “But, I have another problem.”

“Okay, shoot. What's got you in knots?” Hayden had never seen her cousin so nervous before. Okay, lie. She'd seen Bell get flummoxed several times over the years, usually, it was over some celebration or Junior Prom—Senior for Hayden. Or when it came to small random inconsequential stuff. This though... This was different. There'd been a sadness to her worry and Hayden hated that.

“I need your help. See, there's this thing called the Greek Shifter Games, or GSG, and I need a partner. But—”

“First what are these Greek Shifter Games? Second, what do you need from me?” The fear of rejection in the young feline's eyes tore at Hayden's gut.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“The GSG is this whole competition set up around welcoming students back to college. They're supposed to showcase the different Fraternities and Sororities students can join while also rooting for all the student-athletes. Anyway, the vice president of my sorority, Sigma Epsilon Xi, quit this morning. We're going to lose our charter if we can't get more pledges at the games.” Bell frowned.

“Then get one of your cabinet members to join you,” Hayden answered, not seeing the issue. “Easy fix.”

“You would think it would be easy since the initials in English are S.E.X,” Zoe quipped. Everyone should be knocking down her door.

Hayden hadn't even put two and two together on that one. “She makes a good point, Bell.”

The young lioness sighed, ignoring their comments. “Anyway, none of them want to participate, and they're like rats scurrying off a sinking ship.” Lovely visual. “I thought I'd, you know, throw caution to the wind, promote you to VP, and have you join me.” Her cousin gave a tight laugh.

“You can't promote someone who is not even a member.” Nor did she want the Greek life. Filled with snobby bitches and drunk assholes—present company the exception—their idea of “fun,” didn't settle well with Hayden.

“You officially became one this morning at nine a.m. when I added you to our charter then held a vote in which you became vice president by default.” Bell grinned.

Hayden groaned. "By default you mean no one challenged me for the position or threw their hat in the ring?"

"Luck of the draw, I guess." Bell shrugged. "Look, I know my sorority can be one of the best at this college, but I need your help, Hayden. Please."

"Fine." She looked at Zoe who snickered beside her sister. "You knew, didn't you?"

"Maybe a little bit. She came to me and asked for a little advice," Zoe said nonchalantly. "If it makes you feel better, I'll be there with my VP, too."

"And which sorority do you belong to? Gothics R Us?"

"Hardy, har, har." Zoe rolled her eyes. "Actually, I have badass pledges and members. We're Xi Beta Xi."

"You say this as if I should care." Hayden gave her cousin a droll stare.

"Eh, it's just cool to say the name. Xi Beta Xi." Zoe spread her hands out in front of her as if the name would appear front and center on a marquee.

"Anyway, there is a mixer Friday night. You'll need to attend—"

"Bodhi will be there, and so will Christoph," Zoe jumped in.

Hayden turned her attention to Zoe. "What about you, mouth?"

"I got asked out by one of those falcons. Rocky. He's hot in that muscular-biker kind of way. He'll be at the mixer. I told him I might say what up, or whatever Friday night." Her cousin's gaze didn't meet hers. The girl did everything in her power to look anywhere but her.

“Zoe Dryer.” The girl’s attention snapped to Hayden’s. “You found your mate, didn’t you?”

“Hell no. I’m not mating. He’s just some guy. Easy on the eyes and everything like that.” She shrugged.

“You did. I’m telling your mom!” Hayden teased.

“Don’t you dare! I will kick your ass, Hayden. I mean it.” Hayden knew the girl did, too. Where Bell had a dainty quality to her and liked being a girl, Zoe had a rough edge. She reminded Hayden of their father at every turn. “I’ll call your dad and tell him you’re sending them a letter and to refuse it,” Zoe added.

“Not scared. Besides, he’s not home. He’s at the doctor’s office with Loraine. I’m going to be a big sister,” she squealed, changing the subject once more.

“What?” both girls said in unison.

“When?” Zoe asked.

“Is Loraine okay?” Bell questioned.

Everyone knew about the explosion at the Sheriff’s Department and the fact Loraine had been trapped. For a long time, things were touch and go for her, and even when she healed, no one knew if she could have kids. The prospect of her being pregnant though crazy exciting, also scared the crap out of Hayden more than she wanted to express.

“This spring and, yes, from what Blake’s note said, all is fine. I’ll call home later and get you guys more info, promise.” She slipped the letter from her hand into the mailbox and exited their dorm. “So, what are you guys doing tonight?”

“Study group for me. Tattooing 101 for her,” Bell quipped, pointing to her sister.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Nice.” Hayden high-fived the shy girl. “Perfect delivery, too.”

“Thanks.”

"Oh, ha-ha both of you. For your information, I have an interview at the radio station. Hopefully, if they like me, I'll have a job starting tomorrow." Zoe headed in the opposite direction from them. "Have fun with your nerdfest."

Hayden faced Bell as they headed in the opposite direction. “So, about her mate...I want all the deets on this Rocky character.”

Bell laughed. “Well from what I understand, he comes from Washington state. His parents own a bar. His mom is a falcon, and his dad is a moose. They’re also badass bikers. I think she called them, Pasos or something. Anyway, their Alpha is Cougar. They have another guy named Cricket—he’s a bear. It sounds really neat in a way.”

Hayden blinked a few times. "Sounds like a menagerie, to be honest."

Bell laughed. “Yeah it does, now that you mention it. But, Zoe seems happy, so that’s all that matters.”

Yes, it was. "And you, this date with Christoph?" Hayden wiggled her brows.

Pink tinged Bell’s cheeks, and her eyes went all sparkly. “Yeah.” The wistful quality of her voice made Hayden a bit envious of her cousin. “I’m not sure why he chose me, so I’m not sure if I want to go or not.”

Hayden snorted. “Oh, you’re going. I’ll see to that.”

Bell let out an unladylike squeak. “Hayden Raferty, don’t you dare.”

She chuckled as she rubbed her hands together. Let’s see how they like it when someone meddles in their life.

4

Nico ran through the hills behind Turnskin University. His paws ate up the wet soil as though demons chased him, and perhaps they did. Anger coursed through him as he wove around the bushes and up the path toward the clearing. His end game? Reach the cliff located almost at the top. A favorite place of his, and one where he could clear his mind while the sun rose, welcoming the new day—even if it was another day without his mate—without Hayden.

He’d been a morose fucker, for sure. After doing this run every day for the last two years, he didn’t know why he continued to do so, especially when today wouldn’t be any different.

Hope.

Hope for another chance.

Hope, he could make up for all the wrongs he’d inflicted on his little mate.

Hope for a better life for them.

Together.

Once he reached the peak, memories of a not-so-distant past swamped him. Nico

shook his head in an attempt to clear it, but it didn't work for shit. Sitting down on his hind legs, he looked skyward as a thin streak of the morning sun appeared. The change fascinated him. Muted blues and purples mixed with the bright yellow-orange line of the sun as it gained its foothold on the horizon.

His lips curled up in a wolfish smile as he remembered the first time he met the gangly fourteen-year-old girl. Her long black hair flowed freely down her back, and her sparkling blue eyes were full of life. Hayden took his breath away. So full of energy, she always asked some weird question and talked a mile a minute while she bounced around.

The second he saw her—scented her—he knew she'd been his mate. Cotton candy and sunshine all rolled into one, just like Lucas said. For a moment he wondered if Hayden was the older man's mate then he realized Lucas saved her life, so of course he'd know her smell. With his newfound knowledge also came understanding. Nico would have to wait for her. She had to grow up, and Nico bided his time, becoming her friend.

He supposed he could have allowed Bodhi, her twin, to help her navigate the high school, but the deep-seated yearning to keep her safe, grabbed Nico by the balls and forced him to act. He wouldn't lie and say he didn't enjoy that part too, because he did. The minute she'd spot him in a crowd and wrap her arms around him, nuzzling his chest to gather his scent, fuck... He was a lucky son of a bitch.

He also learned after he had sex with Hayden, the touch of another woman, made him violently ill. It was the strangest thing too. He hadn't been able to explain any of it until that fateful day he lost everything.

On the days he went with the guys across county lines was to let off some steam, it'd mostly been him watching others, like a dirty little secret he didn't want anyone to know about. He'd jerk off a few times, okay, more than a few then leave. So, what

happened during his last visit? Fuck, he wished he could remember that night. Maybe if he could, he'd be able to right all the wrongs he committed. Wash away the sin of breaking his little mate's tender heart.

As it was, Danielle found drugs in his system. Something specifically tailored to his genetic makeup. There'd been cases of the drug being used before and one of the people it'd been used on was Hayden's father, Jace. However, Nico didn't want to blame the drugs in his system. Had he stayed home—kept his head about him—he'd never have committed such a err, to begin with.

He'd been scared shitless. He had unprotected sex with Hayden. Though he knew most pregnancies happened within the full moon, Rafertys were built differently. Kalkin could knot and knock up his mate outside the full moon—an Alpha trait. Hayden, on the other hand, didn't follow the moon at all, which screwed with him more. Yet, he couldn't stop what happened between them. The minute he sank into her warm, wet pussy, he lost his mind. He should have used a condom even though his wolf hated the idea. Hell, he should have kept his hands to himself. Yet, the minute the aroma of her arousal hit him in the chest, he couldn't stop what was about to happen between them. He didn't regret taking her virginity. He didn't regret fucking his mate and marking her. What he regretted most of all was not keeping her safe.

Each week afterward, he kept his word. Hayden would come over, take the test, and they'd wait. He didn't have a plan for them if the results came back positive. He figured they'd solve their problems together. With each negative test, the knot in his gut unfurled and he began to breathe again. The night he went out, had been more from relief and knowing he dodged a bullet than wanting to get drunk—which hardly happened to shifters.

Now, Nico wished he could take the whole night back, and never leave his apartment.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Before everything blew up in his face, he'd spent his weekends with Hayden. When he didn't have to work in the jail, they'd play Call of Duty—her favorite video game—or take hikes and watch movies. He taught her to hunt and track. He even taught her how to clean, load, and fire a handgun. They discovered together she had a talent with firearms, and she earned her marksmanship quickly. He'd done everything in his power to help her hone her skills and learn to protect herself.

Unfortunately, when her father discovered what they'd been up to, Jace had been none too pleased with either of them. He freaked the hell out when he caught them practicing on targets deep in the woods. Dude became scary as hell when his fury took over, but, then again, so did all of the Raferty brothers. Thinking back on it, he supposed with his penchant for doing stupid shit, this had been the one time he should have gone to her father, but he'd never do anything to hurt his mate.

What do you call getting messed up and having a one-night stand?

A fuckup of epic proportions.

Images of the day he broke Hayden's heart filtered through his mind. In a singular event, he'd destroyed his tiny mate and best friend. Not a day went by he didn't regret his actions or wonder how he could get her back. Of course, he had no one to blame but himself. When the knock came at his door early the next morning, it shouldn't have surprised him. Hayden wanted to spend the day at the swimming pool—something he'd agreed to—and, in all honesty, he'd been excited to see his little wolf too.

Then the chick he brought home opened her mouth, and the spell between him and

Hayden had been broken.

Shock, tinged with disbelief and pain, dimmed her bright-blue eyes before she took off with him yelling after her. Her mournful howl echoed in the early morning air. Torn between running after her and giving her room to grieve, he stood rooted in his spot. The woman he'd shared his bed with, whose name he conveniently maybe purposefully didn't know, greeted him from his bed once he stepped back into his apartment.

"What's her problem?"

"None of your concern. You need to get the fuck out of here." He brushed past her, while calling himself all kinds of names—stupid fucking asshole being the best—and gathered her clothes. He threw them at the woman still sitting on his bed with a dumbfounded look on her face. "Sex doesn't make a relationship, sweetheart."

"Don't be like that," she whispered, reaching out for his hand. "We had fun last night. Bet I can make it a better morning too."

Nico growled at her. "Get dressed and get the fuck out. Now."

Huffing through his snout, Nico lay in the cool grass. Cheating like he had, made him a low-down dirty bastard. For days, he'd caught whiffs of his mate's anguish and followed the scent only to be stopped by her uncles or her father. If he didn't want to talk with Jace about what happened between him and Hayden or the drug Nico had been given, he needed to stay away. No one hurt Daddy's little girl and received forgiveness the easy way in the Raftery family.

No one.

The worst part of his self-created hell was Hayden never talked to him again and

ignored any attempts he made to speak to her if he did catch her out by herself. Had she given him the chance to explain, he would have told her fucking that chick had been nothing—a release, a bodily function. He didn't love that woman, and he sure as hell didn't want the woman as his mate. He already had one, Hayden.

Hell, if push came to shove, he would have told her his drink had been spiked too and if anything, he was the victim. Yet, saying such, would be one excuse after another, because he went willingly with the guys. He sat at the bar and ordered a drink. He participated of his own volition for the majority of the night. He didn't get to cry victim when he should have known better.

Not my proudest moment.

By that time, he'd also begun to justify what happened. Hayden had been seventeen. Even though they'd had sex, she way too young to mate. Besides, he'd made a promise to himself to allow her to grow up, to spread her wings, and know who she wanted to be before he mated her fully. Wolf shifters were a dominant, possessive lot, so he knew once he had her, he'd never let her go.

Lies, all lies.

Now, he sat in the same spot, morning after morning, in constant turmoil about what to do with regards to the situation. Nico knew exactly what his wolf wanted, what it—he yearned for—his mate. Yet, his wolf, a creature of habit, wanted to mark and claim her for all to see, this time, taking what rightfully belonged to him. If only life was so easy he could follow what the wolf wanted. For the man, it'd always be a more complex situation, and he had to make the wolf understand marking her didn't heal a broken heart or shattered trust.

He knew Hayden.

A stubborn, prideful wolf with a strong moral code like hers, wouldn't take his bullshit answers. Nico had also learned, from his conversations with Loraine—one of Jace's mates—Hayden held fast to the knowledge of him cheating on her. Even though she didn't know the full truth, Nico had broken their bond. A point he couldn't fight because he had.

Especially when it came to his little wolf.

So, buddy boy, what makes this morning different? Perhaps time, or perhaps he'd grown a pair of balls and wanted to fight for what belonged to him and to hell with the silly ass plans. Nico knew he had to explain what happened that night—all of it—and continue to do so until she listened to him. He'd make it quite clear right off the bat he wasn't going anywhere. He would gain her love and trust back, no matter the cost.

He had no other options.

Both he and his wolf were hurting without their perfect little wolf.

Running back down the trail, he moved faster because, for the first time in a long time, he felt like he had a plan to achieve some resolution to his problems. He'd fight tooth and nail for his mate, do whatever he needed to do to get her back.

In a flash of white light, he shifted to his human form then stretched and rolled his neck. He grabbed his discarded clothes off the rail where he'd left them then padded to his room. He had a poli-sci class to get ready for.

"Aren't you a sight for sore eyes." Bodhi's sarcastic tone wasn't lost on Nico as he stopped short of his place. "Where have you been hiding out?"

"I've been where I've always been." He pointed to the dorm. "Right there. What do

you want?” If it hadn’t been for Bodhi and the email telling him it was time to claim his mate, he’d have stayed in Window Rock. As it stood, until that moment, he hadn’t even known how to approach her.

“It’s good to know in the two years since I told you to get your ass here you’ve tried to make amends. I mean, damn, man. What the fuck are you waiting for?” The obvious disdain in his voice didn’t shock Nico.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“I guess I’ve been trying to figure out what to say, without making an excuse.” He shrugged.

"Bullshit, that's an excuse, too. Sorry, ain't going to cut it either."

Thank you, Captain Obvious. “As a matter of fact, I have a plan now.”

“Interesting because I’ve got some good news and some bad news for you, too.” Bodhi had a superior look on his face. “Which do you want first?”

"Does it matter what I want?"

"Nope, just thought I'd be polite." Bodhi reached into his back pocket and pulled out a flyer. "This weekend the Greek Shifter Games are going to begin playing out here on campus. Two people from each of the fraternities are going to square off in different types of battles to see who is the best of the best. Sixteen will square off, only five will win." He made it sound like they'd be fighting in the Thunderdome. Two men enter, one man leaves. Not foreboding at all.

Nico cocked a brow. “And this means what to me?”

“I know for a fact Hayden will be participating with Bell as a lady of the sororities. Each sorority is matched up with a fraternity.” The smug look on his face didn’t falter as he stared Nico down.

“Hayden’s not in a sorority, though.” He might not have talked to her or spent any time with her, but he did have ways of finding out stuff. If it made him a stalker, so

be it.

“As of nine this morning, she is the vice president of Sigma Epsilon Xi.”

What the fuck? “How?”

“Bell needed the pledges, and I put a bug in her ear about helping a friend out.” He grinned. “Namely you.”

“Wait, so you arranged all this shit, and now you want me to participate in these games? Have you forgotten I’m not part of a fraternity?” Though the odds were stacked against him, the spark of hope blooming in his chest didn’t dim. But he did promise to squash it before he planned out their life together, especially if his little she-wolf rebuked him in public and took another for a mate. Reality could be a cruel, spiteful bitch sometimes. He was grateful she’d so far not pulled the rebuke card on him.

“That’s the bad news.” Bodhi pulled a small, plain card out of his back pocket and handed it to him. “The games are by invite only. Since you’re not part of a fraternity, you’re going to have to fill this card out and join my fraternity. My VP can’t make the games and none of the other guys wanted to join, so, you’re going to step in and help me out.”

Nico flipped the card over. There was nothing fancy about the card, nothing to point out it belonged to one of the fraternities on campus. Nico stared at it for a long moment, trying to come up with a reason why he shouldn’t do as Bodhi told him. When he couldn’t figure out a good enough excuse, he glanced at Hayden’s twin and frowned. “What’s the catch?” There’s always a catch.

“You have to do what I say when I say it. You can’t pressure Hayden and when this is over, I promise to help you heal the rift between you and my sister,” his friend

replied.

“And you’re sure you can get me into this little battle of brawn?” He flipped the card over one more time still suspicious about the whole, GSG and being a part of a fraternity.

“Just fill out the damn card, Nico. You’re acting like you don’t want my sister as your mate.”

“You’re not answering my question.” He glanced up at Hayden’s twin.

“Stop looking a gift horse in the mouth,” Bodhi snarled. “I’m giving you a way to fucking prove you’re the one for my sister. Now either get your head in the game or move the fuck on. My twin has been through enough with you. She doesn’t need any more disappointment, especially since I know the truth about you guys. You fucked her and left her.”

Ouch, that stung. Guilt and worry ate at his gut. Nico stared at Bodhi for a minute. If he found out about what Hayden and he did, why hadn't he told Jace or Kalkin? "You never said a word, why?"

Bodhi blew out a breath and some of the anger bled from his features. "She was in love with you, still is. She'd been through hell those first couple of weeks and after you and she got together, she changed. She was happy and we could breathe. I wouldn't spoil her healing process."

Fuck. What did Nico say other than thank you? Nothing. Suck up whatever moroseness you have left and fight for your mate. “All right. You’re on. I’ll fill it out as soon as I get inside my room.” He started for the door. “For what it’s worth, and I know it’s not much. I love her so much it hurts. I was so sick after the incident at the apartment, Danielle had to heal me, and at that, it took days to recover.”

“I heard, man. I heard. I don’t know what happened that morning. I don’t care either.” Bodhi frowned. “Both of you are hurting each other, and I can’t stand it. I want my sister back.”

“I want my mate back too,” Nico whispered.

“That’s the spirit.” Bodhi smacked him on the shoulder as he stepped past him. “Oh, and by the way, there’s a mixer before the games and a ball after the games. All participants are required to attend.”

“Son of a bitch.” He groaned as his friend’s laughter echoed off the walls of the building.

Nico walked into his room and grabbed a pen to fill out the information required. After he grabbed a shower, he would carry form back to Bodhi. He couldn’t believe he was joining a fraternity for Hayden. He snorted. Yes, he could. He’d do anything for her to prove he was trying to make amends for what happened. He sat down at his desk and stared at the photo of the last time they were together.

It’d been a few weeks before everything fell apart. Hayden and Nico had gone for breakfast at the diner then decided to go for a hike. He didn’t know how long they’d been out there in the warm spring sun, but by the time sun began to set, they were both exhausted and ready to go home. However, Hayden wasn’t ready. She wanted one more photo of them together. She reminded him in a few short months, she’d be going away for college. She wanted all the keepsakes she could have while she was away.

He should have taken more time for her. He should have claimed her outright the day she came to his apartment. Should have invoked his rights as her mate. Nico growled. No, he hadn’t wanted to chain her to him at such a young age, yet, he couldn’t stand this either. It was as if the crushing weight of losing his mate grew heavier by the day

and if he didn't fix things—or worse set her free—they'd both die under the overwhelming stress.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

He cleared his throat and stood. He couldn't wait any longer. This was his last chance. He knew it gut-deep. If things didn't work out between him and Hayden, well, he'd free her of this torture.

However, deep in his knotted guts, he knew this had to be the only way to win his little wolf back. She needed to see he'd walk through fire for her. Do whatever it took to be the man she needed him to be. To forgive him when, in the last two years, he hadn't been able to forgive himself. That day, with the sheet wrapped around his waist, alcohol seeping from his pores and God only knows what else, he understood the consequences of his actions.

He didn't deserve a second chance to make all this up to Hayden. Perhaps he should forget about the games and go home. But the spark of hope that lit inside him while he sat on the cliff flickered and grew brighter by the second. He couldn't leave yet. He had to see this through, even if it meant losing his little wolf forever.

He grabbed the card and headed back to where he knew Bodhi liked to hang out. He supposed he could have done the whole thing later, but it was about time Nico stopped tucking his tail between his legs. When he found Bodhi with Tate and Henry in the quad laughing about something, the anxious pit of his stomach feeling returned. The fine hairs stood up on his arms. The unmistakable feelings of paranoia bubbled to the surface. He felt like an addict waiting to find his next fix and that shit didn't work for Nico.

He cleared his throat as he handed the card back to Bodhi. "I'm not sticking around. Thanks for this." He turned to leave, unable to stay in their presence. It was almost as if he waited for them to attack and kick his ass. Hell, in his mind he deserved it. He

wouldn't hate them if they. He'd do the same to either of them if they ever hurt their mates.

"Don't leave," Bodhi said. "You can stick around."

"Not sure I'm good company right now, or if the present company wants me around," Nico answered.

"If we were going to kick your ass," Henry said, sounding like the formidable panther he was, "we'd have done it by now. We know the truth. Sit the fuck down."

Nico cocked a brow. "Fine." Henry was sounding more and more like a combo of Rapier and Kalkin by the day. To hear the command in his voice, well, it took all of his willpower not to laugh. "Just remember I'm older than all three of you."

Bodhi laughed. "You're also pussy whipped like Kalkin says about himself and my dad."

Nico groaned. He didn't want to be having this conversation about Hayden, Bodhi's twin, and his mate. "Can we not?"

Tate grinned. "But it's so much fun torturing you after you've been a fucking hermit. I'm surprised you've showered and don't look like a scraggly wildebeest."

Nico flipped Tate off. "Are the both of you participating in the games?"

Tate shook his head. "Soccer game. I'll be out of town."

"Not my style," Henry said. "Super jocks enjoy that shit more than the rest of us. No offense."

Bodhi held up his hand. "None taken."

"I can't believe the school would go through all this just help the Greek life on campus grow," Nico added. "It's a bit out there."

"From what I understand there is also a Daímonas Festivál," Tate said. "It's supposed to be for all the others here. You know, demons, vampires, fae, and the likes. It's a way to offset the GSG for those who can't participate due to the sun."

"Naturally," Nico said.

"We also can't attend," Henry stated. "It's in the rules. Just like they can't attend the GSG."

Nico whistled. "Well, if that ain't fucked up. What happened to inclusivity?"

Bodhi shrugged. "You sure you want to see what the demons do on the full moon?"

Nico thought about it for a second then laughed. "You're probably right. Never mind."

"Anyway," Bodhi said. "I'm glad you're taking me up on this offer. Hayden said she wanted to talk to me later about a letter from home." He rolled his eyes. "At least now I can call them and tell them to back the fuck off."

"They've always been hard heads. You'd do well to stop now, or else they'll drive you insane," Nico stated.

"Sure enough." Bodhi patted Nico's shoulder as he stood. "I'm glad you're going to give this shot. I know you blame yourself for what happened, but for the time being, can you forgive yourself just a little bit until you make things right with Hayden?"

Then, you two can hash it out and keep the secrets between yourselves.”

Nico mulled over what Bodhi said. Maybe he was right. Part of healing began with forgiveness. If he believed what Danielle and Kalkin said, he was a victim too, then healing his soul and forgiving himself would only help his situation, not hinder it. “Yes, I can, and I will.”

“Good. Then see you at the mixer,” Bodhi remarked as he strolled across the quad, “and don’t be late.

Nico grunted. “I won’t.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Hayden stepped into the cafeteria and immediately spotted her brother. Her sure strides ate up the distance between them, and, when she stood just out of his line of sight, she stopped. “Hey, I have something to tell you.”

Bodhi turned in his seat with a burger in hand and smiled at her. “What’s up?”

She loved her brother dearly, but the boy could pack away the food. “Another one? Don’t you feel like a cow by now?”

“I am a growing boy still.” He winked. “So, what do you have for me?” He patted the seat next to him. “Take a load off. You look beat.”

“Aren’t you a complimenting fool?” She plopped down next to him, wiped out after an early morning sorority meeting. Thanks, Bell. She shouldn’t sound so bitter about it. She liked the small group of girls who called themselves sisters. The charity they’d chosen to send their winnings to—if they won the Greek Shifter Games—helped hundreds of orphaned shifters in foreign countries.

“So, what’s going on?” He took another bite of his burger then wiped his mouth with a napkin as he chewed. “Everything okay? Do you need anything?”

"Everything is fine. It's better than fine. However, I need you to keep the week of spring break open." She snatched a fry from her twin's plate and popped it in her mouth. She sighed at the salty greasiness. "Loraine and our dads are pregnant!"

Bodhi stopped mid-bite and stared at her as he placed his burger back on the plate. “Are you serious?”

She nodded.

“Whose is it?”

“Blake didn’t say. But, I am sure whether it is his or Dad’s, they’ll be happy. Can you believe it, we’ll finally have a sibling!” Sure, they had cousins, some of them still babies, but a brother or sister. Ugh, she couldn’t wait.

“Cool. I can’t wait to meet the new pup.” A hint of excitement tinged his voice when he hugged her tight. “Anything else going on?”

“No. Not really,” she hedged. “Maybe. Are you doing the whole GSG thing?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Bell had this issue with her sorority, and, lo and behold, yesterday morning she inducted me into her gang of seven, and now I’m their vice president,” she replied. “I’m going with her as a lady of the games, and I’m nervous.”

“Congrats. We should have fun. I’m taking my second as my teammate. You and Bell will be our ladies.” He grinned before digging back into his lunch. “Are you going to the mixer Friday night? Do you have a date?”

“Yes, I’m going to the mixer. I promised the girls I’d be there for them. It would also seem our little cousin has a mate. A falcon named Rocky. Some kind of biker badass. I am sure her dad is going to be thrilled.” Sarcasm laced Hayden’s words. “Plus, Bell is going with Christoph. The Alpha lion.”

“You’re deflecting.”

“No, I’m not.” She crossed her arms and stared her brother down.

“Fine,” he sighed. “You’ll be at the dance with Zoe and Bell. Anything else?”

Huzzah!“As a matter of fact,” she began, “do you happen to know any single wolves? I’d like to go on a date.”

“Oh, hell no,” her brother exclaimed. “I am not stepping into the middle of your battlefield. I happen to like my body being in one piece, thank you very much!”

“Scaredy-cat!”

“Whatever, brat,” he snapped. “I’ll see what I can do to help you out. But I’m not telling Nico. You can when you talk to him.”

"Yeah, not happening any time soon." She stood up and hugged Bodhi. "I'll see you at the mixer."

If she was going to go to the stupid mixer/dance-whatever-the-hell-it-is, she wanted to look her best. There were a few stores not far from the campus, so she decided to go shopping on her own—not something she’d ever done before.

Unfortunately, because she shared a vehicle with Bell, she couldn't take the car like she wanted to, and instead, opted to walk. The strip mall wasn't far from them and since it was a nice day, she didn't mind the time to herself. She'd kind of been that way all her life. A loner. No one prodded her about it, only, she'd noticed it got worse after finding Nico as she did. She wished some days she could go back to her first year of high school when she had lunch with all of her friends. Got to hang out with the football players. Go back to when she could laugh and feel so damn carefree she didn't have a single worry.

Truth be told, she hated being alone.

Being on the road like she'd been was a solitary experience. When she first ended up in Window Rock, she didn't even know how to socialize. She answered questions and had to be told sometimes when others were playfully teasing her. The one person she could always rely on in those awkward times was Nico.

Now, she didn't have him.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Hayden hitched her bag higher on her shoulder as she stepped into the clothing store. She didn't know what she was looking for exactly, other than an outfit for the stupid mixer. Ugh. Why did she agree? Why didn't she just tell Bell no? Because you're a pushover. You secretly love your cousin to death, and you didn't want to see her fail.

Bingo.

Bell and Zoe had been the two girls to welcome her since Ella was still little and there were no other girls in a family full of boys. If it wasn't for them, she'd have probably gone insane the first couple of days because all the men were big and scary and all the women were just a little too touchy-feely for her tastes. And, just when she thought she was going to be able to have Zoe and Bell with her at the high school, she realized too late, they were in middle school still.

So, having them with her at college, gave her a sense of belonging, even if she didn't lean on them as much. Sure, she could chalk it up to them interfering in her love life, dropping subtle or in Zoe's case, not-so-subtle hints about Nico, as to why she kept her distance most of the time, but the reality was simple. She needed to learn how to live on her own. For twenty years, she either had to hide, run, or fight. She never got a moment's peace and now that she was away at college, she wanted to grow a little on her own. Hence why she'd been staring at the same purple and black dress for the last however long.

"Purple would look great on you," a guy said from behind her.

Hayden jerked and spun away from him, placing her hand to her chest. "Please don't sneak up on me." She glanced at the guy and spied the nametag on his shirt. Jacob.

“Sorry, nasty habit,” he said. “I can be as still as a statue sometimes.” He chuckled softly then pointed to the dress. “You want to try it on... The dress?”

She stared at him for a minute. He had short brown hair and emerald-colored eyes. When she inhaled, she caught the hint of earth and stone, if rocks had a smell. “What are you?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, by day I am a college student—TSU—I think you go there too right?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

"Anyway, in the afternoons I'm here as a sales associate and at night, I stare at people." The way he answered her so matter of fact-like, made her laugh. "Okay, the last part is a little drastic. I don't literally stare at people, but I am a gargoyle."

Hayden blinked. "Wait, those are real? Seriously?" Questions filtered through her mind like, how many of them were there? What other types of shifters were in the world? Were the folklores about Gargoyles true, they watched over buildings and people? And, if so, who did he watch over?

He gawked at her like she'd lost her mind. “Pretty sure.”

She tucked a lock of her growing hair behind her ear. "I'm kind of still new to the whole shifter world so..."

“Wait. What?” He looked as perplexed as she felt. “How is that possible?”

“Long story.” One she didn’t like telling. “Hayden Raferty.” She held out her hand in greeting.

“You’re Bodhi’s twin,” he said, placing his palm against his. “He’s a cool guy. Pretty popular.”

She laughed. “That’s him.”

“Well, since I have you here,” Jacob said, “why don’t you tell me what you’re looking for, and I’ll help you find it. It’s the least I could do after startling the shit out of you.”

She didn’t get a negative vibe off of him. In the last four years, from the moment she learned how to shift until she left home, she’d honed her skills, so she’d never be put into a situation like she had those first few weeks of being the new kid at school or like when she’d been kidnapped. “Well, what do you know of the Greek Shifter Games?”

"Only that it is one of the most anticipated events on campus," Jacob answered, his green eyes sparkling like rare gems. Hayden knew almost instantaneously he would be fun to date. He was gorgeous, funny, witty, and also pretty cool. Too bad her wolf wouldn't even give him a cursory glance.

“Well, I am going to be a participant as one of the Ladies in Waiting, which means I have to attend the mixer tonight. Naturally, I have nothing to wear, nor have I ever been to one of these things.” Prom didn’t count. After the time she went with Nico, once was all she needed. Bad enough years afterward, people around town murmured about her wolfing out in front of everyone and almost killing Lindsey. Meh, bitch had it coming. Sure, now her wolf wanted to interact with her.

“Then definitely not the purple dress.” Jacob frowned. “How about something trendy, but not too overstated? Like, here I am, but back the fuck off, I’m not here for you?”

Hayden giggled a little as she bounced. “That would be perfect.”

When Jacob was finished helping her, she had way more stuff than she needed but everything matched and fit her to perfection. She settled on a short, frayed denim skirt, two t-shirts one striped and long-sleeved, the other plain black, so she could layer them. She found a pair of knee-high stockings with cute bows that would stay up on their own, and a couple of neat little accessories to match the outfit.

"Hey," Hayden said, as she took her receipt from Jacob, "we should hang out sometime. I could always use more friends, you know?"

Jacob nodded and grinned. "I'd like that." He lifted his hand as Hayden headed out the door. "See you soon! Have fun at the mixer."

She waved. "Thanks! Bye."

Hayden, with her cousins in tow, walked into the community center building located catty-corner to the student union. Zoe, in head-to-toe leather, looked like Barbie gone bad. Bell wore a cute calico print knee-length dress with a matching hair ribbon. The dichotomy between them made Hayden shake her head. "So, go find your prospective dates and have fun." She grinned, not wanting them to forgo their good time, just because she was alone. Everything for her was a choice. Right now, she was happy for them. They too deserved a little happiness in their lives. "Remember, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Don't wait up. Rocky said something about meeting his friends at some clubhouse later. Peace." She waved then took off, parting the crowd as she went.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“So, how do I look?” Bell pushed the fabric of her dress down, a nervous habit, Hayden had picked up on over the years, and glanced up at her. “Do you think he’ll like it?”

“Sweetheart, you’re going to knock him dead.” She hugged Bell then watched her other cousin drift into the throng of people. “Well, kid, looks like you’re on your own.”

Time to mingle. In order for her to move on and start a new life without Nico, she had to make the first move. Now or never, Hayden. You’re a Raftery. No one messes with you, and guys would be stupid not to get with you. Now, go break a leg. She stepped onto the dance floor and strolled around the area, making her way to the drink table. Her stepmom always told her the best way to make new friends was to put herself out there and engage.

She could do it.

“Tell me you’re not all by yourself, she-wolf. Which sorority are you with?” Hayden turned and came face to chest with a muscular jock. She tilted her head back until her eyes locked with his ochre gaze, and she sucked in a breath. Stunning. From his amber eyes to his long sable hair and a smirk of indifference, he made her body pulse to life. Hayden’s heart hammered. Her fingers itched to touch his body, but she didn’t dare without permission. This fine specimen had been 100 percent grade-A alpha.

"Hi. I'm with uh...." Shit, total brain fart moment. What's the name of her cousin's sorority? She licked her lips and watched as his gaze took on a predatory gleam. "Sigma Epsilon Xi?"

“You don’t sound too sure of yourself, she-wolf.”

“Sorry. You startled me.”Made me turn into a bumbling idiot more likely.“Yes, Bell is the president of our chapter.”

“Ah, the little lioness.” A hint of arousal filled his words. “It’s good to have you here. I’m Hill. Your brother, Bodhi, said you’re looking to get back into the dating game.”

Thank you, Bodhi. I owe you big time.“He might have been correct.”

"Great. I have a friend who could use a gentle hand. He's kind of geeky...okay really geeky." He turned a bit and pointed to a guy dressed in distressed jeans, a superhero T-shirt, and Converse. "I know you could break him, but he's my VP, and I didn't feel right leaving him alone while I got down and dirty with my girl."

“Er, um.” She looked at the guy again and swallowed hard.Fuck, I should have known Bodhi would do this shit. I am so kicking his ass.“I guess I could help a guy out. What’s his name?”

“Winston.”

“Awesome. Uh...” She cleared her throat. “Have fun with your girl, and Winston will be just fine.”

“Thank you, she-wolf. I won’t forget this favor.” He squeezed her shoulder, and, for a second, she thought he might have crushed something...seriously.

Ow.“No problem,”she gritted out.

Once Hill walked away and wrapped his arm around some svelte long-haired beauty, she shook her head.Should have known better than to even get my hopes up.

She made her way over to the area where Winston was standing and figured she might as well introduce herself to her “date” for the evening. She didn’t even think he was paying attention. Guess there are more important things on a phone than what’s around you. She cleared her throat, drawing his attention. “So uh—”

"Do you know about gamma-ray technology?"

Gamma what? “I’m sorry?”

His lips curled into a smug grin. “Of course not. Do you even know who Bruce Banner is?”

“Yeah sure,” she answered. “He’s part of that superhero group, Justice League, right?” Hayden floundered for the right answers, feeling a little inferior to the uber-nerd next to her.

“Wow. I asked Hill for a favor, and this is what he brings me. A newbie.” Winston shook his head. “How in God’s name have you made it through your childhood or teen years without picking up one comic book and reading it?”

Hayden started to answer, but he lifted his hand. He wasn’t even giving her a chance, not that she wanted one to be honest. But this dickless wonder couldn’t even carry a proper conversation. Like, hi how are you? What are you majoring in? Where do you come from? Not even a hey, I like your skirt or whatever.

“Rhetorical question. I didn’t expect an answer,” he continued. The bastard might be a geek, but he also carried the air of a beta wolf with confidence. Too bad his body and attitude didn’t match his title.

“Listen you little—” She growled at him as he answered his phone, ignoring her for the moment. Oh yes, I am so going to kick your wolf ass all over campus. When I am

done with you, you'll be begging for my forgiveness.

A few moments later, he ended the call. "Now, where did I leave off?" He slid his phone into his pocket. "Ah, yes. Now, I remember. How much of a newb you are. First of all, you never mix Marvel with D.C. Second, if you're not sure what gamma-ray technology is, read about it in *The Incredible Hulk*, or even *Captain America*. Either one will work."

"I know Captain America," she bit out. "He's the one with the shield and dresses in red, white, and blue."

"At least you know him." He looked down his nose at her. "Those were my homies on the phone. I would appreciate it if you could take one for the female team and let me tell them I kissed you."

"What?" Could this night get any worse?

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“I macked on you. Felt you up a little. Oh!” His eyes went wide as he pointed at her. “Give me your panties.”

“Listen, you little freak of nature,” she snarled. “You need to think twice before you open your mouth and—”

“Issues?” Hayden knew that voice. Alex.

She relaxed marginally. “Nope, not a one.” She watched as Winston scurried off and huddled in a corner with his hobbit friends. “Please tell me they shift into maggots so I can step on them later.”

“I wish, babe.” Alex laughed. His shoulder-length black hair was held in place by a leather thong, and he wore his workout clothes as though he’d come straight from football practice. “So, what did Winston ask of you?”

“He wanted me to agree to, and I’m quoting him here, him macking on me, along with feeling me up, and the coup de grace, he wanted my freaking panties.”

Alex growled, and his eyes turned an eerie shadow of gold. “That little bastard. I told Hill to keep his mutts in line, but he’s too busy banging some out-of-towner chick no one likes.”

“Chill. It’s all good. He’s still a virgin, and I’m now in better company. So, which fraternity are you representing?” She followed him to the giant punch bowl near the back door.

“Lambda Alpha Pi. You?”

“Sigma, Epsilon Xi. Bell is my partner. Who is yours?” She accepted a glass of punch from him.

“I’m not sure. My VP had to pull out of the games. Poor grades on his last set of exams. But, I’ve been assured I’ll have a replacement.” He pointed to the cup in her hand. “Remember to go easy on those. You’ll need a clear head tomorrow morning.”

“Yeah,” Hayden said. “I know.”

By her second cup of the Hawaiian Mambo, she forgot all about Wins-what's-his-face. She felt footloose and fancy-free. Screw Nico. Screw that dumb jock, Hill. She didn’t need any of them. “Alex,” she murmured, “have sex with me.”

“Whoa,” he muttered, embarrassment tingeing his words as he took her cup away. “Where the hell did that come from, Hayden?”

“I don’t want to die only having sex once,” she answered. “So, let’s do it. I like you. You like me. You have boy parts. I have girl parts. It’ll work out fine. We’ll bump uglies and go our separate ways.” She tilted her head to the side. “We’ll have fun.”

“I don’t know,” he hedged. “I heard you’re supposed to have a mate around here somewhere.”

“Pfft. Nico? Nope.” She waved him off. “He doesn’t want me.” In the distance, she heard a low, menacing growl. She turned her head to the side and caught a glimpse of the man who tore her heart apart. “Speak of the devil. Gotta go.”

She moved through the room and exited via the side door. The cool night air hit her like a ton of bricks, and she sobered a little. Shit should have brought a coat. The early

fall crispness bit at her exposed flesh and made her shiver. Damn him for showing up like that. He's not supposed to be here. He should have stayed home where he belonged.

"Don't run from me, Hayden." The hard edge to Nico's voice made her inner bitch want to roll over and expose herself to her mate.

"You lost the chance to tell me what to do when you slept with some random chick." Anger warred with grief and an all-consuming lust. A maelstrom of emotions crashing through her, adding to her already buzzed state. She trembled. Her finger twitched. She wanted to run them through the silky tresses of his hair. Scratch her nails down his back while he....No, don't even go there. He means nothing to you. Never will.

"The sweet scent of your arousal says otherwise, little wolf." He took a step toward her, holding his hand out in placation.

"If I'm aroused, it's not because of you," she spat. "It's all for Alex." Lies. All lies, but she didn't dare give him an inch. Because, if she did, he'd take a mile, and she was afraid of what would happen to her. You know exactly what would happen. You'd forgive him. You'd wonder when he'd cheat on you again, and inevitably you'd be alone.

"You never could tell a lie very well." Amusement laced his voice. "You look good, little wolf." He advanced, still keeping his hands in plain sight. "I've missed you."

Her feet stayed rooted in their spot. Her mind said run. Her heart said stay, listen to what he had to say. "Thanks. I'll see you around." She turned from him and took a step, only to hear him growl once more. "Growling? Am I so far beneath you now, that you're reduced to growling at me when you don't get your way?"

He sighed. "No. I'm sorry. I'm trying to say I'm sorry, and you're not giving me a chance."

She snorted. "You don't deserve anything from me. You lost your chance, as you say when you fucked some stranger."

"You were a little girl!" he growled. "I should have never taken advantage of you when I did."

"Let's get something straight, Nico. You didn't take advantage of me. I came to you of my own free will. I consented to having sex with you. You came inside me three times." She pushed into his personal space and growled. "You marked me, asshole. In a place, you didn't think I'd see. We had six weeks. I'd have turned eighteen and we could have gone public! But, you needed to fuck so bad, you couldn't wait six weeks for me or, better yet, invited me over to your place so we could mate?" Her body vibrated with rage, cooling the desire coursing through her.

"I know!" He closed the distance between them and loomed over her. "Don't you think I realized all my hopes and dreams were right at the tips of my fingers and were gone in a second because of what happened? I screwed up. I hurt you. I get it. I always have."

"Then I'm going to say this one more time, Nico. We're through. I don't want to see you. I don't want to hear you. I don't want anything to do with you." She swallowed the lump forming in her throat as tears burned in the corners of her eyes. "Leave me alone. I don't love you. I never loved you."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Before he had the chance to say anything else—do anything else, she shifted and ran away. The crisp scent of wilderness and spice she associated with him threatened to drive her insane while he stood so close to her. Hayden's heart clenched when she saw the anguish in his eyes at her proclamation of never loving him, and a bit of her resolve crumbled. Damn it. The wall she'd built around her heart—her soul had protected her for two years. Now, after being in his presence for ten minutes, doubt created the cracks, spreading out in a spider web pattern, weakening her. She cursed Nico as she ran through the campus and into the woods, pushing herself deeper into the thicket, needing time to repair the damage he'd inflicted. I'll never roll over for you ever again, Nico Lopez.

6

Hayden's sixteenth birthday...

The upside of being a jailer, Nico could take days off when he needed them most, and since today was Hayden's sixteenth birthday, he had permission to attend her party. The whole affair was happening at Jace's home then afterward, Nico had a surprise party waiting for Hayden back at the clubhouse.

She'd be graduating soon too, which made today an even bigger deal.

Though she was technically a senior, she wanted to stay on and take some fun classes so she could graduate with her class the following summer. Silly really, she was at the top of her class. She could leave for college tomorrow and no one would be the wiser. However, the selfish side of him was glad when she decided to stay for the remaining time as well. The idea of her going away to college rubbed him the wrong

way. Not because she was getting an education he didn't have. On the contrary, he believed she should have one so she could better herself. Nico didn't like her far away. He knew he'd miss her every day. Even though it'd only been a couple of years, they were inseparable, and her leaving was going to hurt.

A lot.

When he arrived at the house for Hayden's birthday dinner, the place hadn't been decorated and there weren't many people, mostly family, all part of the plan. While the kids played outside, He sat beside Hayden on the couch. She was a bit wide-eyed and excited. Her little body vibrated with unspent energy, as would any normal kid be for their birthday. Maybe she needs to run. He pushed the thought aside for a bit, leaving it for when they went to the clubhouse.

"So, how does it feel to be sixteen?" Nico asked, nudging Hayden.

"Like fifteen only a year older," she laughed. Gone was the high-speed talking machine. She'd done tons of growing up in the year and a half since she arrived in Window Rock. She'd also cut all of her long black hair off, surprising Nico the first time he'd seen her with it short. The fauxhawk fit her though. The style brought out the blue in her eyes while also giving her a more grown-up look.

"Sounds about right," he agreed. "Do anything fun at school?"

She rolled her eyes. "No. Everything has been pretty on par for last year."

"Well, happy the hell up, little wolf," he chided. "We're about to have some fun once dinner's over."

Hayden grinned. "You've always got a way with words, Nico."

“I try,” he chuckled. “So, did you get anything exciting for your birthday?” He hadn’t been able to stop at one gift for her, so he bought her three, but again, they were all at the clubhouse as were her cousins.

“Breakfast at YoJo’s.” She shrugged. “To be honest, I’ve never really had a birthday “party,” or dinner or whatever this is supposed to be. I didn’t get any kind of gifts either.” When she peered up at him, he saw the sadness behind the excitement.

He hated it for her. It wasn’t until Nico had been included in the Raferty family that he finally celebrated his birthday properly. Sure, Mrs. Pauline made sure all the orphans had cookies and one item from her shop, but it wasn’t the same. And, Nico hadn’t noticed the difference until Keeley hosted his sixteenth birthday party.

“Well, you never know,” he replied. “Your luck might change.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’re up to something, aren’t you?”

“Me?” He grinned. “Never.”

When dinner was finished, he glanced at Kalkin who nodded. The meal had hit the spot—as per usual for the Rafertys—and though the conversation flowed, the longer they sat there and nothing happened, he could see his little wolf shutting down. Though she might have said it was normal for her not to get anything for her birthday, he also saw the disappointment. Nico had to change it up.

“Well, I had fun,” Nico said standing. He grabbed his plate and Hayden’s. “But, I wanted to—” His phone beeped with an incoming text, and he knew who it was before he answered it. All part of the plan. “Shit looks like I have to go to work. Sorry, little wolf. Raincheck?”

She nodded slowly. “Sure.”

Caden cleared his throat. “Which reminds me. I have a little surprise for you, Hayden.”

Nico excused himself placed their dishes in the sink then calculated how long he had to hide the Jeep and put the finishing touches on the clubhouse with Bell and Zoe. The official plan was to have Caden take Hayden on a small ride along after dinner then get a noise complaint call at the clubhouse. At most they had about thirty minutes or so to finish up and get the cake Danielle made for Hayden.

“What?” Hayden asked, a little lackluster for Nico’s tastes.

“You’re going to go on a little ride along with me,” Caden answered. “I thought since you were talking about wanting to get into forensics, you might enjoy spending a little time together. Since, you know, we don’t.”

Smooth. Nico chuckled to himself.

“Really?” He swore if Hayden was in wolf form her little tail would be wagging.

“Yeah.” The chair scooting back caught Nico’s attention. “We should go now though. I’m on duty tonight.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Yeah, I’m out too,” Nico said on the way back to the table. He tugged Hayden into his arms. “Have fun with Caden. You’ll have to tell me all about it later.”

She nodded. “I will. Thanks for coming to my birthday dinner.”

“I’m always here for you, little wolf,” he whispered before pulling away. “Okay, I’m out.”

Nico headed out the door. He needed to hurry. Caden would give him a minute to park the Jeep in the fenced-in area of the parking lot then start his run back to the clubhouse. Nico couldn’t wait to see Hayden’s face when she arrived to find everyone waiting on her. It was so hard hiding all of this from her and, more so, when she appeared so let down by the lack of activity during dinner.

He tapped his finger on the steering wheel as the slow ass gate opened for him. Once he was inside, he parked then made his way through the back of the Sheriff’s Department. He knew how it must have looked to everyone around him, but there was a method to his madness. He stepped outside a few minutes later and glanced around before taking off toward the clubhouse. He didn’t know how long he’d have specifically, but if he needed more he could always text Caden.

When he arrived at the clubhouse, he was greeted by music and excited-busy conversations. Everyone was working hard putting on the final touches to the place. Pink, purple, and blue streamers were hung from each corner of the room and gathered into the middle. The “Happy Birthday Hayden,” banner had been hand-drawn by each member of Hayden’s family, including him. On the side table near the small kitchen were snacks and a cooler full of drinks for all of them. The TV was on,

the gaming console logo filled the screen while the purple lights surrounding the area faded in and out.

“How much time do we have?” Bell pushed a lock of her blonde hair behind her ear.

“Not sure,” Nico answered. “Caden was going to leave after me, plus we need Bodhi here too.”

The front door opened, and Bodhi stepped inside. “She’s with Caden now. The plan still on?”

Nico grunted. “Yep. We have about thirty or so minutes, maybe, before Kalkin puts the call in for us.”

“Perfect,” Bell announced. “We have all the decorations ready for her. I only need to arrange the presents on the coffee table then we should be finished.”

“You’re being extra,” Zoe reprimanded Bell. “Just place them wherever. Hayden’s going to be too messed up by all this to even care.”

Zoe had a point.

“She’ll spend at least an hour looking around at everything.” Nico shrugged. “However, we also want her to be surprised by the presents too. She seemed a little down at dinner.”

Bodhi agreed. “Yeah, I saw that too. She didn’t want anyone to see her disappointment, which is stupid.”

Then they were all doing their jobs. “Who’s left to arrive?”

“David is here,” Bell said. “Brax and Evan are on the way too. Tate, Henry, and Utah will be here soon, they’re helping Daddy at one of the sites.”

“Colin, Ella, Nicolas, and Aiden will be here shortly. Danielle was reminding them to be on their best behavior,” Bodhi said.

Nico snickered. No one told the younger kids what was happening for fear of them spilling the beans to Hayden. He glanced at his best friend. He hated today was also Bodhi’s birthday, but they were paying specific attention to Hayden. “Hey man, I’m sorry about all this.”

“Pfft.” Bodhi waved off Nico. “She needs this. Plus, I have had my fair share of birthday parties. This is special for Hayden. Besides, I know you all love me anyway.”

“Speak for yourself,” Zoe said flicking her nails at Bodhi, teasing him. “You always smell like wet dog.”

Bodhi trailed behind her. “No, I don’t. I smell good.” He wrapped his arms around her then proceeded to rub all over her. “Now, you’ll smell like me until you shower and wash your clothes.”

“Damn it, Bodhi!” Zoe shrieked.

Nico shook his head. He hoped one day Hayden could be as carefree as her brother was. Bell bit her lip, squelching a laugh. Even after everything she’d been through too, he enjoyed hearing her chuckle.

“Those two are like cats and dogs,” she murmured, more to herself than him.

“Well, if the shoe fits,” Nico said.

She snorted. “Yeah, I guess so, huh?”

A knock at the door drew his attention. “Looks like the others are showing up now.”

“Good, I’ll start setting up the presents.” Bell headed for the living room area while he went to the door.

Nico rolled his eyes as he opened the door and found the kids. “You made it in one piece.” He stepped aside to allow them entrance along with Danielle and Keeley.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Oh Nico,” Keeley said. “You guys did such a good job. Hayden is going to love it.”

“Thanks,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “It was a group effort. So, does everyone know the plan?”

“Yes,” Danielle replied. “We went over it a couple of times before bringing them over.”

“Cool.” Nico relaxed. “Thanks again for helping us.”

“Not a problem. This is a good experience for her,” Danielle replied. “Plus, she gets to spend some time with Caden. I think it’s good for both of them.”

The door opened behind them, and Royce stepped inside. “Is there room for one more?”

“Always,” Nico said. “I’m sure Hayden will be surprised to see you here too.”

“Sorry about missing dinner,” Royce said. “One of us had to be on duty.”

“It’s always you though.” Keeley frowned.

“Perks of being a Rafferty,” Royce said with a shrug. “I’m glad I could be here though.”

So was Nico.

“Hey, I found these stragglers outside,” Wy called as he stepped into the house. “Anyone missing them?” Utah, followed by Tate and Henry stepped into the clubhouse.

Nice, Utah signed greeting them. You did well.

Nico’s chest puffed up. “Thanks, man. Good to see you’re here too, Wy.”

The guy shrugged. “No problem. We’re supposed to be making Hayden feel welcome, right?”

“Exactly,” he agreed.

“Did you grab the cake, Nico?” Danielle asked on the way back to the door.

“Nope,” he said. “Thanks for reminding me.” So lost in his thoughts on his way to the clubhouse he completely forgot.

“Don’t worry,” Danielle said. “I’ll grab it.”

By the time everything was finished being set up, almost a half-hour had passed. The sun dipped below the horizon, blanketing the desert in fiery gold. Nervous energy consumed him. He knew Hayden would like it, but then again, this could all backfire.

Though, he hoped not.

At some point, Bodhi had turned up the music. All they needed now was the birthday girl. The wait was killing Nico so when the heavy rap of Caden’s knock shook the door, it startled everyone. They got into their positions, turning down the stereo as Wy walked to the door.

Nico waited with everyone else. His heart hammered. His palms were damp from sweat. He couldn't believe this was what made him anxious. Not even when he was younger working with Caden and Kalkin had he ever felt like he'd crawl out of his skin. He laughed to himself at the absurdity of it all.

"Do you mind if we make a quick search of the place?" Caden growled, acting like the badass deputy he was. "You kids should know better about the music."

"Yeah," Wy said. "Sorry about that."

"Come on, Hayden, let me show you how we do a quick search." The clip of Caden's boot on the floorboard began the countdown.

When Nico held up one finger, everyone jumped up. "Surprise! Happy birthday, Hayden!"

Hayden's eyes went wide. She stepped back as she stared at everyone. Nico couldn't tell if she was happy or scared out of her mind. He quickly joined her. "Surprise, little wolf."

"This... This is for me?" Her voice was so small, fragile as she stared up at him.

"All for you," he murmured. "Thanks, Caden. I think we've got it from here."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

He grunted. "Happy birthday, girl." He scrubbed Hayden's head. "Don't do anything stupid."

"We won't," Nico said while Caden headed to his car.

"You did all this for me?" Again, the disbelief in her voice tugged at Nico.

"Sure did," he replied. "Come on, everyone is waiting for you."

Bell, Ella, and Zoe were waiting for Hayden when she stepped inside. Once she joined them, they gathered her into a group hug and squealed. Finally, his little wolf giggled and laughed.

"I can't believe you did this for me." Hayden stared at the clubhouse taking in everything. "This is amazing."

"There's so much more," Bodhi said. "Come on, let's have some fun."

After they had their cake, which was so good, Nico pulled Hayden outside. He needed a moment with her. Of the three presents he bought her, one was the most important to him. He knew the significance of giving it to her, but everything he'd been doing was for the both of them.

"What's wrong?" Hayden eyed him. "Aren't you having fun in there?"

A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I'm having fun wherever you are." He wrapped his arm around her. "But I have something for you, it's pretty special, and I

wanted to give it to you away from everyone.”

“Oh,” she replied, following him over to the bench where they’d left their clothes so they could run. “What is it?”

“It’s a surprise,” he teased. “Close your eyes and hold out your hand, little wolf.”

“Okay.” She stared at him for a moment then slowly did as he asked. Her little body trembled as she sat there waiting.

Nico pulled the key out of his pocket with the little “H” initial written on the front of it. The identical one was on his keychain and had a matching “N” engraved on the charm. He placed the gift in her hand then said, “Open your eyes, little wolf.”

She stared down at the key, her brows furrowed. “Nico?”

“This is a key to my apartment.” When she sucked in a breath, he held up his hand, because he knew when she got going, she couldn’t stop talking, especially when she was excited or scared. “There are times when I know you want to be somewhere other than with your family or the clubhouse. I’m not always at the apartment because of my schedule. So, this is for you. It’ll be where you can hide whenever you need to.”

“Nico,” she said, with a wistful edge to her voice. “Wow.”

He tipped her chin up. “Just for us. Do you like it?”

She licked her bottom lip and nodded. “I do. I really, really do. Thank you!” She launched herself into his arms “Thank you. I love it.”

He relaxed then and when she pulled back, staring up at him, he closed the distance

between them. The lips were inches apart. "I'm going to kiss you now, little wolf."

"Okay," she answered, her pupils dilated in anticipation.

He brushed his lips over hers twice before settling in. Euphoria wasn't even a good enough word for what it was like kissing his little wolf. He gently coaxed her to open for him and the moment she understood what he wanted from her, Hayden gave over. Her sweet submission drove him wild, but he put it all on lockdown for her. He tasted and teased her, wrapped her in his embrace, and when he heard footsteps approaching, he broke the kiss and rubbed his nose across hers. "Someone's coming."

The door opened seconds later, and Zoe greeting them. "There you two are. Everything okay?"

If she noticed the pink tinging Hayden's cheeks or smelled the arousal spilling off of them, she didn't say a word, which Nico would be eternally grateful for. "Yeah, just giving Hayden one of her gifts and getting a bit of air."

Hayden swallowed hard. "Y-Yeah, it's a little overwhelming in there." She gave a little chuckle.

"For sure," Zoe said. "Anyway, Bell's going to have a coronary if you don't get in here and open all these gifts."

Hayden laughed. "Wouldn't want that."

"We'll be right there," Nico added. "Thanks, Zoe."

"Sure," the girl said. "No problem. I'll put the princess on ice for a few."

When Zoe closed the door, he sagged. "Way too close." He tipped Hayden's chin up.

“You okay?”

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

She nodded. “Better than.” Then she grinned. “Thank you, Nico.”

“Anything for you, little wolf.” He stood then held out his hand. “Let’s go see what else you got for your birthday.”

She placed her hand in his and he laced their fingers together. A bolt of satisfaction shot through him. “This has been the best day ever, Nico. I don’t ever want it to end.”

Neither did he.

Fuck!

“Hey, man.” Alex came up beside him. “You’ve got shitty timing.”

“I’d say it’s perfect timing. There’s no way in hell I’d allow you to even contemplate sex with her. She’s mine.” That had been the first he’d ever seen his little wolf approach an Alpha wolf and ask for sex. It almost sent him into a blind rage. Bad enough his wolf was still fighting with him to go after her.

“You might want to explain this whole mine thing to her.” He chuckled. “She seems to believe you don’t hold any claim over her.”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, he knew he’d given her too much of a leash where he was concerned, but staking his claim would take extra care now. This is a key to my place. “That’s none of your business right now.” He didn’t understand why the memory of her sixteenth birthday filled his head other than it’d been the day he kissed her. The reminder hit him square in the solar plexus. It was as if his wolf was trying to show

him why she was theirs. Not like he needed the encouragement.

"It is my business if we're going to work together tomorrow," Alex snarled. "I don't know how some no-name got an invite to the games or how you're Bodhi's partner, but I intend to win this shit. I have a girl I need to impress."

Nico turned toward Alex. "Then we're on the same page. I intend to win this to prove I'd do anything for Hayden."

"Good."

Since they'd metaphorically pulled their dicks out and engaged in a pissing contest, Nico relaxed a bit. "So, what's on tap for tomorrow?"

"Archery." Bodhi walked toward them with another guy. "I know we're all looking forward to that."

Nico grunted. "Have we sized up our competition?"

"There are four you need to worry about in this contest." The new guy held out his hand. "Christoph." Ah, the Alpha lion he'd heard about around campus. Seeing the man in person was a little intimidating and Nico dealt with Kalkin all of his life. The man stood about six-five, all brawn, and muscles. He had blue eyes like Bell's only a shade darker and the blondest hair Nico had ever seen. Also, when the guy spoke, he had a bit of accent Nico couldn't place

"Nico. Nice to meet you." He shook the man's hand. "Who are these four we'll have an issue with?"

"How about we talk about this in private? Don't need another team overhearing us." With his head held high, Christoph strolled for the parking lot. "I hope you don't

mind going to a bar. My partner is Rocky, and he's out with his girl."

Nico's gut clenched. The last time he'd gone to a bar, he'd hurt his mate. He hadn't been back since. Nor had he imbibed any kind of alcoholic beverage. "A bar?"

Christoph glanced over his shoulder as he opened the door to his lifted pickup. "Problems?"

"No, nothing." Nico caught up to the guys and climbed into the back with Bodhi. No way he'd tell them about the night not so long ago which ended up ruining his life and sent his mate running from him.

"You're new to frat life, aren't you?" Christoph gazed at him through the rearview mirror.

"Uh, yeah. Right place at the right time, type deal."

Bodhi snorted.

"Anyway." He glared at Hayden's twin. "I'm not sure I'll even do a good job with this."

"You're a shifter. You'll do fine." The lion turned the corner and pulled up to a seedy-looking place. Cars and motorcycles lined the parking lot and around the front corner. When they got out, the thump of country music pulsed from the building. In small letters on the sign over the door were the words Pacos Property. Nico knew who they were, not because the MC was prolific, on the contrary. Because the Lone Wolves MC, a club started by Poppa helped with Vigilante Security in the retrieval of kids, Nico knew the Pacos could be called in, in a pinch, in the Northwest, Washington State more specifically, to help locate kids on the run or abandoned. Interesting.

“Come on. I’ll explain everything inside.” Christoph motioned them forward into the fray of humans and shifters alike.

Nico’s lip curled at the putrid stench surrounding the entrance, and it didn’t get any better when they walked inside. Stale beer, sex, and urine assaulted them. If anyone else seemed bothered by it, no one said a word. They weaved their way through the tables bunched around the bar while people played pool near the rear of the place. The bikers were everywhere inside. Some of them were sloppy looking, beer guts, and greasy hair. Some had beards. Most were covered in multicolored tattoos. The place was different, he’d give it that much. Nothing like the places back in Arizona.

“Zoe?” He’d know the girl anywhere. Her midnight hair had been pulled back in a braid, and she wore all leather. “What are you doing? Your dad is going to kick your ass if he finds out you’re in here.” Zoe glanced up at him and shrugged before going back to talking to the burly biker in front of her. “Hey, shithead, do you know she’s only eighteen?”

Wrong thing to say. The guy uncurled himself from his chair and loomed over Nico. Right at six and a half feet tall, he made intimidation look like an art form. His golden eyes narrowed, giving him a hawkish appearance. Long, jet-black hair hung in his face, adding to his menacing presence. “Why don’t you worry about whether or not you’re going to make it out of here alive, wolf.” The guy cracked his knuckles.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Down, Rocky.” Alex pushed forward and put his hand on the man’s chest. “Nico, meet Rocky, Christoph’s partner and part of our team.”

Damn. “Sorry, man. She’s my ma—she’s a friend.”

“She’s my cousin.” Bodhi pushed past Nico. “And we know about Rocky and Zoe. Her dad on the other hand....” He shrugged.

“Way to stick your foot in your mouth, Nico.” She grinned. “I thought you disappeared. What got you out of your hole?”

“Hayden,” he answered. “It’s time.”

Zoe nodded. “So, I guess I’ll leave you guys to it.” She went to her tiptoes and kissed Rocky. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow at the games. Good luck.”

“You’re lucky, asshole,” Rocky muttered, eyeing up Nico. “We also hate cops around here.”

“I’m not on duty here,” Nico stated, narrowing his eyes. “But, even if I was, I’d still give your ass a run for your money. Baby bird.”

Rocky curled his lip. “You got a mouth on you. Someone should shut it.”

Nico growled low. After the last few days, hell two years, he’d had, he was itching for a fight. "As I said, I'm not on duty."

Bodhi coughed. “Guys, come on. We’re supposed to be a team here.”

Nico snorted, not taking his eyes off Rocky. “Sure. A team.”

“Rocky,” Christoph warned. “Settle down.”

The falcon huffed then relaxed back into his chair. “Law don’t go around here.”

Nico glanced at Bodhi then chortled. “Did he quote Tombstone?”

Bodhi covered his laugh with a cough. “Shut up before we have to take you both out on stretchers.”

“As I said back at the college, archery is the first challenge,” Christoph said, once they’d sat down and Zoe stepped away. “Who’s going to take one for the team this round?”

“I am,” Bodhi said. “We need to get Nico into the top four, no matter the cost.”

“Why?” Rocky’s preternatural gaze pinned Nico, silently daring him to do something stupid. “If his actions with Zoe are any indication of what he’s done to this Hayden I keep hearing about, then I’m inclined to say sink or swim, asshole. Convince me.”

Everything inside of Nico wanted to tell the guy to go to hell, but he also knew if he wanted these guys to work with him, he had to be honest. “I fucked up. I broke my mate’s heart. No, that’s a lie. I did more than break her heart. I broke her spirit. I—I can’t remember the night, which is worse. I’ve tried to explain, make it up to her. But it was all excuses and half-hearted attempts. This is my last chance to prove I can be the wolf she’s loved since the moment she met me. I need this.”

“He won’t tell her what happened because he thinks he was at fault, which in a

roundabout way, he was,” Bodhi piped up. “However, it’s not how she suspects. Hayden might act like she doesn’t want him, but I know for a fact she’s not the same anymore without him. She’s going through the motions, and our whole family is afraid if they don’t fix this, they’ll lose both Nico and Hayden. I know there’s hope. She wants him. She’s just afraid.”

There was so much more to the story than even Bodhi said, but a promise was a promise. He never said a word about the day she came to his apartment. Never said a word about the pregnancy tests. There were things her family didn’t need to know, and if they were going to move forward together, they needed to start fresh, no more secrets between them.

“Good enough for me,” Christoph said. “Here’s how this is going down tomorrow.”

Morning came too soon for Nico. His alarm blared, and the gladiator costume he was supposed to wear stared back at him. I don’t wear skirts, especially leather ones. Nevertheless, if he wanted to participate in the games, he had to wear it, liking it or not. Pushing the sheet from his body, he sat up then scrubbed his face. Last night had been a battle of wills and constitution.

He didn’t like being the odd man out. The group of guys he was with, including Bodhi, had a friendship. This time around, he was the new guy. He had to find his place—and fast. There were going to be four different disciplines. Four different times to get his ass kicked and be made to look foolish—not that he didn’t already. Four different days to parade around in costumes trying to impress the student body when all he wanted was Hayden to see him. Sitting there on his bed, in a school where he didn’t belong, all he could think about was winning the affection of his mate. The palpable fear rolling through his veins only made the anxious knots in his stomach twist harder.

This whole plan had the potential to destroy him.

Sliding out of bed, he stumbled to the bathroom and took a shower. He'd given everything Christoph said consideration. The man was right. Rocky too. He didn't belong there. He hadn't earned his place in their little group. He was the interloper who would use them to get to Hayden. He hated the idea, yet he couldn't not participate either. Just admit it, the whole idea is a clusterfuck. No, if and's or but's about it. Nonetheless, he wasn't leaving.

When Nico emerged from the shower, he grabbed the required getup and dressed. He had an hour to get his ass to the football field and line up for the parade. If this didn't impress Hayden and show he'd do anything for her, Nico didn't know what else to do.

Accept the fact she is being honest and wants someone else. Accept you lost your chance and have to move on. Never. He'd never accept anything less than having Hayden by his side. He'd dug this hole, and he'd get out of it. Bodhi and Alex greeted him in the hallway, dressed in the same fashion as he—except they'd forgone a T-shirt.

"Afraid of someone seeing your chest?" Bodhi quipped. "I thought you were a wolf, not a girl."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“I didn’t want to scare the competition.” He shrugged.

“Sure,” Alex chuckled. “Come on. We’ve got to be on the field in twenty.”

Shucking his shirt, Nico followed them. Wearing sandals and a skirt, he felt more exposed than normal, even though his wolf loved being naked. “Hey, did you wear underwear under your skirts?”

Alex roared with laughter. “Please tell me if you trip and fall, I won’t get an eyeful of your junk.”

“Uh...”

“Fucking hell, Nico,” Bodhi gasped, laughing. “Of course, you’re supposed to wear underwear. Who the fuck do you think we’re portraying? The Scots?”

“Fuck you guys,” he snarled. “I thought we were going for authentic.”

“So, you wore no briefs, but you did wear a fucking T-shirt?” Alex wiped his eyes as another bubble of laughter shook his shoulders. “You’re hopeless.”

“Whatever,” he muttered. “I promise my junk won’t be exposed.”

“Good. Make sure it stays that way.” Alex clapped him on the shoulder as they exited the building. “So, you should know, this is going to be a huge production. The guys from each fraternity have gone all out for this shit.”

“Okay. What do you need me to do?”

Wisps of early morning haze drifted across the campus, muting the glow of the sun. He felt as though he walked through an enchanted forest instead of a school. Already, a steady flow of people headed for the field. They carried banners and plastic horns. Some dressed in togas while others wore dresses, mixing two different cultures, but they were having fun with it, which mattered most. They bellowed what he suspected were Greek chants specific to their fraternity or sorority as they marched toward the waiting arena.

Bodhi clapped him on the shoulder. “Our job is easy. Phi Beta Kappa, our fraternity, has a float dedicated to the Greek god Dionysus. We’ll be walking behind it, so watch for grape juice and food being thrown. The assholes know how to party, and they will do it in excess on the float.”

“Seems fitting,” he groused.

“Yeah, but they’re a great group of guys, and I’m proud to call them my brothers.”

“Anything else?” Nico quirked a brow.

“Enjoy yourself out there. Remember, this is a five-day tourney. We don’t have to rush through this shit.” Alex smacked him on the back. “Oh, and every day after the games, there’s a lunch for us. You need to make an appearance.”

“Fantastic.” They came to a stop at the edge of the tunnel as people filtered through. When they got into position, he glanced up and saw a flash of movement. He narrowed his eyes and took a step forward. Son of a bitch. His shaft twitched, and he wished to hell he’d worn shorts. Dressed in all white, Hayden walked onto the field and stood by the steps. He swallowed hard. The rhinestones and sparkling gems adorning her dress accentuated her tan flesh and when she took another step, the slit

up the side revealed a glimpse of her long, toned leg. Fuck, I'm so screwed.

7

Hayden's Greciangown fit her like a second skin, clinging to her curves. "I should've never let you talk me into this." She continued to mutter as she climbed the stairs to her perch overlooking the field. The heels Bell lent her hurt her feet, because they were almost a half-size too small, and had made her wobble more than a time or two. "I feel...exposed." She smoothed her dress and gazed out over the grounds. "How long do we have to sit here?" Hayden swore every time she took a step, she flashed more of her body than anyone had seen except for Nico, and her family.

"As long as it takes for everyone to get through the event today." Bell smiled, taking up her position next to Hayden. "Then we have lunch. We're expected to feed the victors. It gives the games an authentic feel."

"Oh joy." Hayden rolled her eyes. She didn't want to feed the victors. She wanted to make a graceful exit and head back to her dorm for an all-night cram session she didn't need, because of self-preservation. Her cousins along with her twin were up to something, she knew it the minute she saw Nico the night before.

Blowing out a breath, Hayden wished she could stomp her feet and pitch a fit. It wouldn't do her any good for obvious reasons, though it would release some of the pent-up energy leaving her on edge. Seeing Nico again after two long years of being at school, hurt. Words failed at how her chest felt cracked wide open, exposing her tattered soul to the chilly night air. Or the way her heart pounded wildly, galloping as though it would burst from the opening and leap to its death at Nico's feet. Nor could she ignore the arousal spilling through her veins the second he publicly claimed her, even if Alex had been the only one to hear him.

"Hayden." Bell's tone took on an admonishing quality. She tried to appear contrite.

“This is for fun. This is what college is all about. Experiencing something bigger than yourself. Look at everyone. No matter if they’re regular students or belong to a club, they’re here today to cheer on the guys. That’s big. That’s important.”

She hated when her cousin was right. She sighed and settled into her seat. “Fine.” She pouted. “But you owe me after these games are over.”

“Deal. Whatever you want.” Bell giggled. “You’re going to love this. I know it. We’ve all been planning this for a long time.”

“So, what do we have to do?” Hayden gazed out over the stadium, surprised by how quickly the stands filled up.

“Wave when the parade of competitors comes around in front of us, cheer for our team when they’re up. Smile and be happy—”

“A parade?”

“Yeah. It’s part of the whole authentic atmosphere of an ancient Greek Olympics,” Bell replied, motioning to the floats taking up their position near the tunnels.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“So...lions and tigers, too?” Hayden slid her gaze toward her cousin. “Besides the shifter kind.”

Her cousin chuffed, and a grin tugged at Hayden’s lips. “That’s Romans, silly.”

“I mean, they’re already combining the two cultures, why not?” Hayden hedged, causing Bell to laugh again.

“If it isn’t the loser,” a woman in a pink gown said. Behind the snotty girl, stood three of her sidekicks, arms crossed over their chest, and their eyes narrowed on them.

“Wow. A female goon squad. Interesting,” Hayden quipped.

“Laney,” Bell muttered.

“Did you run out of pledges again?” The girl snickered. “Not surprising. Loser.”

Hayden stood up. “You got a fucking problem, lioness?”

"Ooo, so scary. When did you get a dog to do your work for you, Bell?" The girl tweaked Hayden off. She reminded her of Lindsey and Claire. This Laney was a bully plain and simple. She wanted to reach out and wrap her hands around the girl’s neck, ending whatever game the girl wanted to play before the GSG even began. Maybe then that smug look of superiority would be wiped from her face.

“You should probably walk away now,” Hayden muttered. “If you know what’s good for you.”

“Oh really? What are you going to do about it?” Laney’s obnoxious laughter grated on Hayden’s tattered nerves. Like Lindsey, this girl didn’t know when to shut the hell up and walk away. Had Lindsey done that in the beginning, she wouldn’t have ended up in jail for six months then physically removed from Raferty/Dryer Pack and Pride lands.

“Back off. I’m only going to say it once.” Hayden growled getting into Laney’s face allowing her she-wolf to push forward. The blood-thirsty bitch was looking for some action after Hayden ran away from Nico. “The last girl who fucked with me ended up in the hospital for a week.” Not a total lie either. Lindsey, due to hitting her head on the hardwood floor, had a horrible concussion. Add in the broken bones in her arm and the slices from Hayden’s claws, well, the girl didn’t look like herself when she left town.

“She reminds me of Zoe,” another girl said. “So uncouth.”

“I’ll take it as a compliment since we’re cousins.” She curled her lip in disdain, exposing her curved canine at the girl.

“Oh wow, are we already starting early?” Zoe pushed through the crowd, pulling her partner behind her. “Stupid cows.”

“Watch who you’re calling a cow.”

“Kylie, go play with yourself.” Zoe curled her lip, showing a hint of her canines as well.

“Whatever, losers.” Laney snapped her perfectly manicured fingers at them. “Let’s go.” The girls started to walk away then stopped. “Oh and, Bell...” She turned to Hayden’s cousin. “I am going to love tearing down your house when we expand Sigma Sigma Pi.”

Zoe lunged for the girl. “What did you say?”

Hayden laid her hand on her cousin’s arm and shook her head. “She’s not worth it.” As much as she too wanted to rip those silicon injected lips off Laney’s face, it would give the girl exactly what she wanted.

A show.

“But she—”

“She’s not worth it. She wants you to react. Don’t be stupid.” Being the daughter to a deputy sheriff came in handy sometimes when a situation needed to be defused. Being the niece of the Alpha taught her to keep her anger in check, even if Hayden also wanted to rip those fake fingernails off of Kylie’s hands one finger at a time. “You guys have worked way too hard on these games to ruin it because the wench has it out for Bell.” If anyone did anything, it would be Hayden who threw down, after the games, when Laney wasn’t paying attention.

“Yeah, you’re right.” Zoe stormed to her seat next to the newcomer. “Lacy, that’s our cousin, Hayden. Hayden, Lacy, my vice-president.”

“Good to meet you, Lacy. So, there are only four of us together?” Hayden retook her seat next to Bell.

“No,” Lacy answered. “Terri and Emma should be here soon. Emma’s having a little issue with her dress.” The girl’s cheeks flamed, and her gaze dropped to the ground.

“What happened?”

“Laney, if I had to guess,” Zoe muttered. “Stupid bitch needs an attitude readjustment.”

“An accident I-I’m sure.” The girl, Lacy, folded her hands in her lap as she stammered. Then tsked as she blew out a breath. “Someone switched the dress from a fourteen to a smaller size, and she’s...well, she’s trying to zip it up.”

Hayden growled. “How much smaller?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Two sizes.” The girl squirmed in her seat. “I’m sure it’s the store or something.”

“I’m sure,” Hayden bit out. More like those four little witches decided to play a horrible trick on the girl if her suspicions panned out.

“I told the bear to let me hold her dress. Delilah, Kylie, and Reagan are Laney’s puppets, and they’ll do whatever she tells them just to keep in her good graces,” Zoe spat.

“Emma is a sweetheart,” Bell whispered. “She can be a tad too trusting when it comes to her sisters. Those girls need a rude awakening.”

“We’ll give it to them. I promise,” Hayden responded.

“I hope so. I’d love to knock Laney down a peg or two,” Bell muttered.

“Here she comes.” Lacy pointed toward the stairs.

Wearing a pale-gray Grecian dress, Emma slowly made her way to their sitting area. Her hair hung in loose curls, topped by a wildflower headband. Her bright-amber eyes sparkled with merriment. Hayden could see why everyone had been upset. She didn’t think the girl could hurt a fly. Her friend, Terri, according to Bell, wore a pale-green frock and looked stunning in the gown. “The guys are going to eat their hearts out,” she murmured.

“You think so?” Lacy waved to her friends.

“I know it.”

A horn blew in the distance, pulling their attention to the field. In the middle of a dais stood a man dressed in a toga, wearing a crown of gold leaves and a pair of leather boots laced up his legs. His long black hair had been pulled back to the base of his neck and held in place with a leather thong. Hayden took a moment to study his features. The guy was gorgeous, of course, he had deep-set dark brown eyes, full bow-shaped lips, and a straight aquiline nose. He brought the horn back to his lips and blew again. “Ladies and gentlemen, the tenth annual Greek Shifter Games are about to begin.”

Cheers erupted from the crowd, and he raised his hand, calming everyone down.

“For the next five days, you will watch as each contestant battles it out until one person from each category reigns supreme. All of the funds raised through these games and the Howler’s Ball afterward will be going to the five charities the winners choose.” Cheers and applause rang through the stadium before the guy silenced them once more. The man’s deep voice enthralled Hayden. She’d practically been sitting on the edge of her seat in anticipation of what he’d say next.

“These games will consist of eight teams of two. Sixteen contestants will enter, only five will be your victors.”

Behind him, the college band began to play and marched onto the field. Bell sat forward in her seat and cheered. Gone was the hurt in her eyes over the comments Laney and the horde of witches had made. “This is intense,” she said, unable to take her eyes off the action on the turf.

“Very,” Hayden agreed with a little giggle.

“And now, I present to you the competitors. Show them some love!” The MC’s arms

swept wide as the floats proceeded to enter the stadium, following the loop around the outer field. Walking behind them, the two-man teams for each participating fraternity, waved to the masses.

Several of the floats had heavy partying going on. Hayden caught a glimpse of her brother and Christoph waving to the crowd. Her brother appeared so happy out there. Like he belonged. She continued to scan the floats searching for the one person she needed to apologize to the most—Alex. God, she couldn't believe how stupid she'd been. Of course, it'd been easy to blame the alcohol she'd consumed, but that would make her a hypocrite since she hadn't listened to Nico. Her actions the night before had been out of frustration, and she never should've been so forward with him. It was inappropriate.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Hill and Winston's fraternity float drive by. She recoiled, and her stomach soured. The little pissant, Winston, blew a kiss at her then waved to everyone else. Her wolf bristled. The little bastard tried his best to humiliate her last night, but it didn't work. His personality matched his hyena brethren. Smarmy, greasy, and complete assholes. The idea of him ever getting near her again made her want to punch his lights out.

Beside her, Bell squealed. Christoph ran to the wall separating them then climbed up. Hayden understood why her cousin became flummoxed by the man. His commanding presence overwhelmed most and could make all the girls wanton hussies. His piercing blue eyes sparkled with intention as he stared at Bell. His rakish good looks gave him a bad boy quality mixed with the aristocracy. He placed a quick kiss on Bell's lips before pushing a lock of blonde hair behind her ear.

"The night of the ball you're mine, kitten," he growled then hopped down and rejoined his partner.

Bell's wide-eyed stare made Hayden laugh. "Looks like someone's getting lucky."

“Hayden!” Bell cheeks turned a cute shade of pink as she buried her face in her hands. “I can’t believe he did that.”

“I can.” She grinned.

“Hey, isn’t that Nico?” Zoe pointed to the float where the guys were going nuts. A man dressed as Dionysus poured wine on himself. He flung grapes at the crowd and splashed his fellow brothers as they gnawed on turkey legs, but Hayden didn’t care about him or the other guys. As soon as she spotted Nico, she’d only had eyes for Nico.

Dressed in a leather skirt with forearm cuffs and leather sandals like the announcer, he looked like a Greek god. His stomach muscles bunched and pulled with each step he took. Her wolf preened, swishing her tail in invitation. Hayden licked her lips. Her mouth went dry. Her palms became sweaty as her heart pounded. He shouldn’t be there. How did he get an invite? She glanced at her cousin who stood enthralled by the lion who’d kissed her in public. This couldn’t be happening.

She shouldn't be reacting to him. He hurt her. His betrayal cut her bone-deep. Yet, despite the chiding she gave herself, Hayden couldn't keep her eyes off of the man who could have been her mate. The man who gave her, her first kiss. The man she had willingly given her virginity to after she'd been kidnapped. Then he went and screwed it all up with his philandering ways.

Don’t think about it.

Yeah. Right. That was like saying don’t drink the water when she was thirsty.

As he grew closer with each step, the urge to run crawled through her. Her wolf tensed, hating the idea of her leaving her mate behind once more. A battle of wills waged within her. The wolf wanted her mate. She wanted to protect her heart from

the inevitable. If he cheated on her once, what would stop him from doing it again? The beast inside Hayden bared her teeth and howled in outrage. The hairs on her arms stood on end as the wolf skirted close to the skin. The beast won this round, forcing her to stay in her seat.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Hayden crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Nico, secretly hating the fact the girls around her sighed and asked each other who the hunk next to Alex could be. Her wolf demanded she tell them to back off, he belonged to her, but she kept her mouth shut. The she-wolf might be forcing her to sit there, but Hayden wouldn't utter the words, he's mine.

"Little wolf," Nico crooned.

So lost in thought, she hadn't seen him scale the wall and position himself in front of her.

"I'm not your little wolf anymore, Nico." She looked everywhere but at him. "You're also not very original. Didn't you see? Christoph already attempted this little wall climb thing."

"Oh, you still are mine. I am going to prove it." He took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles, ignoring her comment. "Make sure you're watching me out there." He gave her a cocky grin then jumped back down and got into line.

"He's dreamy," Emma sighed.

"Sure, in a mangy mutt sort of way," Hayden agreed.

"He's not mangy at all," Terri sighed.

Hayden's lip curled. "Sure."

“Don’t poke the wolf,” Zoe piped up. “That guy is her mate. Hands off. Eyes off.”

“Sorry,” Emma murmured. “I didn’t know.”

Hayden's shoulders sagged. She hated being a raging bitch. "Don't worry about it. He's not mine. Everyone keeps saying he is, but it's not true." The lie rolled easily off her tongue. The horn blew again, giving her an out on the conversation. “I guess we should pay attention now.”

The competition began. Sixteen targets had been set up in one section. Then eight about twenty-five feet farther away, and finally four more at about the fifty feet mark. The top two would have to shoot at a moving target—whoever got closest to the center won. The rules appeared quite simple. The competitors took their positions, and Hayden found herself trying to locate Nico.

Butterflies fluttered in her belly as nervous energy coursed through her. She should be pissed off at herself. She shouldn’t care if he won or not. Nonetheless, she sat forward, clenching her fists as she chanted over and over, he could do it. Bell uncurled Hayden’s hand and took it in hers as she smiled at her cousin. “He’ll do fine. He’s a great shot. We both know it.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Hayden groused, not wanting to acknowledge she’d been on edge. But, Bell was right. Nico had been at the top of his academy class. He taught her how to shoot too, and within a few weeks, she'd been as good as him. If anyone could win this particular competition it was Nico.

“I’m going to play the cousin card for a second and act like I’m older than you when I say this.” Bell sat up a little straighter. “It’s time to let the pain go, Hay. I know he hurt you. I know he broke your heart, but you’re only hurting yourself now. You’re shutting down, and I’m afraid I’ll lose my best friend if you continue down this path. I don’t want to lose you—either of you, understand?”

Hayden glanced at her cousin. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and Bell bit her trembling lip. Damn it. All of the pent-up anger bled from her. If she'd been honest with herself and everyone, she used the pain as a shield—protecting herself from being hurt again. “It’s not so easy, Bell.” Hayden hated hearing the weakness in her voice.

“I know, but you’re letting it fester.” Her cousin gave a humorless chuckle. “For a long time. The guy is seriously trying to make this up to you. Look at him.” Bell pointed to the event. Nico stood in front of the target, bow in hand, arrow nocked and ready. “He’s doing this for you.”

“Why? I don’t understand how this is proving anything,” Hayden said, some of the exasperation seeping out of her. “I didn’t tell him this is how he should fix shit. I didn’t say I wanted him to do it. I don’t understand.”

“It’s simple,” Zoe replied. “He’s doing this for you. To show you he’d sacrifice his body to re-earn your trust. You didn’t have to tell him. You didn’t have to demand he prove himself. He’s winning your hand. He wants you. As much as you’re suffering, so is he.” She insinuated herself between Bell and Hayden. “Tell me in all honesty you don’t want your mate.”

Hayden couldn’t say it. Tears stung the corners of her eyes, and she glanced away from her cousins. “I can’t say it.” That made her hate Nico even more.

“Then you’re already on the path to healing,” Zoe grinned. “I say you enjoy these games. Get to know your mate again and see what happens.”

“I agree,” Bell added.

“Who asked you guys, anyway?” Hayden said with a sniff.

“No one, but you’re going to take our advice because we love you, Hayden. And because we’re family and we’ll always be here for each other.” Zoe hugged her tight.

“Can we root for our guys, now?” Bell asked. “I want Christoph to win.”

“I doubt Rocky will do very well. He’s better at hand to hand.” Zoe grinned.

“He’s a bruiser, after all,” Hayden teased.

“You know it.” Zoe laughed.

Hayden relaxed. Maybe her cousins were right. She needed to let it all go. Allow herself to rediscover what drew her to Nico, to begin with. She also had to come to terms with the fact she’d never stopped loving him. Even on the worst days, she loved him. Even when she hated him so much the sight of him made her sick, she still loved him.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

The whistle sounded and Nico took the shot. The thwap of the arrow hitting the target echoed around the stadium. The arrow wiggled before going still just inside the small yellow circle. Not a bull's-eye but close. Hayden hollered, catching even herself by surprise. Nico turned his head and winked before shaking Christoph and Bodhi's hand. Rocky smacked him on his back, and Jackson, the last remaining dragon at Turnskin University, fist-bumped him. She didn't know much about that dragon. All Dani, her old roommate, would say was, he'd been alone or liked to be alone.

Round after round they went until they had four targets left. Christoph, Hill, Nico, and Winston stood waiting for the go-ahead. Bell, Hayden, and Zoe clutched each other's hands. She held her breath as Nico took his position first. He nocked the arrow. Hayden closed her eyes and sent a silent plea for him. At the last second, she opened them and watched the arrow hit the target. This time, he hit the red circle, inches from the blue. Her shoulders slumped in disappointment.

A few minutes later, Christoph stood with his fist in the air, winner of the day's competition, and overall leader for the competition after the first day. Behind him, in second place, stood Hill, the obnoxious bastard, then Nico and Winston.

Once the MC called a close to the day's games, Hayden followed her cousins out of the stands then over to the grassy quad where tables and catered food had been placed for them. The idea of being close to Nico while the guys ate their lunch and the students mingled, set her on edge. She never really liked big crowds, though, over the years, she'd forced herself to enter them, she still couldn't help the fear overcoming her.

When the guys made their way through the people surrounding the area, they headed

for the tables set up for them. Bell, Terri, Emma, and Zoe were already getting everything ready for competitors. Bell had positioned herself at Christoph's side to assist him. While Zoe did the same for Rocky. She glanced around the area, not sure what she was supposed to do, other than grabbing a platter of food and act as a servant girl.

Bell took Hayden's hand as the guys sat at their respective tables. "Remember, we're supposed to serve them. This is supposed to be fun."

"Right, serve them. Have fun." She smiled. "Congratulations, champion of the day and competitors. What can we get you to eat?"

Nico's eyes swirled, and his eyelids grew heavy. "I know what I want, little wolf."

"I do, too." Laney pushed Hayden out of the way, and she stumbled into Bell. "So, what can I get you, boys?"

Christoph stood and walked to Bell who'd been knocked to the ground by the stupid cow. "You can walk away, lioness. We don't need your services here." He wrapped Bell in his arms, pulling her to his side.

"I'll be the one to say whether she stays or goes," Hill growled. "I say you keep your little twit away from her superior."

Christoph took a step toward Hill, and Nico put his hand on the lion's chest. "Shut the fuck up, Hill. You're already on my bad side with what you pulled last night. Keep going, and I'll deal with you myself."

Hill laughed. "You could try, but it looks like your bitch has already neutered you by rejecting you. She was desperate to fuck any shifter with a dick last night, and you weren't even close to her radar."

Hayden's stomach knotted. "That's not true." Mostly.

"No? What do you call the situation with Alex?" He chuckled. "You're a bitch in heat, Hayden. Why don't you spread your legs and give Winston a go? I'm sure he could rock your pathetic world."

Nico lunged for him, and, this time, Christoph pulled Nico back.

Tears blurred Hayden's eyes as humiliation burned through her veins. With every word Hill spoke, he hit his mark. She was pathetic. She probably had gone through "heat" more times than any of them sitting there and most of her teenage life, but it'd happened outside of the full moon, and she'd called it her cycle, making her an anomaly of some kind. She glanced at Nico who couldn't meet her stare. Obviously! You rejected him, her wolf chided. "I'm sorry." She choked the words out. Trying desperately to keep herself in check. "I can't do this, Bell. I thought I could, but... I-I can't."

Without a backward glance, she ran. She didn't know where she'd go, and she didn't care how she'd get there as long as she didn't have to stay with them. She'd never be able to erase the look on Nico's face, nor would she forget Hill's words.

Oh God, what have I done?

"Little wolf!" Nico yelled at her as she stumbled and fell.

She cried out and tried to curl into a little ball. She didn't want to face him, but damn the man's dogged determination. Nico had other ideas. The smell of cedar and pine, the two scents she missed more than anything, assailed her, consuming her senses. The minute he touched her, the warmth of his body pushed away the ice encasing hers.

“Go away,” she sobbed.

“Never,” he murmured, picking her up. “I’ll never go away.”

“Why? Look at what we’ve done to each other.”

“Don’t you dare let what that asshole said get to you. He’s a dick. We all know it.” He brought her to a bench and sat down with her. “As for the other, I deserve your venom. I know that.”

“We’re pathetic,” she whispered.

Nico laughed. “Yes, I guess we are. But we’ll get through this, together.”

“Why are you being nice to me?” she asked, finally looking up at him. The pain in his golden gaze stole her breath and rubbed her insides raw.

"Don't you get it, little wolf? You're my mate. I'm always going to be nice to you. I'm always going to protect you. Love you. Nothing's ever going to change a thing between us."

“But you’re a limp dick now according to Hill,” she spat out, harsher than she’d meant to. “I did that to you. You should hate me.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Nico sighed. “Do you always believe what people tell you?”

She shook her head. “No. This though... Nico, how do we come back from this? How do we move forward after what’s happened?”

“Then you shouldn’t believe everything you hear now.” He kissed the crown of her head. “I’ve been waiting for the right wolf to notice me. The other shit can stay right where it belongs, in the past.”

“Nico, I—”

He brushed his lips over hers before pressing their foreheads together. “Let me in, little wolf. I’ve missed you so much. My life hasn’t been the same without your light.”

“I’m scared. So, so, scared.”

“I know, little wolf,” he whispered, holding her close. “I know. We’ll do this together. One day at a time if we have to.”

She inhaled deeply, rubbing her cheek against his naked chest. “I need a little more time. Then I can give you my answer.”

“Well,” Nico said, humor filling his tone, “we’ve got nothing but time. Take what you want. I’ll be right here waiting for you.”

Hayden couldn't stop thinking about the luncheon after the first competition. Hill was right. As much as Nico told her to take her time, the anxious energy coursing through her veins told her, she was running out of options. Also, she couldn't help but think back to that fateful day when she found Nico, naked with that woman. Along with the heartache, she swore she'd squash down and never expose herself to it again.

Nevertheless, the situation never sat right with her. Heartbroken as she was, the rational side of her brain didn't click into place, and sometimes, she wondered if it ever would. What if what she saw wasn't what happened? Of course, she might be desperate enough to believe whatever scenario her mind conjured up to make Nico cheating on her okay. But, what if? What if what happened that morning had been a setup?

The only question remaining was, why?

Who would want to hurt her and Nico? Who would gain anything by separating Nico and Hayden? Everyone in her family knew about the situation with Lindsey and Claire. They'd seen her reaction when those girls tried to take Nico away from her. More so after those stupid cheerleaders tried to hurt Hayden at prom while trying to take her necklace. So, what was the point? Sitting in her dorm room, Hayden frowned. Did any of this matter? Did she care if she had the truth? What difference would understanding what happened, make?

Because then you'd have to realize you made the mistake, not him. Her frown deepened. If she'd been in the wrong the whole time, she didn't think she could forgive herself. You know, you could go find Nico and ask him yourself...

Did she want to?

Shards of memories from her past floated through her mind, words she'd shoved from her brain because, at the time, she didn't want to hear excuses. Now those same

pleadings confused her. “Listen to Nico. Hear him out, Hayden. Please.” Her father never said please in such a manner, before. It was as if he asked her to believe him, not Nico.

Then there were the letters from her fathers. They were persistent. They always seemed to carry a thread of “please listen,” while she read them. Now, she wondered if maybe she missed something big this whole time, and if she had, what did her obliviousness say about her?

Hayden groaned in frustration.

“What’s wrong?” Bell appeared beside her, and Hayden jerked. “Sorry. I’ve been knocking on your door for a minute, and I got worried.”

“No,” Hayden hurried to say, “I’m sorry. I’ve been lost.”

Bell squeezed Hayden’s shoulder. “I’m sure.” She sat on Hayden’s bed. “Want to talk about it?”

Hayden scrubbed her face. “What if I have been wrong this whole time? What if what I thought I saw isn’t what happened? What if my dad asking me to talk to Nico was for a reason and I blew all of them off?”

Bell frowned. “Well, subtly isn’t a Raferty trait, so if they were trying to get you to talk to Nico before now, they did a shitty job of it.”

Hayden laughed. “It’s always so weird to hear you curse. You must be upset about my situation.”

Bell wrinkled her nose. Her eyes sparkled with amusement and anger. Not at Hayden. Perhaps at the situation? “It’s been a little over two years now. I don’t blame you for

being upset or feeling broken or anything you've experienced. You and I are like two peas in the same pod. We understand what it's like to be kidnapped and tortured. We understand what it's like to not know from one minute to the next if anyone would save us. The only difference between us, your mate has always been your best friend. From the minute you arrived in Window Rock, Nico has been your right-hand man, so to speak. Cutting him off, without allowing him to explain, if there is even a valid reason to do so, burned both of you. You singed your mating." She narrowed her eyes at Hayden. "Don't think we didn't know he mated you either. We did. We never said anything is all."

"When you say we, who do you mean?" Fear gripped her stomach. No one knew about that day in Nico's apartment. She'd never told anyone and even if Nico was a cheating asshole, she knew deep down he'd never say a word either.

"Bodhi, Tate, myself, Zoe," she shrugged, "us. We never said anything because we figured you didn't want to tell anyone."

"So, if you know, they do too?" "They," being her parents, and her uncles. Could this day get any worse?

Bell screwed up her face for a second. "I can't answer for them. I don't want to presume to know anything." She placed her hand on Hayden's. "You're his mate. No matter how much you deny it. No matter how much you hurt him, the simple truth will never change. I think the bigger question to this whole situation is, what do you want, Hayden? I believe you don't want to answer that. Allowing yourself to answer the question means coming face to face with a past you never healed from."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“When did you become so insightful?” Hayden teased.

“When I started going to therapy. I’ve had to grow up, Hayden. So did you, I think though, you’re still the same lost, scared little girl who tried so hard to shield herself from her painful past, she also blinded you from the truth.”

Frustration swamped her. Why did everyone believe she should forgive Nico and move on? He did the one thing he knew would break her. “But I—”

“Talk to him,” Bell said. “You won’t get the answers you need for closure until you do.”

Hayden’s head fell forward, and she closed her eyes. “You don’t get it. I don’t want to hear about his exploits or why he would cheat on me. I don’t care. I don’t want to relive the worst day of my life. I don’t need him.”

Bell chuckled. The low sound held no warmth. “You keep saying as much for everyone around you, however, you’re lying. I hate liars, Hayden. You do too.”

She did. “Bell, I... I’m not sure I can hear what he has to say to me.”

“You’ve conjured up all these things in your mind of what he’s done, you’ve never given him a chance to explain. Don’t you think, before you write him off completely, he deserves a chance to tell you exactly what happened?”

“Why? What’s the point of having all the details?” Anger simmered low in her gut. “I don’t need to know he fucked some other woman after he told me I was his.

That—That—” She swallowed hard. No, she would say the words ever again. “It’s not worth it, Bell. My heart breaking all over again isn’t worth whatever he might say to help ease his guilt.”

Bell snorted. “You’re so damn stubborn. I swear you belong to Kalkin or even Caden, not Jace.”

“Not the first time, someone has said as much. If I didn’t already have a complex, I might start now,” Hayden grumbled.

Bell sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “It’s not my place to interfere.” Hayden grinned a little and Bell held up her hand. “However, in this situation, I don’t think you’ll go searching for the truth until I lead you to it. So, come on horse, hear me out.”

Hayden sputtered a laugh. “God, Bell, you can be a little witch when you want to be.”

She chuffed. “Whatever. Are you going to listen or not?”

"Sure," Hayden answered. "Why not. What's this big secret everyone, including Nico, hasn't told me about?"

Bell pursed her lips. "I overheard Daddy and Mom talking after everything happened. Daddy said Nico might have been drugged, and he was sick. He had to stay with Danielle for two days."

Hayden perked up. “What?”

Bell bobbed her head. "Yeah. I didn't hear everything he said, but it was bad, Hayden. The whole family split their time between you and him because they were so worried both of you were going to die."

No. That's not true. It couldn't be. Nico was drugged? How? Why? Who? What would be the point? No, he got drunk, like she'd heard stories of how Caden had before the birth of Nicolas, and Nico did the same stupid thing. Yet, Hayden didn't scent the bitterness of a lie. "I... Bell, do you understand what you're saying?"

"Yes." Her bottom lip trembled. "We didn't know how to reach you in those first few weeks. You were in this shell a-a fog of pain and grief. Hayden, I—"

"I can't," Hayden said. "No more. Please, Bell. I don't want to hear anymore. I don't want to remember. I don't want to listen. I can't do this if I have to relive every moment and dissect my past to find the truth. Don't ask this of me."

Bell lifted her chin and stared down her nose, looking every bit of an imposing Alpha. "I'm not asking anymore, Hayden. I'm telling you to grow up. Make a bridge and get over yourself, before someone else does it for you and everything you want, and desire disappears because your pride got in the way."

"My pride?" Hayden jerked away from Bell and stood, shoving her chair across the room. "I don't have any, Bell. I lost it all when Nico fucked another woman and didn't give a shit about me." She couldn't believe the words coming out of Bell's mouth. "He lied. They lied. Everyone lies!"

Bell stood then and crossed to Hayden's door. "Just like you're doing as well, Hayden. Lie, lie, lie, lie, lie. You wouldn't know the truth anymore more in that twisted-up brain of yours even if you were smacked in the face with it." Glancing over her shoulder, Bell pinned Hayden with a glare. "I won't allow you to continue to live in the dark any longer. One way or another, I'm going to push you into the light. When you get there, if you don't do it on your own, you're going to regret you didn't save your mate." Without another word, Bell exited Hayden's room, leaving her to stare after her cousin.

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

According to Alex, the fights went pretty quickly, depending on the fighter. Of course, Nico didn't care whether they went fast or slow—he had his eyes set on the prize.

Hayden.

His gut churned, and he saw red the minute Hill opened his mouth and crushed Nico's little wolf. The fucking asshole didn't need to be a prick. There were extenuating circumstances as to why his body had a visceral reaction to people. He never told Hayden because he didn't think she'd believe him, nor did he have a chance to tell her. Nevertheless, Hill had done what he'd set out to do, create discord. He threw a temporary monkey wrench into Nico's plans. Yet, if the way she had stared up at him and hadn't pulled away when he carried her to the bench were any indication, she cared, maybe more than she wanted to vocalize at the moment. Obviously, it could all be wishful thinking on his part.

No, don't think of it as such. She was upset for you. For herself. For the whole fucking situation. A situation he caused and one only he could cure.

“This is how the matches go. Three rounds, five minutes apiece. No low blows. No hair pulling. No gouging of the eyes. No groin attacks.” Alex taped up Nico's hands while the official droned on and on about what they couldn't do in the ring. If they found an infraction in a competitor's tape, they are automatically disqualified. “Do you have any questions?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

He glanced up at the man and shook his head. Once the ref bumped his fist, he turned his attention to Alex. “When do we find out who our first opponent is?”

“When you get in the ring,” Alex answered. “Flex your hands and tell me how that feels.”

“Feels good.” Nico opened and closed his hands. “Do I have to put those stupid gloves on?”

“Not if you don't want to. The best way to finish quickly is submission. Take the guy down and make him tap.”

“What else?” Glanced around the area, taking in all of their competition.

“Don't lose.” Alex handed him a mouthguard. “You've got this tonight.”

“Yeah, I do.” Street fighting had kept Nico safe for a good portion of his life. Doing this? A cakewalk. The only person he worried about taking on was Hill. It would feel good to knock that douche down a peg or two.

“We're ready,” Bodhi said from the door. “Let's go kick some ass.”

The basketball gym had been transformed into an arena with two square rings in the middle. The students had turned out for the Sunday afternoon festivities, and they wouldn't be disappointed. Nico walked to where Jackson and others stood, waiting for the brackets to be posted. He glanced up to the roped-off riser section around the ring and found Bell and Hayden sitting in their seats. Today, Hayden wore a crimson

flowy dress. Her braid wrapped around her head in some intricate updo except for a few curls framing her face. His breath hitched.

Wow.

Hayden always managed to take his breath away. She was beautiful. Gorgeous even. Over the years, he noticed more and more how much she looked like her uncles and her cousins, right down to her full, heart-shaped lips. As she matured though, her wolf genetics had also added to her beauty, tipping her eyes in such a way, he could see her and the big, black wolf within her.

She nibbled on her bottom lip, and his groin tightened. Did she even realize what she did to him? How she drove him insane without even trying. Her gaze lit on him, and he smiled. Her eyes went wide before she gave him a little wave then started talking to Bell. Memories of the afternoon they spent together flooded his mind. She was so small in his arms, thin and lithe. She trusted him not to see the scars of her abuse, and he didn't. They made her more beautiful in his estimates. Those blue, purple, and red bruises. Those cuts from the chains holding her down, he wanted to lick and kiss each strip until she begged him to stop. When she climaxed in his arms, pure magic. He'd never been so enthralled in his life. Watching her shatter with pleasure—perfection.

She was everything to him.

“What did you say to her yesterday?” Bodhi came up beside him, drawing Nico out of his thoughts.

“What I always say. I'll do whatever it takes.” He shrugged.

“That all?”

He laughed. “Yeah. You expecting more?”

“With you, I never know what to expect.”

Truth. Nico hadn't always been the predictable one. He couldn't say when things went to shit, where he'd end up, but somehow, he'd always ended up in the right spot at the right time. Seemed as though he was part feline too because he always landed on his feet—until recently. If he couldn't fix things with Hayden, he didn't know what he'd do.

Nico nodded, slapping his friend on the shoulder. “Come on. It’s almost showtime.” They took up their positions near the other competitors. “What happens now?”

“Now, we wait to be introduced then we get in the ring and beat the shit out of each other,” Christoph said. “Should be fun.”

His idea and Nico’s idea of fun were two different things, but if getting the shit beat out of him meant he had a chance with his mate, he’d do it. “Who’s going to be the hardest to take down?”

“Hill is good, but Winston has a nasty habit of cheating to get what he wants. However, Kane is a scrapper.” Jackson pointed at the guy on the end. He was tall and had shoulder-length brown hair. His green gaze took in everything around him while he too waited. “Watch for Winston to shift mid-round.”

“We’re warned not to shift,” Nico stated, a little dumbfounded.

“It won’t stop him. All those assholes care about is getting in as many hits as possible and wearing you down. Don’t for a minute think anyone here has the best of intentions.” Jackson snorted then turned his attention to the stands as the man from the day before stepped up onto the raised dais positioned between the risers.

“And you, Jackson?” Nico prodded.

“I’m your worst nightmare come to life, but it doesn’t mean I’m not loyal to those who are loyal to me.” The dragon crossed his arm over his chest.

Before he could ask another question, the announcer raised his hands, settling everyone. “Day two has brought forth the competitors worthy of calling themselves champions. Today, we’ll see just how strong they are.”

The man played up the whole gladiator vibe of the event. His toga had gold clips holding it together in place of yesterday’s bronze, and his wreath of leaves gleamed in the bright light of the gym—a dramatic flair if Nico had to guess.

“Who is that guy?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Victor Lorenz,” Rocky replied. “A pain in the ass drama major who’s going to be the death of me.”

“Now for the match opponents.” He pulled a scroll out from a hidden spot in draped material covering him. “Round one, Nico Lopez and Conner Livingston.”

The room erupted in a cacophony of cheers.

Nico chanced a glance at his mate. She held Bell’s hand in a death grip. Did she doubt his ability to fight? Or did she worry he’d get hurt? The din of the room settled around him as he watched her for a moment more. Then, stepping away from everyone, he climbed up into the ring. Across from him in the secondary ring, Bodhi stepped into the square circle. His opponent, Winston.

The mangy mutt, though smaller than Bodhi by twenty pounds, wasn’t as gangly as he’d appeared at the mixer. There’d been a muscular tone to his slight frame. The bell rang, and Bodhi began to fight. Gathering his wits, Nico gave his full attention to the ref entering the ring. All the rules had been spelled out in the locker room while they got ready, but the man reiterated the major sticking points—shifting while fighting was an automatic disqualification.

“Now bump fists and good luck.” The referee stepped back.

He held out his fist, and Conner laughed at him before walking away. When the bell rang, he came out of his corner swinging. He bobbed and weaved past most of Conner’s punches, but the guy got in a few hits. Patience. Nico needed patience. He had to be calculated and controlled, waiting for the right moment to attack. When he

saw his opening, Nico pounced. He caught Conner as the dick bounced around the ring, acting like a cocky fool. The first hook shot glanced off Conner's cheek, the second right under the chin.

The wolf went down hard.

Jumping between them, the ref began counting. "Ten!" he wagged his finger, calling for an end to the match. The bell dinged seconds later, and he raised Nico's hand in victory.

He smiled as the gym exploded in cheers and acclaim. His body vibrated with excitement and unspent energy as adrenaline coursed through him. Though nothing like the thrill of his first kill, his heart pumped, thumping against his chest. The wild ecstasy consuming his wolf poured through his body. His gaze locked with his mate. The demand knotted his gut. Had they been alone, he'd have claimed her then and there. Hell, he might still do it if he couldn't get the beast back under control.

Nico climbed out of the ring and met up with Bodhi who'd left Winston lying in the middle of the ring, bloodied from the beating he'd inflicted. The smell of copper assailed him, setting him on edge. It was an amazing, natural high, but also dangerous. Nico needed to slow his roll.

"Damn, dude, did you leave an inch of him not bloody?" Nico asked, with a chuckle, trying to lighten the mood.

"Hayden told me what the fucker said to her at the mixer." Bodhi shrugged. "I thought I'd teach him a lesson on respect."

"I think he learned it." The medical staff carted the hyena out of the arena on a stretcher. "Who's up next?"

“Rocky versus Jackson and Alex versus some dude named Raven.” Bodhi shoulder checked him. “Looks like Christoph took out the trash with Zac.”

He nodded. “Good. Once we get them out of here, our chances of winning this thing grow exponentially.”

Match after match, they fought until the final two opponents were left standing. Nico rubbed his hand across his bottom lip and spit out a glob of blood. Christoph hadn’t held back with him. The streak of red on his hand made him frown, pulling the fresh cut. Damn it. Finally, after a submission hold, the lion tapped out. He and Christoph were worse for wear as ambled out of the ring and fist-bumped each other.

Once they were both out of the ring, Nico had ten minutes to get cleaned up before the next round with Jackson while Bodhi took on Kane. Alex, unfortunately, fell to Hill. However, Nico couldn’t concentrate on the loss. He needed to focus and watch Jackson carefully to learn his next opponent’s vulnerabilities.

Up in the stands, with their heads close together, Hayden and her new friends laughed and chatted. Her whole face lit up as she fell back into her chair, holding her stomach. Her blue eyes sparkled with merriment, filling him with resolve. He had to win this. Going another day without being around her, not experiencing everything that made up his mate, was detrimental to his emotional wellbeing.

He craved her light.

The second to the last match finished in a flourish of punches and jabs. Fighting Jackson had been like facing off with a spider monkey. He was everywhere, keeping Nico on his toes the whole time. Yet, once he realized Jackson had a pattern and a tell, Nico could track him better, ending the fight with a swift blow to the dragon’s chin. By the time he exited the ring, Nico was exhausted. After two matches of going full tilt, he needed a break.

Unfortunately, Nico wouldn't be able to rest until after the last fight. His opponent—Hill.

When the bell rang once more, the announcer stood once more on the raised platform and lifted his arms. "Two men enter this ring, and only one will leave victorious." The guy had to have had a serious crush on Mad Max. "In the blue shorts, your first competitor, Nico Lopez."

He climbed into the ring and raised his fist into the air before rolling his shoulders.

"And finally in the red shorts, the captain of the football team, Hill Chancy." The corner of Victor's mouth tugged into a devious smirk. "Let the final match, begin!"

The last two matches had grated on Hayden's nerves. Granted, Jackson and Christoph had done what was expected of all the competitors—fought. But, Christoph had done so with such brutality, he opened a cut over Nico's eye while also leaving a few bruises on Nico's ribs. Luckily, by the time Nico stepped into the ring with Hill, the cut had closed somewhat, and the bruises on his ribs faded to ugly green-and-yellow.

The bell rang for the first round, and she gripped Bell's hand tight. Hill stood a good three inches taller than Nico and weighed at least thirty pounds more. He lumbered around the ring while her mate followed him. She'd noticed Hill tended to drop his right hand when punching with his left. Had Nico observed the same?

"Come on," she mumbled, sitting forward, waiting for someone to throw the first jab.

"Limp dick." Hill grinned. His arms were relaxed at his sides. Unease prickled at her spine. "I'm going to give you one good shot. Then, I'm going to rip you apart in front of your bitch."

Nico stood in a ready stance, his expression blank, not taking any of the asshole's

bait.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

After a moment, Hill rolled his shoulders then slammed his fists together. “Have it your way.” He advanced, pushing Nico into the corner, peppering his sides and face with lefts and rights. The cut over Nico’s eye, which had started to heal, opened up and bled sending a rivulet of crimson down his temple to his cheek.

Hayden flinched with every blow, silently willing Nico to fight back. Do something. She shot to her feet. “Fight back! Hit him!”

Finally, Nico moved. He ducked one of Hill’s hooks then attacked with a flurry of lefts and rights, moving the other wolf backward with each punch. She hollered again, bouncing on the balls of her feet, while the crowd roaring to life with her. By the time the first round ended, the energy in the gym had spiked. Vibrating with adrenalin, she plopped next to her cousin and blew out a breath. One down, two more to go. She knew each match was only fifteen minutes long, but this one had seemed much longer.

Bell shook her head and chuckled. “You’ve got it bad.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She gave her a sideways glance. “You love him.”

“I do not,” she barked louder than she intended. “Don’t be ridiculous.” She leaned into Bell’s side. “I might not want him, but I also don’t want him getting hurt.”

“Uh-huh.” Bell giggled. “You still love him.”

“Whatever,” she grumbled. In all honesty, she thought about him all night. Could they have a future together? Her heart said yes. Her brain said no. Self-preservation insisted the chances were fifty-fifty he’d find someone else to cheat with, despite him saying she was his mate and he’d wait for her because he’d said it before and look at the mess they were in.

Still, the information Bell gave her the night before, continued to plague her. Bell had no reason to lie. She wondered if she’d listened to her father or her uncles all that time ago if things would have been different if maybe she would have learned the truth. The harsh reality of their situation didn’t feel so cut and dry anymore.

The bell rang once more, and the guys went back to fighting. Their bodies moved with grace in a perfectly choreographed dance. He avoided a few of Hill’s jabs, but the ones he couldn’t sidestep he took to the body, absorbing the punishing blows. Back and forth they went until a well-placed cross slammed Nico to the floor. The ref stood over him counting, while her anxiety surged.

"Get up, get up. Come on. Don't let him beat you," she murmured, garnering another grin from her cousin. Her knee bounced with nervous energy as the count got to six, and he still hadn’t moved. At eight, he stood, dancing on the balls of his feet and nodding to the referee. “Yeah! Kick his ass!”

Bell chuckled. “Yep, you’re head over heels for that man.”

9

When the bellsounded at the end of the second round, she breathed a sigh of relief. Other than being knocked down, Nico went toe to toe with Hill. Nevertheless, his face had been bloodied and his chest heaved from exertion. One more time, he’d have to stand up and fight. In the end, though, she couldn’t make heads or tails of his actions. A part of her wanted to believe he did this for all the right reasons, but should

someone get the crap beat out of them for love? To prove their feelings? The whole situation reminded her of the barbaric gladiators.

Yet, the longer she stood there, she questioned herself. What else was he supposed to do to prove anything to her? She wouldn't listen to him. She wouldn't hear her family out. She ran time and time again, never fully allowing herself to bear witness to that day. She told herself over the years it had more to do with a broken heart and saving herself, than anything else, but had she hurt herself more by acting like a child?

That thought made her frown. How could she be a mate if she still acted like a kid in some respects? How could she give herself to Nico and play grown-up, when she still played games, instead of faced the truth? An adult would have heard the other person out. An adult would have been rational and at least faced the pain head-on. She hid away and licked her wounds, allowing them to fester, not heal.

The crowd broke out in cheers, bringing her attention back to the match. Nico stood against the ropes, blocking punches while Hill tried to find a weak spot.

She jumped to her feet. "Nico!" Her hands fisted at her sides as she watched in horror. "Now. Hit him now! He's dropping his left hand!" If she could have paced, she would have. Anxiety knotted her stomach, and fear clogged her throat. "Hit him!"

She didn't know if he heard her, or if he had been baiting the wolf in front of him, but Nico came out swinging. Most of the blows landed on the body, but he connected some with Hill's face. The wolf staggered, stepping backward, but Nico didn't let him get his feet under him. He continued his assault. He pummeled Hill with lefts and rights until the referee got between them and stopped the bout.

Nico raised his hands in victory and howled. The she-wolf inside her preened and answered her mate. His gaze locked with hers, and she went weak in the knees. Lust burned bright in his brown eyes. She gasped, unable to break the connection between

them. The corner of his mouth kicked upward in a devastating smirk before he winked and got rushed by the guys. Bodhi hoisted him up, while the others gathered around.

Bell hip-checked her and laughed. “So much for not being into him. I guess this means you’ll be making up?”

“What?” She gave her cousin a look. “What gave you that idea?”

“Um...hello....”

“I can appreciate a good match when I see one.” She sniffed. “Besides, I’m sure he’ll have more than enough company tonight.”

“Pfft.” Bell swatted at her. “Go get him.”

She hurried down the stairs, trailing after the crowd following Nico. What she’d say if she got close to him, she didn’t know. Congratulations didn’t seem appropriate or enough. She could hear raucous shouts from down the corridor. Women and men passed her by as though she didn’t exist. Maybe it’s for the best. As she came around the corner, Bodhi stood at the locker room door. His relaxed position belied his stiff movement when a grimace pulled his lips into a thin line.

“Are you okay?” she whispered, walking to him.

“Yeah, nothing a little TLC won’t take care of.” He gave her a small smile.

“Is...is he in there?” She hated the hesitation in her voice.

“Hayden—”

“No, Bodhi, I don’t want to hear your lecture. Is he in there?” She crossed her arms.

“Look, if you’re going in there, you need to be prepared to mate him.” Her brother grabbed her arm. “He’s doing this for you. All of this. Don’t let the pains of a teen dictate the agony of an adult.”

“It’s not like that, Bodhi,” she muttered as she squirmed under his gaze, hating the fact he could see right through her.

“It’s not?” He chuckled. “Sis, you have been acting like you’ve lost your best friend from the moment you found him at his apartment. It’s become worse since we left for college and more so over the last few weeks.”

“Why do you care? Why are you on his side?” She wouldn’t give any credence to what he said.

“No one else is,” he murmured. “He’s a guy. He did something stupid. Plus, you don’t know the whole story. Until you do, you can’t keep hurting yourself or Nico.”

“So, I should just forgive him and act like it never happened?” She couldn’t believe what her brother had said.

“No. Not at all. I believe he deserves to pay for his mistakes. But, how long does he pay? How long do you go on hurting yourself and denying the one person who can complete you?”

“I don’t have time for this conversation. Is he in there or not?” Her hands went to her hips.

“Yes, he is.”

She pushed past him, but he grabbed her arm. “Think about what I’ve told you. Don’t be stupid about this.”

“Your concerns are noted.” She wrenched free then shoved through the door into the locker room where Reagan pawed at her mate, who lay on a bench.

“Get your hands off him,” Hayden snarled.

Reagan laughed. “If it isn’t the stuck-up bitch. Why don’t you go back to your little group of losers and let the real women tend to the men.”

“I’m not going to tell you to get your hands off of him again.” She growled, advancing on the little slut touching her mate.

“Get out of here, Reagan. I already told you no. I don’t want you here.” Nico’s gaze locked with Hayden’s. His skin was pale, paler than it should be. A tinge of green crept along his jaw. Even his eyes were glassy. He didn’t look good.

Hayden popped her head out the door to where Bodhi still stood. “Get the healer. Now.”

Her brother grunted. “On it.”

“I said don’t touch me.” Hayden popped her head back into the locker room as Nico tried to shove Reagan away.

“Excuse me?” she huffed. “No one turns me down!”

“There’s a first time for everything,” he quipped. “Now see yourself out and don’t come back.”

Stomping her foot, Reagan squealed and left. Hayden shook her head before going in search of a first aid kit to clean up Nico. When she found it, she returned and sat on the end of the bench. “Not a word.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.” He held up his hands. Not only did he look like he had the shit beat out of him, but he also appeared sick. Was there more wrong with him?

"Good." She opened the box and pulled out the saline solution and some gauze. Grabbing a towel off a cart beside her, she laid it on her lap. “Put your head there.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He closed his eyes, letting out a sigh. The pinch in his features relaxed. His coloring began to return albeit slowly. Some of the worry eased from Hayden.

She poured some of the solution on the gauze and dabbed the cut over his eye. “I don’t understand why the fuck you’d want to do this to yourself.”

“I guess I’m trying to win my mate back, and I’ll do whatever it takes for that to happen.”

She hesitated for a second then returned to cleaning his wounds. “That’s stupid. You should have said no to this barbaric show of machismo.” She grabbed a fresh piece of cotton and went back to work. He hissed, stilling her hand. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You’re allowed your pound of flesh. I deserved it.” He let her wrist go.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Shut up.” She snatched the antibiotic ointment.

“As you wish.” He grinned.

She continued to work while they waited for the healer to fix some of the bigger issues. As she stared down at him, the questions swirling in her mind came pouring out. “Bell said you were drugged. Is that true?”

Nico stared up at her. The eye with the cut over it already began to swell shut. “Are you sure you want these answers?”

Did she? Probably not. Should she have them so she could make a more informed decision for herself? Yes. “I do. I need them.”

Nico grunted. “I only want to tell this story once and then I never want to speak of it again, little wolf. Understand?”

She nodded. “Same.”

He made himself comfortable on her lap then threaded his fingers with hers. “I was fucked up in the head. I thought... Shit, Hayden.” He pitched his voice low. “I thought I got you pregnant. I worried about what would happen to us. For four weeks I barely functioned. The fear was so great within me. I knew all the rules and why they were put in place for us and all I could think was, Kalkin’s going to kill me because no one goes against the Alpha.”

That she could understand. Even though she knew her body better than Nico would,

she could see where he might be worried they'd have an oops baby. She also couldn't say it didn't freak her out too. It had. But, they should have dealt with it together not alone. Not like they had. "We both didn't handle the situation very well."

"Exactly. I was so messed up in the head because despite how scared I was, I came up with a million scenarios in my head for why we should do it over and over and over again until I knocked you up." Nico let out a shaky breath.

"I wanted you too," she admitted. "I also didn't want you to get into trouble either."

"Same for me," he replied. "Anyway, the weekend after you took the fourth test, and it came back negative, I went out with the guys. Something I'd been doing all along, only I never, ever, participated. They drank, hooked up with women, and I watched their backs."

Hayden's heart began to crack again because she knew what was coming. "What happened? Why did you all of a sudden want to bring some woman home?"

He grimaced, squeezing her hand. "That's just it. I can't tell you. I don't remember." His whiskey gaze pinned hers. "I can't for whatever reason, touch another woman. The minute I do, I get violently ill."

Hayden blinked then scrunched up her face. "What?"

He chuckled then groaned. "I can't touch other women. Since we mated, because we did, Hayden, I haven't been able to touch another woman sexually. It makes me sick."

Was that why his jaw was tinged with green, and he forcibly pushed Reagan away from him? None of what he said made sense to her. She'd never heard anything of the sort before. Then again, it wasn't like she knew a whole lot about wolves, specifically

mated wolves. "That doesn't change the fact you did though." She frowned, unable to put together what happened.

"Of course not." His serious tone gave her pause. "Because I still went out intending to blow off steam and came home with another woman. There are no excuses, Hayden. If I wouldn't have given in and gone with the guys, none of this would have happened. We both know the truth of the matter."

"Do you remember anything?" she asked a bit hesitantly. "From that night?"

He shook his head. "One minute I was alone drinking my beer, waiting for the guys the next I was waking up to you pounding on my door."

She frowned. "So, when did you get drugged?"

Again, he shook his head. "I don't know. Dani thinks someone hit my beer with it. I would have seen it though, right?"

She would assume so. "Well, yeah. I guess. What kind of drug was it?"

Nico frowned. His gaze dropped from hers and the scent of his humiliation and pain hit her square in the chest. "The same one your father was dosed with."

Bile bit at the back of Hayden's throat. "No."

"Yes," he answered. "Danielle has all of the results at the clinic. She thinks the dosing was mild. Almost as if someone set me up that night. Like you were supposed to find me in the state I'd been in. No one counted on my reaction to the drug or being touched."

"Who?" She swallowed hard. "Who'd want to hurt you so badly?" The idea of him

having to suffer as her father did through the full moons, unable to touch anyone but her, broke her heart all over again, this time for him, not because of him. Someone destroyed her mate's life. All for what? Why? "Uncle Kalkin said PBH was through, finished. You killed all those men for me. So, why now?" She swiped away tears as she sat there. Why couldn't she be normal? Why couldn't their lives be normal?

"We don't know." He exhaled roughly. "With as sick as I got after I kicked that woman out of my apartment, I doubt I had sex with her. The concentration of the drug wasn't very high either which means I hadn't been given a big enough dose. I've wracked my brain over the last few years trying to remember everything from that night and I can't."

Hayden didn't know what to believe. Her brain said, listen to him a bit more. Her heart said to forgive him and move forward. Yet, if he was telling the truth, he'd been violated which meant he probably didn't want anyone to touch him, which she understood. "I need to set you free, Nico. It's for the best."

He snarled at her, sitting up and grabbing her face so she was only inches from him. "Leaving me is for the best? Setting me free?" He growled low and long. "Why? Because you think I was raped? Because you pity me? Because you see your father now when you look at me?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Yes. She did. It had taken her father years to adjust to his emotional state along with his physical desires. There were still things not even Danielle understood about the drug used on her father and now, it seemed, her mate. It wasn't fair for her to, once again, take his choices away. "Nico, I want you to be free because, with me, you'll always be reminded of what happened to you." She choked on a sob. "If you stay, you'll be reminded over and over again about being violated. You'll grow to hate me."

"Never," he said with a gut-deep strength. "Never. What happened to me has nothing to do with you. I knew the risks of going out. I let my guard down. I left you behind because I fucked up. I broke your heart, little wolf. I threw away the love of my life because I couldn't handle the ramifications of what could have come next after the best afternoon of my life." He cupped her cheek, his hand still wrapped in white tape, scratched at her skin. "I love you so fucking much, it hurts to be away from you. I feel like every day I die a little more. I miss you. I'm fucking desperate for you, Hayden. You're my little wolf. What kind of life will I have without you?"

She sniffed. Her chin wobbled. Her eyes blurred with tears and her nose burned. "I love you too. I've never stopped. I can't stop and that makes me hate you even more." She jerked as she began to cry in earnest. "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to fix us. I can't—"

Nico brushed his lips over hers, kissing her. The meeting of their mouths was soft, comforting. There was the heat of desperation there, but also longing. Of missing him or in his case her. She sank into his kiss, knowing she'd cry harder the minute he pulled back because there was no denying he was her mate. She couldn't walk away again, even if she wanted to.

He pressed his forehead to hers, staring down at her. "We'll do it this time together. As proper mates. No more running. No more hiding. We'll take it slow and easy. Both of us need the chance to relearn everything about ourselves." He kissed her again. "Please, don't ever think I'd hate you. I'll never hate you, Hayden. You saved my life more times than you'll ever know."

"Nico..." She sniffled and sobbed, trembling in his arms. "I'm so scared all over again. I feel like everything is so out of control."

"Then use me as your center, little wolf. We've always leaned on each other. You've always had me to keep you grounded." This time when he stared down at her, she met his gaze. "There you are, little wolf. I see you now. I've missed you too."

Her she-wolf sat up and pushed forward, preening at Nico's attention. "I've missed you too."

"I know you have, Hayden. I know, baby." He groaned then and laid his head back on her lap. "Okay, I can admit, maybe fighting wasn't the best decision I've ever made."

She wouldn't laugh. "I had Bodhi go get the healer for you."

"Good," he murmured. "Hey, little wolf, have lunch with me tomorrow."

"Why?" She tilted her head.

"Call it thanks for tending to my wounds." He took her hand in his again.

She eyed him speculatively while going back to cleaning his wounds. "Only lunch?"

"Only lunch."

“Okay.” She grabbed a fresh four by four square. “We can start small, with lunch.”

“Thank you.” He closed his eyes. “Don’t freak out, but I’m going to pass out now.”

His body went lax in her lap, and she let out a startled squeak before checking his pulse. His heartbeat was steady and strong. As she waited for the healer to arrive, she couldn’t take her eyes off her mate.

“Remember, there is a quiz tomorrow on the difference between a zygote and an embryo,” Professor Phillips announced while dismissing the class. “Also, my office hours have changed. I will only be available Monday, Thursday, and Friday from one to three in the afternoon, if you have an issue or questions before then, please send me an email.”

Hayden dumped her book into her backpack and stood, thankful biology was her last class for the day. The lecture time gave her a chance to think about last night, about her reaction to seeing Nico fight for her and their conversation that followed. In some weird way, seeing him fight made her stomach flutter and her heart skip a beat. Watching him as she had also twisted a visceral part of her. She equated it to Darwinism. The strong only sought out the strong, and her wolf saw demanded she claim the man.

Their conversation, however, opened old wounds to be cleaned properly and gave her a new prospect on, well, everything. A part of her was still so angry at Nico. Yes, he had put himself in a bad situation, yet she also understood why. She was partly to blame as well. Things were so fucked up. At the time, she didn't understand the consequences of going to him as she had. All she'd cared about was being with her mate. She flung all caution and rules out the window and indulged in her wants. She sank into the taboo. She became a spoiled child wanting a new toy, she hadn't stopped to think about his feelings as well. She put him in a no-win situation then brushed all of it off because thinking would stop her from taking what she desperately wanted.

She now understood why she should have waited. She wasn't ready. And her not being in the right headspace, put them in the predicament they were in now.

Talking to Nico though had cleared away some of the old hurt. Though she was angry for another reason, she also accepted the fact she did love him. As angry as she'd been at the notion, Nico was her mate, and anything they did for that moment on would shape the rest of their lives. So, she decided then and there, as she waited for the healer, to forgive herself. Forgive him and begin again. After last night, they'd never talk about any of it again. In order for them to move forward, their past needed to stay firmly in the past.

Which led her back to the lunch date she'd agreed to. In those last moments spent in the locker room, a part of her wanted to know when they'd go out. Yet another part liked the idea of it being spontaneous. Before she left his side, he'd grabbed her hand and tugged her back to him. His dark eyes blazed with desire seconds before he dipped his chin and claimed her mouth. His arm banded her, pressing her flush to his body. Their kiss was exploratory. Lazy. He tasted her. Sipped from her lips. He'd coaxed her into it, drawing out her yearning. Hayden had wound her arms around his neck sinking into all of it. It felt like coming home for her. So right she didn't want to let go.

Almost a little too perfect.

When he drew back, wonderment and a hint of awe had filled his features. In the next second, he'd schooled his expression before walking toward the shower, leaving Hayden to stare after him.

As she pushed the classroom door open, she spotted Nico waiting for her outside, his arms crossed over the wide expanse of his chest and his feet evenly spaced apart. The air of authority and dominance rolling off of him made a shiver of delight roll through her. Hayden's wolf preened at seeing her mate. Instead of going straight to

him, she turned and marched down the hall in the opposite direction. Why not, I didn't see you standing there.

The farther she got from him, the less her body hummed with energy. Her wolf paced and snarled at her.

"Done with classes?" His silky-smooth voice wrapped around her, knocking her off-kilter. She should have known he'd catch up. "I thought you saw me standing there waiting. Or did you ignore me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Liar, liar pants on fire.

"I thought we could grab some lunch today and continue our talk." He kept pace with her, parting the crowd with ease.

“Talk about what?”

“Us.”

“There is no us.”

“Oh, I beg to differ, little wolf.” Taking her hand, he led her over to his Jeep. “Get in.”

“No.” She growled. “I mean, wait. I thought I’d have a little more time to prepare for this.” She scratched her forehead. “Right now?”

“Damn it, Hayden. If you don’t get in the fucking Jeep, I’ll put you in the vehicle, and you won’t like it.” He loomed over her like a predator cornering its prey. “Your stubborn pride is getting in your way. It’s always gotten in your way.”

Everything he said hit below the belt. He stated the truth with such vehemence it stung. “Whatever,” she snapped, getting up into the waiting vehicle. “Always such a know-it-all asshole.”

“And here I thought we’d made progress.” He closed the door then hurried around the front of the truck and got in.

“A kiss does not make a relationship.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.” She gazed out the passenger window as he started the SUV and pulled out of his spot. What she wouldn’t give for a greasy burger right at that moment. Her stomach gave an appreciative growl, and he cocked a brow at her.

“Good thing one of us is willing to take care of you.” He chuckled.

“Don’t start.”

Once he pulled into the parking lot of University Pub and found a spot, he turned off the truck, and she jumped out. She needed a moment to gather her wits before he joined her once more. Nico caught up Hayden and grabbed her hand. The small smirk tugging at his lips rankled her nerves. He was so cocky. So sure of himself. Together, they found a booth away from prying eyes and ears.

“So, talk. What did you want to say to me?”

He folded his hands on the table “Are you going to listen, or insult me the whole time?”

Ouch. “I’ll listen,” she muttered while picking at the corner of her menu.

“Good.” He gave her a curt nod. “I’ve wanted to mate you since the moment I laid eyes on you. If you hadn’t been so young, I would have taken you to the Strawberry Festival and marked you as mine. But, it didn’t happen that way. Unfortunately for us, some dipshit took you. Sometimes I wish I would have left the asshole alive. Then we could have questioned him. It’s my biggest regret.”

"You mean your biggest regret wasn't giving in to a hormonal seventeen-year-old, right?" she said, not sure why she provoked him, especially after their conversation in the locker room.

He snorted. "I'm not going to lie and say I wish we'd done things differently, Hayden. I do. But, as I told you, having you in my arms—best fucking moment of my life. I'd never until that moment, experienced anything as powerful as feeling you climax in my arms."

Heat burned her cheeks. "Nico..."

"It's true, little wolf."

"Then, why?" She understood some of his logic, like being scared or nervous. Why not come to her? Why not be scared with her? Maybe that's why she couldn't let it go. "Why throw it all away?"

"You haven't been so lily-white in all this either, have you?" His gaze bored into hers. Knowledge and a bit of jealousy shimmered in the flecks of amber surrounding his irises.

"What are you talking about?" She licked her lips growing more nervous by the second.

He snorted and crossed his arms over his chest. The muscles of his biceps and forearms flexed, and she swallowed hard. "Don't you remember threatening me with Adam?"

Gut punched, she stared at him. Adam, the first boy who took a liking to her in high school after Nico graduated. When she and Nico couldn't spend time together, Adam and she did. He kissed her. Listened to her. She could talk to him about the things she didn't want to talk about with her mate. Plus, he taught her things about guys. Stuff at the time she couldn't go to Nico about, like blow jobs and hand jobs. "What about him?"

“Oh, little wolf,” he growled. “Don’t play stupid with me. I know the truth.”

“What truth?” She tried to glean how much he knew.

“How many times did you jerk him off? How many times did that sweet little pussy of yours cream itself when you watched him come? Was everything you did from the moment you saw me, was intended to hurt me. Did you yearn for payback? Are you done yet?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

A rush of heat filled her, and her cheeks burned with embarrassment. “How did you find out?”

“I could smell him on you,” he grumbled. “I should have killed him.”

“Brute.” She curled her lip in disgust. “Mom and Dads wouldn’t have let you. Besides, I told you, I didn’t get anything out of it.”

“But you wanted more, didn’t you?”

If he had a point, he needed to spit it out. “So, what if I did?”

“So, you deemed it okay to get your pleasure, but I was supposed to sit back and do what? Stay chaste?” He sat back when the waitress approached. Once they gave their order, he leaned in again. “Did you put me on so high a pedestal, when I fell, I shattered?”

When he put it like that... “No, I—well—I...” She frowned. “You’re right.” If they were going to move forward, she had to be honest with him too. “Everyone wanted me to stay innocent. Holly most especially. You wouldn’t go against anything Uncle Kalkin said. I felt, ignored. I was jealous, sure, but I also felt like maybe I wasn’t worthy enough to have anything special. Like, even though I survived all those years on the run with my aunt, I still wasn’t good enough. Or, perhaps worthy. I was alone. Was it smart to do what I did with Adam? Probably not, but I felt valued, even if it meant nothing.”

Their server came to the table and Nico ordered for both of them He knew her so well

he could recite her favorite meal without hesitation. When the woman left, Nico looked at Hayden. Why did all of have to be so dang complicated? Why couldn't she let it go? She had the answers, not that they were good ones because, in all reality, they were damning toward her than Nico, yet she couldn't switch off her anger.

"If you'd listen to me, little wolf, you'd hear I'm trying to apologize for my transgressions. I'm trying to make this up to you because I see your pain every day and have to live with the fact I caused it. I did this to you. I did this to us. I'm sorry." He cleared his throat and took her hand. "I have ached to hold you. To touch you. I miss you so damned much, it's as if I am missing a part of my soul. Even after last night, I still don't know what to do to fix us. Tell me what to say, baby. Tell me how to act. Tell me what you want from me, and I'll gladly give it if it means I can be in your arms again. My life is nothing without you, and I can't stand it anymore."

Everything in front of her blurred into a blob as the first tears rolled down her cheeks. "You are my life," she sobbed. "But my heart is broken. Even if you glued it back together, sure the pieces will fit, but the cracks will show." She wiped the tears from her eyes. "I'm not a starry-eyed little girl anymore."

"No, you're not." He cupped her cheek, and she nuzzled his palm. "You're a beautiful woman who requires her mate to heal her. To care for her. You yearn for me to repair the damage caused to you. You need to be loved. Let me be the man who shows you what it means to be loved and cherished. We'll work toward it together." He gave her a lopsided grin and tapped the end of her nose. "You are the first person I think about when I wake up and the last person I think of before I go to sleep. You were always my priority, and I hate the fact you felt so isolated."

"You don't know the half of it," she muttered.

"Then tell me, little wolf. We have all the time in the world," he coaxed.

Hayden stared at Nico for a moment then nodded. "Did you know about the locks on the bedroom doors? Or why they were there?"

Nico stared at her then tilted his head. "Locks on the bedroom doors? I don't understand."

She gave a little laugh. She didn't either. No, that was a lie, she did. She had a bad habit of walking in on people at inopportune times. "It started with Mac." She took a shaky breath. "I was going to be late for school, it was my first day and Mac said he would take me. So, when he wasn't in the kitchen..." She squirmed in her seat. She hadn't seen her aunt either, but she'd taken a job at the local clinic, and she worked the night shift. When she heard rustling in Mackenzie's bedroom, she'd gone to make sure they were okay. Not realizing she'd walk in on them having sex. "I kind of walked in on them doing the deed." She winced. "Embarrassed, I ran back to my room and stayed out of sight until Mac came and got me."

"Oh shit," Nico murmured, scrubbing his face. "Sexuality and mates go hand in hand for shifters. Didn't anyone explain to you that at some point, you might see a naked ass or three?"

She shook her head. "No. I think everyone thought I was too traumatized to say anything to me."

"But locks?" He held up his hand. "Even Jace, Blake, and Loraine?"

"Especially them. I guess dad felt the most vulnerable out of all of them," she replied. "I can't blame him. One day he meets his long-lost daughter and the next he's fully mated with a man and a woman. It couldn't be easy to—"

“Stop, Hayden,” Nico snapped. “Stop making excuses for them or giving them allowances. What if something happened in the middle of the night?”

She rolled her shoulders. “I guess I went looking for someone.”

“What?” he growled. “What do you mean went looking for someone?”

She’d been so scared that night. The nightmare she’d woke up from had been so bad, she’d been covered in sweat and crying. Since she’d arrived in Window Rock, she’d thought they were gone, because she’d been so happy there and safe, yet that night was the worst. After she gathered herself, Hayden had gone to Bodhi’s room first, but he wasn’t there. Then she went to her dad’s room and found the door locked. She didn’t know what made her want to leave the house that night, other than she wanted some kind of comfort from someone—more specifically—since she couldn’t ask for help from anyone else, she wanted him, Nico. She took a deep shuddering breath before answering her mate. “I had a system. I went to Bodhi since he was with me more often than not. When he wasn’t in his room, I went to Dad, but their door was locked. So, in my frightened state, I left.”

“You left?” His breath left him in a whoosh as he sat back against his chair. “Hayden, do you know how dangerous that could have been?”

She nodded. “At the time, no. Later, yes. I did. Anyway, I guess I got a little turned around because I was still stuck between the nightmare and being awake and I came upon a group of kids.”

“Who were they?” Nico narrowed his eyes. “Did they hurt you?”

“No,” she said. “They didn’t know I was there.” In truth, she’d been enthralled with them. They were a bit older, maybe Nico’s age at the time. They had alcohol and music and soft lighting. The group was made up of five boys and three girls. All of

them were laughing and carrying on. For a minute, Hayden had envied them. “Anyway, I watched them. They were so cool. So carefree. I think they were orphans.”

“Jesus, Hayden.” Nico scrubbed his face. “How long did you stay there?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

"I don't know. I thought maybe they knew you," she mumbled. "I thought if I stayed long enough, you'd show up."

"Holy shit," Nico muttered. "Hayden, I stayed with Mrs. Pauline by then. I—little wolf."

Yeah, she figured the same afterward. "Well, things got pretty interesting while I waited." She laughed a little bit. "The music they were listening to, changed and all of them got naked. I didn't understand what I was about to see, but I also couldn't leave."

"They had sex and you watched?" Nico continued to stare at her with a dumbfounded look on his face.

"Yeah, I did." Heat filled her cheeks. "They'd have never known I was there if I hadn't kicked a bottle." She ran to Kalkin's house and snuck into her uncle's home, though now, she wondered if he knew she left home, and he let her in. She pushed the thought aside. "No one asked me anything, and I never offered anything either."

She didn't know how long they sat there, but eventually, their lunch was placed in front of them and their drinks had been refilled. She didn't tell him about what happened because she wanted him to feel sorry for her. Though, she did want him to have some perspective too. Not everything he knew about her was rosy after she arrived in Window Rock. The one group of people who were supposed to take care of her all but ignored her for the most part.

"Then there were the nights I didn't eat," she whispered. "I don't think Holly did it on purpose and it was my fault too. I'd get so drawn into my homework I'd forget." She

shrugged. "Most of the time, Mac would bring me cookies and milk when he'd get home, especially if he worked late at a site. I never had the heart to tell him the truth."

"Never again," Nico snarled. "Never fucking again."

"I'm fine, Nico. I didn't ever say anything because I didn't want to be a burden to anyone. It's hard enough being that kid, let alone asking for stuff or needing people." She pushed away the morose feelings and tucked into her lunch. "Now you know, and I'd appreciate it if you never said a word to anyone too."

"I can't make that promise." His brown eyes blazed with rage and pain. "They are your family. They should always be there for you. This... I can't keep this to myself."

"I didn't tell you so you could run off and blab about my problems, Nico. Please don't make me regret telling you any of this," she pleaded.

"Fine," he grumbled. "But if shit is ever said or the right opportunity presents itself, you better bet your sweet ass, I am going to give them all a piece of my fucking mind. Damn it, Hayden, do you understand what was happening to you at all? You were no better than us orphans! They treated you like a charity case, not their fucking blood. I am so fucking angry. So fucking hurt. Goddammit!" Nico slammed his fist on the table, drawing attention to them. "You deserved so much more, baby. Then I had to go and fuck your life up more. No wonder why you stayed here and never went home. I can't fucking fault you there. If you never want to return, I'm good with it. I can be a deputy anywhere. Not just Window Rock."

She laughed a little. "I have news."

"What?" Nico wiped his mouth.

"Lorraine is pregnant. I have to go home. The baby is due around spring break."

Hayden held her hand out to him. "And, I'd love it if you came with me."

An hour later after they'd eaten and talked, they returned to her room. She placed the key in the lock, and he stilled her hand then turned the knob, stepping inside first. He made a quick circuit of the room then motioned her to enter.

"It's my room, in Bell's sorority house. It's not like someone is going to booby trap it."

He shrugged. "Not like someone won't. It's better to be safe than sorry."

"Aren't you a Boy Scout," she said, walking into her room. "So, now what?" She sat on her bed, while he opened and closed the closet before going into the bathroom. He came back out and sat beside her. "Well?"

"Coast is clear."

"And?" she hedged.

"And what?" Nico tilted his head.

"What now?" Geez, sometimes it's like pulling teeth with him.

"I guess it depends on you." He shrugged.

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really." Exasperation laced his words.

"Okay, so, what is it?" she pushed. "That depends on me."

He glanced out the window of her room, overlooking all of the other sorority houses nestled at the base of the hills. “Full moon starts tonight, little wolf.”

“Yes, it is,” she agreed. “Though, I still don’t feel the pull like the rest of you.”

Nico gave her a little smile, joining their hands. “What do you say to us trying to figure out why that is and tonight, I’ll maybe I’ll finish what we started, all those years ago.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Shock registered in her gaze. Her eyes widened, and a tremble worked through her. He had her right where he wanted her. Off-balance.

“Just like that?” Her voice wobbled.

“Yup, just like that.” He'd turned over everything she said at lunch then later as they'd taken their time leaving once they'd finished eating. He still couldn't believe how Kalkin and his siblings handled Hayden. It didn't make sense and as much as he promised not to say a word until the time came, he knew he'd be chewing Kalkin out when the man called him.

“This isn't a good idea.”

“Yeah, baby.” He helped her up off the bed. “It is.”

“Don't I even get a say in the matter?”

“Sure, little wolf. You get to pick which position I take you in when we mate.” His wolf hovered just below the surface, eager to claim his mate again, this time for the whole world to see.

“Don't be obtuse. That isn't what I meant!” she snapped, crossing her arms, which pushed those pert little breasts of hers higher and made his mouth water. Her hard nipples pressed against the thin material of her T-shirt, and it took all of his willpower to pull his gaze from her.

“I'm not being obtuse, mate. I knew exactly what you meant.” He reached out,

cupping her chin in his palm, forcing her to look at him. “So what will it be, little wolf, missionary or doggy style?” She gasped, as lowering his face, to nuzzle her neck. “Personally, I’d prefer the missionary position, last time you rode my dick, and I almost came instantly. This time, I want to watch those beautiful blue eyes of yours as you come on my dick.” The scent of her sweet arousal wafted around him. He groaned. “I’ve been waiting for this moment since our first time together, little wolf.”

She exhaled a shaky breath. “You’re not playing fair!”

“No, I’m not. Don’t you get it? I’m not going to lose you...lose us. Ever. I’ll do anything and everything to make sure we’re mated.”

“The past.” She dipped her head, turning her face from his.

“I’m done with the past. The past is just that...the past. In our future—in our now—there’s only room for you and me. That woman and Adam have no place in our lives. I won’t allow them to interfere with us ever again.” He tipped her chin up. “We’re starting over. Our relationship—who and what we are now—started at the mixer.” Determination filled his words. He brushed his thumb across the seam of her mouth before leaning in, capturing her lips in a slow, sensual kiss. He nipped and teased her, coaxing her to give over. All pretenses went out the window. He couldn’t wait any longer.

“Wait,” she whispered, her breath brushing across his cheek when she pulled away.

“No more stalling. No more waiting. You’re mine. Feel me,” he urged. “We can have everything both of us have craved for so many years. Yearned for. Say yes, little wolf. Be brave and be my mate. Take your place at my side.”

“I—”

He knew the perfect way to get rid of this building tension. His dick went rock hard with anticipation. “Run with me.”

“Are you serious?” she asked hesitantly.

“Yeah. We’re both strung out. We need to forget for a little while. Be wolves. Enjoy the evening. And when we get back, if the mood is right, we’ll see what happens next.”

She lowered her gaze. “My ability to shift is broken, Nico. I haven’t been able to do so consistently since that day.”

He frowned. “You’re serious?”

She nodded. “Kalkin and Jace said they’d help me—force it. I never wanted to. I...I couldn’t bear the thought of anyone forcing it.”

“Little wolf,” he whispered. “I had no idea. All those months and years.” He pulled her closer. “Would you allow me to help you this time?”

She nodded. “Please. She’s right there. I can feel her under my skin trying to get out. I want to be free again.”

"Always." Nico stepped back giving them room. He disrobed Hayden, between kisses and nips at her skin. When she stood before him naked, he sucked in a breath. She was perfect. She was so damn beautiful she made him ache for her. All those scars from when she was a child. The silver burns from the chains holding her down when she was a teen. He wanted to kiss each of them. Wanted to spend his days lavishing her body with as much love as he could give her.

He glanced at her right breast where he’d made sure the mark would stay and

grinned. That was his claiming. The mark he'd hidden so no one would know. He ran his knuckles across her nipple and the bite. "Tonight, I am going to put my mark where everyone can see it. No more hiding, baby."

The moon climbed higher in the sky, casting off the last rays of light for the day. She stood before Nico completely naked, nervous, and excited. If she went on this run, she'd mate Nico. Whether she did so because the wolf demanded as much or because, for all her bluster, she wanted the man, none of it mattered anymore. For two long years, she'd tried to tell herself a crush and sex didn't equal a mating, no matter what he or her family said. But what she did know was a simple truth—after spending as much time as she had with Nico in the last few days, she couldn't deny him any longer.

The fine hairs on her arms lifted as the magic built around her. Nico pressed his hand between her breasts and hummed. Her wolf pushed forward, whimpering to be let out. Unlike last time, she felt no pain. In one fluid motion, her body shifted, the ground rising to meet her. Finally. She stretched and shook herself out then yipped. The scent of cedar filtered around her, and she turned. There, behind her, Nico's wolf waited for her. She took in his impressive frame as he stood proudly near the stump at the opening of the trail behind Bell's home. She yipped again then ran past him.

Crisp, damp air ruffled her thick, black fur and filled her senses. She breathed deep, enjoying the night as she climbed the hill, going farther into the woods surrounding the school. Behind her, the soft plods of his paws gave her comfort. Her wolf felt safe having her mate near. When she came to the bend in the trail, she hid in the bushes and waited. She counted down, and, as he approached, she pounced, knocking him to the ground. She nipped and played with him. Rolled and tumbled as they fought for dominance.

Every time she thought she had him, he'd flip her onto her back. Standing there, pure male smugness filled his features. Not to be outdone, she flipped him again and they

tumbled until he latched onto her neck. She gave in, going pliant under him. When he finally let go of her, she licked his muzzle and took off again, undeterred by his show of dominance. By the time she got to the clearing at the top of the hill, the moon shone brightly on the city below. She shifted and sat on the ground, not caring if she got dirty or if he saw her naked. She realized in those moments when she dropped all of her pretenses, she'd used it as another wall between them.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“You’ve gotten better,” Nico said, breaking the silence as he took a seat next to her.

His body heat radiated off of him, warming her. She leaned against him and continued to stare out at the twinkling lights. “I’ve had time to practice. You’d be surprised how many wolves here think they can best you, even when they don’t shift.”

He growled at her statement.

“Oh, stop. I bested all of them.”

“I suppose you won’t be telling me who.”

“Nope.” She grinned.

“Didn’t think so.

She laid a hand on his knee. “It’s been a long time since we’ve done this.”

"Yeah, it has." He placed his hand over hers. "I missed you all those mornings."

“I missed you, too.” She swallowed hard. “I hated being away from you.”

“I hated all of it.” He laced her fingers with his and pulled her onto his lap. “I can’t turn back time and change what happened. But, I can prove for the rest of my life how much you mean to me.” He cupped her cheek and ran the pad of his thumb across her bottom lip. Her eyes fluttered shut as a sigh passed her lips. “I’ve always

loved you. Even when I'm a complete fuckup, I love you."

He leaned in, pressing his mouth to hers. The sensual kiss heated her. Aroused her in ways she couldn't begin to describe. Excitement skittered down her spine with the tentative touch of his tongue to hers. She opened to him, and a tortured groan rumbled from him. His erection pressed into her hip, hard and tempting. "Did you give any thought to which position yet?" he murmured against the shell of her ear.

"No. I-I want to try them all." And she did. If the mood struck.

"All of them?" He grinned. "Tell me, little wolf, which position do you want to try first?"

"Missionary. I like the idea of us facing each other, while we're doing it." She gasped when he pinched her nipple. "Mmm."

"Make love or fuck, depending on the circumstances. We're not doing it. We're not horny teenagers anymore, little wolf. We're adults."

"Says who?" she teased. "I've been horny for a while now."

He kissed her again. This time, he consumed her. Feasted on her with each swipe of his tongue. She moaned his name as he trailed kisses across her jaw and down her neck. "You've avoided me long enough, little wolf." He ran his tongue over the hard peak.

"Holy fuck," she squealed.

He nipped at her flesh while he continued to fondle the tight bundle of nerves between her thighs. Her heart crashed against her ribs. Pleasure zinged through her with each lick of his tongue. Between the two sensations, she couldn't quite catch her

balance.

“You smell so sweet, baby.” He nuzzled her neck. “We should continue this back in your room.”

“Uh-huh,” she whispered, wrapping her hand around his length. “We should, but...” She squeezed his shaft. “I like it out here. Under the stars. We’re in our natural habitat.”

“And you want your second-first time out here and not some comfy bed? You are strange.”

“It took you four years to figure that out?” She laughed.

“I’ve always known, little wolf.” He turned her until she straddled his lap then kissed her.

Running her fingers through his hair, she planted her feet on the ground. In the next second, she shoved him down and shifted. Her feet hit the ground, and she took off running back toward the sorority house. His growl filled the night air, and she kicked it into overdrive. In all the times they’d played, she’d never gotten the upper hand. The sound of his heavy footfalls grew closer, but she wouldn’t be deterred. Zigzagging through the wooded area, she took her human form when her feet hit the sidewalk surrounding the sorority house. Under the cover of darkness, she hurried into the house.

“Little wolf.” His whisper surrounded her as she ran for the staircase. “You can run all you want to, I can still smell you.” His growl sent a shiver down her spine.

She suppressed a giggle and continued to the second floor. Six doors and she’d be in her room. She glanced back and smiled. Can’t make this easy for him.

“Gotcha!” His very large, very dominant body pressed her to the wall. His shaft fit against the cleft of her rear. Burying his nose in the crook of her neck, he inhaled then let out a purely masculine groan. “Open up, little wolf.” She fumbled with the handle momentarily, before pushing the door to. Once they were both inside, he slammed it closed then lifted her off the floor. “Nico,” she murmured.

“Naughty wolf.” His mouth crushed hers as he helped her wrap her legs around his waist. “Don’t let go,” he muttered, before continuing the kiss. He squeezed her ass, separating her cheeks.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Tingles of awareness and bliss rolled through her. After breaking the kiss, he trailed wet open-mouthed kisses along the line of her jaw, down her neck, and onto her collarbone. His tongue flicked the hollow spot, intensifying the anticipation coursing through her. Everything left her wanting more. Her insides coiled with expectancy. In three quick strides, he crossed the room to her bed and dropped her on the mattress. She bounced. Without even waiting for her to settle, he covered her. "You're in so much trouble now." His eyes glowed an eerie amber shade before going back to their normal whiskey hue.

"Do your worst." She lifted her chin while holding his gaze.

He gave a growly chuckle. "Planned on it." He slid down her body and settled between her legs. "Wrap these beauties over my shoulders and hang on."

"Cocky muc—" Her back arched off of the bed with the first swipe of his tongue slid along her slit then pierced her.

A smug grin tugged at his lips before he dragged his tongue through her slickness and swirled around her clit. Sparks of need snapped across her skin, leaving goosebumps in their wake. She whimpered, writhing under him, trying to get closer to his touch. Though he started slow and gentle, now he consumed her with each lap of his tongue and nip of his teeth. He feasted on her, sipped from her flesh while winding her body taut. His hand covered her breast, squeezing it until she cried out. Her orgasm hovered just out of her grasp. The relentless torture he plied her body with threatened to destroy her.

"I knew you'd have the sweetest pussy," he groaned before licking her again. "I

should have done this last time too.”

“Don’t stop,” she whined, tugging on his head.

“No? What should I do next?”

“Finish the mating,” she answered, frustrated.

"You still don't get it, do you?" He slid up her body, pressing kisses to her belly, sides, and breasts. "This isn't about getting it done and over with. This is about giving both of us what we need. This is about us reconnecting, remembering what it is like being with each other.”

The head of his cock rubbed her slit, teasing her. “Then, why are you waiting?”

“Because I’m enjoying you. I’m taking my time because I’ve waited years, remembering the feel of your snug little snatch pulsing around my cock as you came. I spent most of my nights stroking off with your name on my lips. I’ve wanted this moment with you so I could relish the feel of your body against mine. Better question, little wolf, is why you want me to hurry.” He rolled to his side, taking her with him. He caressed her shoulder as he waited for her answer.

“We’re making this a bigger production than we should be.” She could not meet his gaze.

“Or you’re afraid, after all these years, I’m going to leave you again. Or that you’re not special enough for me?” He trailed a finger down her cheek. “Once my mark graces your neck, there’s no going back. Everyone will know what we’ve known since that day. You’re all mine, little wolf.”

“But—”

“No buts. You’re my mate. It’s time.” He kissed her again, coaxing her to give over to him. To desire the same things he did.

“What if I’m not good at this?” Her heart pounded. Nervous energy worked through her, settling in her extremities. Her hands trembled as she placed them on his shoulders. “What if it’s not as good as the first time? What if—?”

He shook his head, placing his finger to her lips. “Don’t you get it? You’re like a fine wine. Meant to age and breathe. Hell, I should’ve waited a few more years before I took your virginity, but that day, I couldn’t. I’m a selfish bastard. I want my mate again.” He pushed a lock of her hair from her face then pressed a kiss to her forehead.

His words held a conviction that tugged at her will. Her wolf preened, sashaying in front of her mate, demanding she shut up and give over to him. She stared up at her mate’s whiskey gaze and nodded. “Yes. Please.”

“Baby, you never have to beg.” He hooked his arm under her leg, opening her up. “Ready?”

She nodded. “Y-yes.”

He pushed forward.

She clamped down on him and shook her head as she hissed. “Too long, you’re so fucking big”

He groaned and chuckled. “I’ll fit, little wolf. Relax for me.”

“Says the man trying to impale me onto a baseball bat.” She whimpered. “What the fuck did you do, grow three inches since the last time?”

“Now that we have the ego boost out of the way”—he took her hand and placed it over the top of her sex— “work that pretty little clit of yours. This is about to get interesting.”

She did as he asked, her finger gliding over her clit while he pulled out and pushed into her. His thrusts were shallow to begin with, barely giving her any of his cock. On the third stroke, he filled her all the way, and he stilled. Her back came off the bed on a sob of pain and pleasure. Nico gave her time to adjust to his intrusion while pressing featherlight kisses to her face. “I’ve got you, little wolf. You’re perfect. So soft. We fit, just like I told you.”

“Fuck me. Even better than I remembered.” She tugged her bottom lip between her teeth. “Fuck me. Hard.”

“Keep working your clit for me. I plan on making this the best night of your life.” He kissed her again and started to move.

His strokes were measured, building the pleasure between them until she panted for more. His big body flexed and bunched over her, knowing exactly what she needed. The coil of desire pooled low in her belly. She met him thrust for thrust. She traced the contours of his muscles then grabbed his ass. She pulled him tighter to her body. The sparks of bliss she’d felt when he went down on her returned, and she clenched around him.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

A tortured moan passed his lips. “Damn, squeeze me again.”

She grasped his ass once more.

“No, baby.” He leaned in and whispered with a growl. “Your pussy. I want your sweet-as-sin pussy to clench on me.”

She gasped. “Really?”

“Yes.”

She flexed around him, and another tormented groan filled his chest. His pace faltered before he regained his rhythm, slamming into her over and over again. Her world spun out of control. Her hips moved counterpoint to his, creating a delicious friction between them. She clung to him, clawing at his back for purchase. He took her higher, made her feel things she’d only dreamed about.

“Nico,” she mewled.

“Fuck yes, little wolf. I can feel it, can you?” He wrapped her legs around his waist and dipped his chin to take one of her nipples into his mouth. Nico nipped at the tight bead then licked away the sting. Each bite sent another bolt of lust through her. “Yeah, you do.”

“It feels like I have a bomb inside me waiting to go off.” She thrashed, trying to assimilate the sensations assaulting her body. “Help me.”

“Like this?” His thumb pressed on her clit, working it in small tight circles.

She screamed, seeing stars as he continued to play with her. "Oh, God." Her body jerked. Intense pleasure shot through her. Her heart thundered. She feared she'd die due to the current of bliss racing through her veins. There's no way she'd survive this. No way she'd go back to avoiding him as she'd thought she'd be able to. No, she wanted to feel this way all the time. The knowledge she'd be his completely after their night together detonated the ball of desire inside her. Her pussy rippled. The first wave of her release washed over her, taking away her ability to breathe. Brilliant flashes of white light filled her vision, and, in the distance, she heard a howl.

His teeth pierced her flesh, and she came again. Her body shook through the force of her climax. Her muscles went lax, and, for a minute, it was as if she floated on a cloud of nothing. Then she felt it. For the first time, she experienced the knot. Nico swelled within her, lodging himself deep within her snug pussy while he throbbed through his release. Wonderment filled her. She was with her mate, finally, and she didn't want to let him go.

“Wow,” she whispered.

“Wow is right.” His warm breath brushed against her neck. “You’re mine. Don’t you ever forget it.”

“You’re mine. Don’t you forget it.” She poked him in the chest and giggled.

“Never, little wolf. Never.”

11

As the morningsun peeked through the blinds in Hayden’s bedroom, Nico kissed and nibbled at her neck, paying particular attention to her mating mark—the one he

placed there the night before. She moaned in protest, swatting Nico's shoulder before she snuggled back into his body.

If he'd been a gentleman, he would leave her alone. Let her get some much-needed rest—considering they'd only fallen asleep a few short hours ago. But he wasn't a gentleman. He was a wolf who needed his mate. Badly. Once he'd gotten a taste of her again, he craved her. In the wee hours of the morning, she'd finally succumbed to sleep, his knot lodged within her. Fuck, just thinking about the fact he'd been able to do the one thing he'd wanted to all those years ago, had his dick leaking precum.

He placed warm, soft kisses along her shoulder to her collarbone and the tops of her breasts, while his hard dick brushed up against her belly. He bit back a moan as her pink nipples puckered under his perusal. His little responsive mate. Glancing up at her peaceful features, he stared at her in wonderment. She was his. All fucking his. Her sleepy blue eyes fluttered then opened fully, watching him intently.

Thank fuck she's awake.

"Morning, little wolf," he whispered across her skin as his lips wrapped around the tight bud of her nipple. The taste of cotton candy exploded on his taste buds as he sucked on it.

"Morning, mate." Her fingernails scraped at his scalp, turning him on even more.

Letting go with an audible pop, he worked his way over to her other breast. "I'm hungry." He smiled at her. "So, I thought I'd have some breakfast in bed." He licked her nipple then drew it into his mouth.

"Now I'm a meal?" Her husky voice penetrated his senses as she fisted his hair, holding him to her breast.

“You are this morning, baby.” He nipped at her flesh. “I’m your big bad wolf, and you’re my Red Riding Hood. I’m gonna eat you all up.” His dick kicked, throbbing with need as she giggled. Nico let his hand travel down her belly to the top of her mound where he caressed her slit. “You sore?” Although he wanted her again, he’d wait to see if she was in any discomfort.

“No,” she murmured.

He slipped his fingers between the lips of her pussy as he sought out her clit. “I ache.”

“So do I, baby. So do I.” He groaned then dropped his head to rest on her chest as her pussy clenched around the invading appendage.

“Please,” she panted, rolling her hips. He inserted a second while his thumb rubbed slowly across her pulsing clit. “More please!” she begged.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“You plead so beautifully,” he crooned as he slid his way down her body to her pussy. Her sweet arousal called to him. Tempted him.

Her cream coated his tongue as he lapped at her pussy. With each swipe, he ground his hips into the mattress, trying to alleviate the ache settling in his balls. “Come for me,” he demanded. “Then I’ll fuck you. I’ll take you hard, fast, and when we’re done, I’ll give you every bit of me.”

Her hips jerked. Hayden shuddered in his arms as he eagerly licked up her release, bringing her down from her climax. He kissed a path up her torso, pressing his lips to both of her hip bones, her belly button, and the valley between her breasts. His mouth covered hers in a searing kiss, relaying the carnal need racing through him. Without breaking the lip-lock, he palmed her ass, giving it a firm squeeze as he adjusted them so he could fill her in one thrust. He craved the supple flesh.

Nico rubbed the top of the crack of her ass with his middle finger and uttered a curse. Last night, while her rear had been high in the air, he’d pulled her cheeks wide and gazed longingly at the pink rosette. Soon. The ultimate act of dominance took trust between mates. After everything they’d been through, he owed it to her to earn it back.

She broke the kiss and sobbed his name as he teased the entrance of her ass. “Soon, little wolf,” he promised her as he filled her. With one fluid thrust, he pushed through the slick, snug muscles of her pussy until he rested balls-deep inside of her. He grunted as she squeezed around him, just like he had asked her to last night. Minx. Nico pressed his forehead to hers, giving her a moment to adjust.

"Tell me, Hayden, did you enjoy my knot last night?" He peered up at her, the flush covering her breasts, neck, and cheeks was a beautiful shade of pink, accentuating her features. She nodded her head, biting her bottom lip. "I want to hear the words, baby."

"Yes," she whimpered. "So much."

"You want to feel it again, don't you?" He nipped at her, teasing her as he held fast within her.

"All the time." She trembled in his arms. "Every time."

"I feel the same way." Nico moved then. His thrusts were short, extending their pleasure. Each time they mated the night before, it'd been hard not to go hard and fast. His wolf wanted to give his little wolf the knot binding them together forever. He wished these games hadn't started during the full moon, because it would cut into their time together, yet he also couldn't be too angry. If not for the GSG, he'd never be back in his mate's arms.

Hayden went pliant under him. The ripple of her pussy accommodating him, teased him. His gut coiled with anticipation. When her hips began to rock back and forth—a silent plea for him to go faster, he obliged. He wanted to fuck her hard and fast until she was screaming for him. He retreated then, rubbing his tip over her sensitive entrance before sinking back into her once more.

"Nico!" she yelped, before grabbing his ass.

"That's it, little wolf," he murmured against the curve of her ear. "Grasp what you want with both hands. No matter how many full moons it takes for you to experience the true pull of the wolf, I will be here for you. I'll fuck you hard and fast. I'll make love to you until your eyes burn and tears spill down your cheeks because you're so

aroused it hurts. I'll make your inner bitch roll over and give us the moon." The snarled edge of his voice had his insides urged him to give in to his needs and come.

"Nico," she groaned. "What are you doing to me?"

He gave a rough chuckle. "I'm fucking the wolf within you, so she'll give me all of you in return." He flipped their position, taking her from behind, like the wolf he was. He leaned over her, allowing him to whisper in her ear. "When I'm done with you, you'll fuck me as a wolf during every full moon."

She clamped down around him and moaned. Her sweet little pussy pulsed with excitement, and he reveled in it. His wolf pushed forward with the demand to claim what was his as well, but Nico held back. They weren't ready yet. Next full moon he'd do it. He'd chase her again through those woods then take her to the ground and claim her once more as the wolf. Damn, the urge was strong though. His skin rippled and the hairs on his arms stood. He was holding onto his human form by a thread. He cried out, jerking his hips.

"Not gonna last, baby," he grunted, sucking air between his clenched teeth. "He wants out to mount you."

She shivered, whining beneath him while pushing her hips back to meet him stroke for stroke. This was all dangerous for them. He wouldn't hurt her. But, he also wouldn't take away her choice either. He knew she wasn't ready. She still needed help shifting and he'd be damned if he'd force her into any situation ever again.

"Get there, little wolf, before we have a situation on our hands." Later he'd look back on the moment and probably laugh. They were so strong together, both of their wolves were dominant beasts wanting what they wanted, even though one of them, Hayden, was still so fragile and scared. He lowered his hand to her clit and began rubbing the tight bead in circles. She hissed his name, going down to her elbows,

lifting her ass higher.

“Please,” she whimpered. “Please.”

Fuck, she was such a tempting little morsel. "What do you want, Hayden? Use your words."

“I need to come. I want to keep going too. I want everything.” She glanced back at him. Her eyes were a shade of the iciest blue he’d ever seen other than with Kalkin. She stared at him with this preternatural gaze, holding him in place, silently pleading with him.

Gut punched he groaned. The choice it seemed was taken away from him at that moment. He could feel the warmth of his wolf encasing him as the light of Hayden’s joined his. In the next second both of them were on all fours. The urge to rut consumed him and he couldn’t stop any of it. Like Hayden, he’d be along for the ride until both were satisfied. The cycle began and ended several times until he swelled within her, locking them together. Both of them yelped as they began to climax and slowly returned to their human form.

Nico shook or maybe Hayden did from the force of their mating. His chest heaved as he panted for breath. He couldn’t move. He couldn’t speak. He was still too dazed by what happened to them and too worried about his little mate. For long moments they laid there, his knot holding them together while every so often he filled her with more of his release. It was torturous. Invigorating. He kissed her mark and snuggled her close to him, not wanting to ever let her go.

“Did we... Do that?” she finally asked, peering over her shoulder at him.

He grinned. “Yeah, I think we did.”

Hayden wiggled against him and sighed. “That’s... I have no idea how to even explain what we did.”

This time he chuckled. “What we were supposed to do, little wolf. We fucked as our beasts, completing our mating.”

She hummed. “Well, I want to do it again.”

“Okay, you got us here, Hayden. What’s this all about?” Zoe plopped in the chair next to her and propped her chin on her fist. “I have things to do.”

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Don’t mind her,” Bell piped up. “She’s just upset because Rocky’s been training for the last couple of days. The hunt tonight is supposed to be difficult.”

“Shut it, Bell. Not like you’ve seen much of Christoph either,” her sister snarled.

“Whatever.” She narrowed her eyes. “Christoph and I are just fine, and we’re friends.”

“So, you aren’t macking on him, or you are, and you’re playing the tease card?” Zoe popped a brow.

“As much as I like a good Jello wrestling match, I have bigger problems.” Hayden held her hands up, stopping her cousins from bickering with each other. Last night and then again this morning were two of the most amazing moments of her life and also the scariest. Nico had always been a bit high-strung, dominant as her uncles and fathers would say. He kept her in bed and under him for most of the night, and she couldn’t find a reason to not want to be there. Especially after both of them shifted and allowed their wolves to take over. That was hot.

“Later,” Zoe snapped at Bell. “We’ll continue this later.” She turned her attention to Hayden and pasted on a grin. “What’s going on? I can see your mark. You finally took the plunge and sexed it up with Nico, didn’t you?”

“What’s it like? Did you enjoy yourself?” Bell took a seat next to her.

“He didn’t hurt you, did he?” Zoe cracked her knuckles. “Because if he did, I have friends now. Powerful friends who won’t mind getting their hands dirty.”

“Whoa. Calm down, feisty. No, he didn’t hurt me. Second, yes. I took the ‘plunge.’ Third, I won’t talk about it, other than saying it was better than I could’ve ever imagined.” At seventeen, things were different between them. They were acting on the forbidden or the taboo of their age difference. This time—this full moon, there weren’t enough words to even explain what she experienced with her mate. Amazing didn’t adequately cover her experience. The last thought she had while he hovered over her left her awestruck. Wow, this is happening. It’s no longer a dream or a secret.

“Man, no one tells us the good stuff,” Zoe whined.

“Now that you’re a mate, what is so wrong you need our help?” Bell asked.

“Nothing is the matter. Geez, stand down.” She chuckled. “Can’t I just ask for a little help without everyone worrying about me?”

“Then what’s with this meeting?” Zoe asked.

“I need a dress for the Howler’s Ball. I thought we could go shopping together.” She shrugged.

"That's it?" Bell relaxed back into her chair and sighed. "I thought we were going to take down the mega-bitch squad while also beating some sense into Nico. I heard what Reagan tried to do with him in the locker room while you were there."

“I’m not worried about her.” She laughed. What none of them knew about was the fact Nico couldn’t be touched. However, she’d never say a word about it either. They were his wounds to tend to and to overcome. All she could do was support him and help him as much as possible. “So, we’re all going to this ball, right?”

Her cousins nodded.

“Then we should do a little shopping.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Zoe groaned. “I’m not a frilly lacy person.”

“Not even for Rocky?” Hayden arched a brow.

“Well....” Zoe hedged.

“What if I promised we could find something to fit your style, would you go?” Hayden pulled out her phone and showed her some of the things she'd seen online. “I found some stuff that you might like.” She scrolled down the page until she stopped at the one she’d favorited. The red-and-black burlesque gown had ribbon piping and black appliqué designs that would draw a person’s gaze to whoever wore its cleavage and her slim waist. Kind of like Zoe’s. Hayden set the phone down in front of her cousin. “Something like this.”

“Oh my God,” Zoe gasped. “It’s perfect.”

“So you’re going, then?”

“Yes.” Her cousin laughed. “I’ll go.”

“Great. Do you have a dress or an idea, Bell?” Her cousin always was meticulously put together. If she said no, Hayden would be surprised.

"You see, Laney asked Christoph if he'd escort her since her date, Zac had to be there and do security or something, so, I don't know if I'm going or not." God love her cousin. She lifted her chin and sniffed before clearing her throat and blanking out her features. Her father would be proud. Her mom? Not so much.

“What?” Hayden tilted her head.

"Yeah, it's cool. Christoph is already a winner, and it's his choice." Bell brushed everything off like it was no big deal, but Hayden could see the anguish in her blue eyes.

Fuck that. She shook her head. "Are you sure you heard right?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“I didn’t have to hear. I stood right there.” Bell grabbed her bag after glancing at her watch. “I’ve got class. I’ll see you on the field tonight for the hunt. Remember to be dressed to cheer for your champion.” Bell stood, gave both of them a small smile then strolled off, head held high and shoulders back like nothing affected her, but Hayden knew better.

“Okay, spill. What the fuck happened between Bell and Christoph?” She turned her attention to Zoe who had a murderous look on her face.

“Just what she said, I guess. Only, why would someone who participated in the games be acting as security for a ball they’ve been invited to?” A deadly coldness swirled in Zoe’s blue eyes as she scanned the cafeteria.

“Yeah, I kind of had the same thought. Bell eschewed her right to the lion. Maybe they’re not mates after all,” she said, not completely on board with that assessment.

“Oh no,” Zoe answered. “They are, but you know Bell. She’s way too fucking refined to get angry or upset at him. She’ll allow him to do as he wants because it’s the proper thing in her mind for her to do.”

“I could kick his ass,” Hayden muttered.

“Yeah, get in line. Rocky’s not even happy with him. Something happened after the match, and I’m not sure what.” Zoe gathered up her stuff. “We’ll go later to get that dress. For now, I have English. Ta.”

“Later.” Hayden grabbed her things while making a mental note to talk with Nico

about Christoph. Her cousins had been her rock for the last several years. It was her turn to return the favor, and she wasn't lying. She'd kick Christoph's ass. No questions asked.

"You think you're the shit, don't you?" Reagan's screechy voice grated on Hayden's last nerve.

Hayden's lip curled at the insult. "I don't think anything, Reagan. How's the bruised ego?" She pivoted to stare at the girl behind her.

"We'll see whose ego is bruised after the games are over. We're not finished yet." Reagan's smug expression made her laugh.

"Oh, honey, I wear his mark now. It is over." She brushed past the sniveling bitch and headed for class. She had way too much to do to spend her time worrying about what some trollop had to say. Hayden's she-wolf preened beneath the surface. They'd claimed what belonged to them and there was no way in hell, she'd ever let Nico go again.

A few hours later, after Hayden finished with her classes for the day, she knocked on Nico's door and waited. For as much confidence as she thought she had, she couldn't get that sniveling bitches words out of her mouth. They were planning something. What, she didn't know. She nibbled on the corner of her thumbnail while she tapped her foot. Her stomach knotted. Great, just great. Now she's gotten to me. She knocked again and growled in frustration. How long did it take for him to answer the damn door?

"Little wolf?"

She spun on her heels and came face-to-face with her mate, already dressed and ready to go, coming out of Christoph's room, the blond lion following close behind Nico.

“I thought I’d be meeting you on the field?” He gave her a curious glance.

Shit. “Uh, surprise?”

“What’s wrong?” He called over his shoulder to Christoph, “I’ll see you on the field. My mate needs me.”

When the lion was finally out of earshot, she spoke. “I had a run-in today with Reagan. She got to me.”

“What did she do?”

“Oh, you know. Normal bitchy stuff. Telling me we’re not done, and I fell for it hook, line, and sinker.” She laced her fingers with her mate’s. “She saw my vulnerability...You. But, I have a sneaky suspicion her words meant more than just about me.”

He snorted. “I’m mated and happy. She can move her prissy ass on.” He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Carnal and claiming. He devoured her. Growled at her with a sexual hunger that left her panting for breath. Her heart fluttered; her body trembled. Shit, the man could kiss. “However, you might be right. Something feels off. My wolf has been on high alert all day.”

“Uh...”

“You’re not supposed to say anything.” He closed her mouth. “Although seeing you stunned silent is pretty awesome.”

She laughed. “Sorry. She pushed buttons. I should know better after everything, but it’s—”

“Hard?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Did you know Christoph is taking Laney to the ball instead of Bell?”

“What?” Nico’s eyes narrowed and a growl slipped past his lips. “I hadn’t heard that. I was just talking to the guy. What the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t know. I think Laney and her group of bitches have something up their sleeves. I can’t put my finger on what, but they seriously have a hard-on for Bell.”

Nico grunted. “You’re right. I can talk to the guy if you want.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

Hayden sighed. “Did any of the guys talking to you help? Because, I know when everyone tried to tell me what to do, I pushed all of you away. I’d hate for the same to happen between Bell and Christoph.”

Her mate blew out a breath. “You’re right, again. Let me see what I can find out. I’ll keep you posted.”

She bit her lip then shook her head. “Don’t worry about it. You should be focused on the next match. You have to hunt tonight.” They strolled down the hall toward the exit. “Do you know what you’re supposed to do?”

He shrugged. “According to Christoph, we’ll shift then run through the woods while you watch on the big screen. There’s supposed to be strategically placed game for us to chase and bring down. The win goes to the person who gets the biggest kill poundage-wise.”

“Seems easy enough,” she said as they followed the path to the stadium.

“Should be.” He stopped her. “To tell you the truth, I’m glad this is almost over.”

“It’s not been so bad. I mean, the ball is tomorrow night after the last event.” She searched his gaze. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He pressed his lips to hers. “I did this to win you back.”

“Uh-huh and...?”

“I got you.” He gave her a cocky grin.

“You did.” She grinned.

“Yet, I feel compelled to see this all the way through. I don’t like Hill or his cronies. Their egos are too big for their own good.”

“So, knock them down a peg or two.” She pressed her lips to his once more. “Go have fun.” She patted his ass. “I’ll be waiting when you get done.”

Nico lined up with the other competitors and waited. Anxious energy coursed through the group as they went over the rules. The area where the game had been located would be marked by tags. Once a competitor entered, he could not, under any circumstances, back out. Leaving the roped-off area, constituted disqualification. If a competitor was onto a kill, none of the other participants could interfere. If they did, they would be disqualified. From the time the guys gave chase, they each had fifteen minutes to complete the takedown, or they'd be disqualified. Finally, the biggest kill would win. The added bonus—some of the meat would be used for the ball. The rest would be processed and sent to local charities and orphanages.

The horn blew, and everyone shifted. The crisp scent of fall air filled his lungs, along with the smell of game waiting beyond the trees, calling to his wolf. The chase. He howled then took off, bounding through the woods. Once they closed the competition line, there'd be no turning back until he made his kill. Officials stood out of the line of sight away from the boundaries, watching everyone make their way through the thicket.

As a champion, Nico didn't have to go for the biggest animal. He wanted to get through this and go back to his waiting mate. To hell with everyone else. However, he also wanted to help his friends. He wanted to make sure someone—anyone—other than Hill and his posse—got the win.

He slowed his pace to a trot, making as little noise as possible. Up ahead, a small buck—if someone considered a six-point buck small—stood in the open field. He crept up to it, staying downwind as he approached. A part of him wanted to make the buck run, give chase, and have fun. Another part of him wanted to take the animal down, have the weight tallied, and go home with his mate. The wolf, however, wanted to play. Nico gave over to him and chased the buck through the woods. His steps were cautious, so as not to step out of bounds. Up and over hills they went until the deer tired and stopped at a stream. His wolf luxuriated in the thrill of the kill. Stalking his prey, he stepped lightly, keeping his head low. The buck's ears twitched back and forth, listening, staying on point while drinking his fill. Nico inched around his kill and waited. When the deer took off again, he'd be right behind him ready to take him down.

In the clearing, a doe stepped out, catching the buck's attention. Perfect. Yeah, buddy. Go get you a piece. I won't hurt you. The buck raised his head and called out to the female, who responded in kind. Nico waited another second then as soon as the animal began to follow the female, he attacked. He jumped at the buck's hindquarters, tackling the deer to the ground. The beast thrashed, throwing its rack around, trying to stab Nico so he could get away. Dodging his head, Nico went for the neck and bit down. Warm blood filled his mouth. With a quick jerk, he snapped the deer's neck. Letting him go, Nico raised his snout and howled. The horn sounded, and a judge came out of the woods beside him then tagged the kill.

Nico shifted back and took the bag from the judge. Inside, were a pair of basketball shorts and a bottle of water to clean up with. He put the shorts on then took the tag from the judge. "Thanks."

"Not a problem," the judge answered. "Good kill. It's been a pleasure watching you."

After a quick handshake, he followed the trail to the stadium and used the water to clean his mouth out and his face off. The clock below the screen showed two hours

remaining in the competition. Rocky waited off to the side, already finished with his run. His expression had been cautious as he watched the remaining competitors. "How did you do?"

"Hell, I don't know. Not being able to shift because of this type of competition, really hurt my chances, but I got a wild boar." He grinned.

"Right on, man." He fist-bumped the falcon and smiled. "I got a buck."

"I saw. Nice kill."

"Thanks. Anything out of Hill?"

"He's onto an elk. If you ask me, he's a little too ambitious." The falcon frowned.

"Oh?"

Rocky lifted his chin to the monitor. "Watch. The elk outweighs him by at least a hundred and fifty pounds, if not more. He's got no discipline whatsoever, and if I didn't know any better, I'd swear the damn beast already tried to gore the asshole."

"Not good."

Hill chased the animal through the woods, no clear end game in sight. It was almost like the bull knew the asshole chased after him, so he toyed with Hill.

Rocky shook his head. "Not good."

The pair came to a small clearing not far from where Nico had taken down the buck. The elk turned on Hill and charged. Hill, the dumb shit, didn't try to hide. He followed the elk's lead. Nico wanted to close his eyes, look away, but it was like a trainwreck happening before his eyes. He glanced to where his mate sat with her cousins. Each of them shrank away from the screen, their heads turned, their eyes squeezed shut.

The impact of the bull hitting Hill rattled Nico's teeth. He could feel the collision as though it happened to him. Blood poured from Hill's hind leg as the elk pulled the tip of his antler from the guy's body. The ungodly howl echoing around them called to his wolf. He howled in pain with the wolf on the screen, followed by several others in the stands. One judge shot the elk, while three others grabbed Hill and ran.

The screen shifted to Jackson who took down a bear by the caves. The bastard grinned at the camera then winked. Nico and Rocky laughed. The ham. As Nico had gotten to know the people Bodhi called friends, he'd also come to like them. And, at some point, they'd become his friend. "That's awesome."

"Yeah, the asshole owes me. He fucking beat me," Rocky grouched.

"Shit, I think he beat everyone with that kill." Nico snickered.

"I believe you're right," Rocky agreed.

The announcer, Victor, came out on stage and raised his hand. "So far, the total

weight collected tonight comes to fourteen hundred pounds.”

The crowd erupted. A picture of Bodhi circling a wild boar filled the screen behind the emcee. Hayden gasped. She covered her face with her hands. Shit. He ran to where she sat. After everything with Hill, he knew his little mate would be anxious about her twin. Nico gathered her into his arms and pressed a kiss to her temple. “He’ll be fine. Your fathers and uncles taught him how to hunt. He’s done this before. Have faith.”

“I’m trying, but after Hill....” She glanced up at Nico, fear shadowing her beautiful blue eyes.

“I know, sweetheart,” he whispered. “But, your brother isn’t stupid. He’s got this.” Nico kissed her gently, grateful he could clean his mouth out before he rejoined the others. “Did you see me take down that buck?”

She grinned, relaxing in his arms. “I did. But you could’ve done better.”

He scoffed. “What?”

“You could have done better,” she teased. “Why didn’t you go for something bigger?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t feel like it. Plus, I wanted to be with you. You’re the best catch.”

“Aww,” she whispered. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you’re trying to get laid.”

“Is it working?” He kissed her again.

“Perha— Oh my God. Bodhi did it!” She pointed to the screen. “He took down the

boar!”

“I told you he’d be just fine.” He hugged her tight when she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Yeah, you’re getting laid tonight.” Elation filling her voice.

“Damn straight I am. How about we sneak out of here? I have a feeling Jackson’s the winner anyway.” He pushed a lock of her hair behind her ear as he gazed down at her.

“I’d like that, mate,” Hayden whispered, peering up at him. “Lead the way.”

12

Hayden stretched and opened her eyes. Last night, they’d barely made it to her room before her mate had stripped her down, and, as he put it, had his way with her. He had a voracious appetite, waking her up twice more during the night as a wolf. She still couldn’t get over how different it was to have sex with Nico as their wolves. There was so much more emotion and so many more urges while they were in that state. She couldn’t even put her finger on why she needed it other than, her she-wolf demanded she give over to Nico’s wolf.

Now, with his back to her, she watched as he dressed then grabbed a bottle of water out of her fridge. She didn’t want him to leave. She wanted him to climb back into bed with her, so she could selfishly keep him to herself.

“You know, if you keep looking at me like that, we’ll end up being late for the last day’s events.”

“And this would be a bad thing...why?” A small grin tugged at her lips as she

allowed the sheet covering her to slip down her body, exposing her breasts to her mate, when he faced her.

“You are insatiable, little wolf,” he growled, stalking toward her. “One more event then we can spend all of our free time locked in this room.” He crawled onto the bed and hovered over her. “But, for now, we have an obligation to fulfill.” He kissed the tip of her nose. “Up and at ’em.”

"Are you sure I can't tempt you to stay a little longer?" She reached under his leather skirt and palmed his cotton-covered, hard dick. "You really shouldn't go into battle pent up as you are."

He groaned. “Little wolf.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

She gave him a sassy grin while batting her lashes. “Yes, mate?”

“You’re playing with fire,” he growled.

"I want to get burned." She hooked her fingers in the band of his boxer briefs and tugged them down. "Come back to bed, Nico."

“Fuck me, little wolf.” He groaned against her lips as she pulled him down to her. “Get on my dick and make me come.”

“That’s the plan.” She laughed, straddling his lap, taking him to the hilt. “The competition can wait a little longer.”

A knock came at her door moments later as Hayden rocked her hips. “Come on Hayden, we’re going to be late.”Bell.God love her cousin.

She buried her face in Nico’s neck, the tingle of her impending climax spread through her while he began to throb within her. “On my way.” She didn’t know how she kept her tone so even, especially when she tensed in his arms, her mouth poised against his skin, ready to bite down. “Give me two more minutes.”

“Only two,” Nico murmured against her flesh.

She snickered softly and he groaned, holding her two him. Nico ground her against his groin, and she toppled over the edge. Instead of crying out, she latched onto his neck, biting down for all she was worth, leaving her mark upon his skin. Nico groaned and bucked below her. The warm wet heat of his release filled her, and she

sighed, sagging into his arms.

“You’re amazing, little wolf.” He pressed his lips to her throat. “But, now, I’m going to be late-r.”

She giggled. “Sorry?”

He grinned. "No, you're not." He helped her off of him then stood. "Now, I need to get going."

“When you put it that way.” She flung the sheet off of her then slid out of bed. “I’ll grab a shower and put on my last frilly dress.”

He chuckled. His heated gaze warmed her. “You’re a tease, little wolf.” Wrapping his arm around her waist, he pressed her body flush to his. “I’ll see you on the field.” He nipped at her mark before turning her face to him. His kiss made her toes curl and her body tingle. It possessed her. She sighed, giving over to him, rubbing against him. She relished their last few minutes together until tonight when they’d enjoy the Howler’s Ball together. "On second thought, you can clean up a little, but the idea of my cum being inside you right now has me all kinds of fucked up. No shower. I want everyone to know you're my little wolf."

“That’s so fucking hot and gross at the same time.” She kissed him. “Although, I guess I feel the same way because my cum is on your cock too.”

“Yes it is,” he growled, releasing his hold of her. “I’ll see you soon, little wolf.

“Be safe.”

“Always,” he replied, pushing a lock of her hair out of her face. “Go on, get prettied up for me. I can’t wait to see what color you’re going to wear today.”

She nodded then headed for the bathroom. “Hey,” she called out.

“Yes?” He paused holding the door open.

“It’s blue, like my eyes,” she stated. His rough growl of approval made her grin. “Have fun today.”

“You know it.” The soft snick of the door closing signaled his departure.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror of her bathroom and grinned. In less than a week, her life had changed dramatically. When she’d placed the letter to her dads in the mailbox, she hadn’t expected the journey she’d placed herself on. Boy, won’t they be surprised when they find out I took the plunge and gave Nico a second chance? Seemed like a reoccurring theme to her. Because, in reality, she wasn’t just giving him a second chance, she’d given herself a do-over as well. Doing as Nico said, she cleaned herself up and proceeded to get ready for the day.

Once she was dressed in her gown, she made her way downstairs to join her cousins. She wondered absently if Hill would be at the final competition and the ball. Even with his wolf genetics and ability to heal without much intervention, the goring he’d taken had looked horrible. She walked out of her bathroom and dressed then finished getting ready for class.

As she stepped into the kitchen, she spotted both Bell and Zoe at the table. Both of them wore the same expression on their faces. They were pissed. “What’s wrong?”

“We’ve got a situation,” Zoe muttered. “Looks like Laney and her little bitches are going after Bell’s sorority house before we’re done with pledge week or the games.”

“What?” Surely, she’d heard her cousin wrong.

“Yeah, I had an eviction notice on my door this morning.” She handed the paper to Hayden who read it.

“The school will have to find you other housing, Bell. If not, they violate the college’s housing rights, especially if you haven’t done anything wrong.” She continued reading the papers as they walked out of the house. “Just because Laney wants to expand her sorority house, doesn’t mean she has to take your house out with it.”

“She can if my sorority isn’t getting the membership it should,” her cousin muttered.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“So we’ll just have to boost them. When is pledge week?”

“It starts two weeks after the games, and it goes for thirty days,” Bell replied. “See, the games were supposed to showcase all of the fraternities and the sororities available to the students on campus. Then in the next two weeks, people could pledge wherever they wanted in hopes of getting into their favorite sororities or fraternities.”

“Right. So, how can the school allow this?” Hayden questioned.

Bell shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“We’re going to find out.” Hayden didn’t care how long it would take to get to the bottom of the letter. “Then we’re going to ruin them.”

By the timethe final game started, Bell and Hayden were nowhere near an answer. Nobody in the administration knew where the letter came from, even though it had the president's seal on the paper. Perhaps Laney had played a trick on Bell, but what would happen if they didn't move out? So many questions swirled in her mind. However, until the administrative staff could figure out where the letter came from, there was nothing they could do.

Taking her seat, Hayden stared out over the obstacle course set up between the thirty-yard lines. Men lined up on either side of a swinging sandbag section, waiting for the game to begin. At the entrance stood all of the competitors, including Hill. He looked a little worse for the wear, but not as bad off as she’d expected. Standing away from the idiot gang—Nico and her brother. They laughed while Jackson, Rocky, Christoph, and Alex gathered around them. When had she made this little group of

friends?

She'd spent so much time trying to keep herself away from people, she'd actually done the opposite—rallied people around her. Hayden waved at all of them. Her mate winked at her while her brother waved back and grinned. For the past week, they'd brutalized their bodies. Done things she still couldn't wrap her mind around. All in the name of charity. Or, in Nico's case, to win her back and claim his mate.

"We're going to enjoy ourselves," she announced to their group. "It's the last competition and we have a ball to attend tonight. We can worry about evictions and catty girls later. This is for us." She curled her lip when Laney's little bitches giggled and pointed at them.

"Yeah, I agree." Emma grinned. "Besides, who says you have to do anything? As long as you make the pledges, you're not going anywhere."

"And we're going to help you," Lacy added. "Starting Monday, we're going to make sure you get the pledges you need to keep your place. No matter what those little hussies try to do."

"You guys." Bell's bottom lip trembled. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"What Dad taught us to do," Zoe piped up. "Kick ass and take names."

They all laughed then settled in. "I hope Hill gets the crap knocked out of him," Terri snarled.

"Now, now," Hayden laughed. "He got the shit knocked out of him last night. Today would only add insult to injury."

"I know," Terri answered. "That's why I want to see it again."

“Bloodthirsty.” Zoe nodded. “I like her. Keep her as a friend, Bell.”

For the last time, Victor Lorenz stepped forward and held up his hands.

“Shh,” Bell admonished. “The games are beginning.”

“Welcome to the final day of the Greek Shifter Games. We’ve already crowned three champions, and tonight we’ll crown the last.” The crowd erupted in cheers. “The man with the quickest time through the gauntlet without being knocked off of any pedestals will be declared the winner.”

She took Bell’s hand then Zoe’s. So far, Christoph, Nico, and Jackson were victors. It would be fair to say she wanted all of her friends to win, but it might not happen. For all she knew, Hill might pull this off, or Winston. Her stomach knotted at the thought of that little shit winning anything.

The horn sounded, and the first person went into the gauntlet. The shifter traversed the obstacle course with ease. Hopping from base to base, he got to the swinging sandbags in no time flat. Hayden held her breath. The object, she figured, was to get through them without the bags knocking the person off-balance. He hurried through the first three then lost his balance by the fourth. The guy’s arms flailed as he tried to catch his balance and stay upright, but, in the end, tumbled off. She frowned. One down, fifteen more to go.

One by one, the guys went, and, one by one, they fell. Some, almost at the end. Others, well, she wondered if perhaps they even understood the concept of what they were supposed to do. When her mate stood at the starting line, held her breath, and crossed her fingers while repeating the mantra, please don’t fall. At some point, she closed her eyes, the anxious energy coursing through her made her stomach jittery, and her heart pound. She knew he had the skills to make it through the course. Cracking her eyelids open, she watched him pause at the sandbags. He observed

them, timed them, and then leaped.

Each pedestal he landed on, she breathed a little easier until he got to the final one and jumped to the last platform. She shouted, jumping to her feet as she cheered for her mate who'd made it across in under thirty seconds. The last few guys might beat his time, but right now, she didn't care. Her mate stood above the rest.

"Aren't you just adorable?" Laney said from her perch beside her. "I wouldn't count on him winning this. Hill still has to go."

"Yeah, I know. But, then again, my mate is in one piece. Can the same be said for Hill?" She grinned. "You know, that elk looked awfully familiar with Hill."

Laney curled her lip. "You're a disgusting pig. Just like your friends."

"Is that the best you've got?" Zoe sneered. "Someone needs to teach you how to trash talk."

"We don't need to," Reagan added. "Before long, you'll all be the group of losers who couldn't keep your home."

"There you go again, running your mouth. Writing checks your ass can't cash," Bell said, without any emotion. "If you don't have anything nice to say, shut the fuck up and let us enjoy the last day of these games."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Don’t worry about it, Laney.” Reagan licked her lips. “We’ll enjoy Christoph together tonight.”

Bell lunged for the girl, her eyes completely blue like her lioness. Her fingers curled into claws, her hands became giant paws. "I'll kill you if you touch what's mine."

The two girls laughed. “Awe, look at the cute kitten trying to be a lion.” Laney giggled more.

“Don’t get too worked up, Bell. We’d hate to see you do something you’d regret,” Reagan said, with a tiny pout. “We don’t want to see you get into trouble.”

“Bell,” Hayden whispered in her cousin’s ear. “Let it go. Christoph is your mate. They’re only trying to piss you off and cause a scene.”

“Yeah, listen to your little friend, Bell.” Kylie laughed.

“You’re going to look killer in that dress you bought, Laney,” Delilah said. “Christoph is going to be all over you.”

“Don’t do it,” Hayden murmured again. “They’re not worth it. They’ll be eating their hearts out when Christoph leaves with you.”

Bell looked at her. Fear radiated from her blue eyes. “You keep saying that,” she whispered. “But, I fear he’s already made his choice.” Her cousin slipped from her grasp then hurried away from the stands, heading for the woods surrounding them.

Hayden growled. "You're not going to win this. Whatever your little game is, you will not win. I will make sure of it."

Cheers rang out in the stadium as Jackson finished the course and Hill was declared the winner. "I'd say we already are." Laney gracefully exited the stands.

"Bye." Reagan giggled. "I hope you like my sloppy seconds. Your mate was really good."

Hayden rolled her eyes. "Zoe looks like we're going to have to find your sister."

"I can't stand those wenches. I can't wait for them to get what's coming to them," Zoe snarled. "I'll go find my sister. I know where she went." She stormed toward the exit. "And tell your mate he better talk some sense into Christoph, or else I'm going to neuter his lion."

How the hell did she get wrangled into this again? Oh yeah, her cousins promised it would be a good time. So not happening.

Somehow, the guys all ended up in one room together, getting ready for the ball. The whys of it still mystified Nico as he took the proffered beer from Christoph's hand. The Alpha, already dressed in his tux, looked tense as hell, and who could blame the guy? However, he'd done it to himself. "You ready for tonight?"

"Not in the least," Christoph answered, throwing himself into the chair next to him.

"Good, you shouldn't be." Not one to beat around the bush, Nico hit the Alpha with both barrels. "You fucked up big time, and you hurt my mate's cousin."

"Do you think I don't already fucking know that?" the lion growled. "I don't know why I said I'd help. It just came tumbling out."

“Sure it did. Just like you’ve known Bell is your mate, and you’ve yet to act on it,” he quipped. “What the fuck is going on in that head of yours?”

“It’s complicated.”

“The hell it is.” Nico placed his beer on the table next to him. “You saw the shit I went through to win my mate back. Are you going to do the same?”

“No,” Christoph snarled. “I’m not that fucking stupid.”

“No? Are you sure? Because, from where I’m sitting, you’re letting your dick dictate what you’re doing.”

“I don’t need this shit.” Christoph stood. Tension and anger radiated off the Alpha.

He’d seen the whole situation with Laney and her group of troublemakers. He also knew Christoph had seen Bell run off into the woods, alone. “Coward,” he muttered. “I should have known you’d never be good enough for her.” He glanced at Jackson. The six-foot-five dragon fixed his blood-red tie in the mirror. “Hey, Jackson.”

“Yeah?” He pulled his long sable hair back with a leather thong before turning to face Nico.

“Bell needs a date. Would you mind helping me out? It seems Christoph has other pussy he’d like to play with.” Nico curled his lip, giving Christoph the side-eye.

A purely indulgent smirk tugged at Jackson’s lips. “Sure. That won’t be a problem at all.”

“Thanks.” He focused on Christoph. “Make sure you show her a good time. After the little scene at the games, she deserves to cut loose.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Full court press?” Jackson fiddled with his suit.

“Sure, why not. Not like Christoph over here won’t be doing the same with the bitch squad.” The lion growled beside him, and he chuckled. “It’s about time someone showed Bell a good time.”

“I don’t mind dancing with her. I saw that shit, too,” Alex said. “Christoph, whatever the fuck has crawled up your ass, I hope it dies soon and you get back to normal. Or whatever is normal for you.”

“All of you can fuck off,” the lion growled. “You don’t understand the pressures I’m under.”

“So, you’re going to hurt a young girl. A girl who fucking idolizes you, knows who you are to her, and what...ditch her?” Jackson stepped away from the mirror then got into Christoph’s face. “You’re a fucking prick. If you don’t want her, I’ll claim her myself.”

“The hell you will,” Christoph roared.

“I guess that’s up to Bell.” Jackson headed for the door. “I’ll take care of Bell, Nico. You just enjoy the evening with your little mate.”

A few minutes later, the Alpha lion stomped from the room. The asshole needed to learn a hard lesson here. If anyone knew the damage hurting a mate could cause, it was Nico. Better to wake the beast now than lose everything later, even though it sucked to see Christoph struggle.

“Do you think you were a little harsh with him?” Bodhi took a seat next to Nico.

He shrugged. “Maybe, but if it pushes him in the right direction, then it’s for the best.”

“And if Jackson moves in on his territory?” Bodhi quirked a brow.

“Have you stopped to think they might end up like your dads and Loraine? It’ll all work out. Trust me on this.” Patting his mate’s twin on his shoulder, Nico grinned. “Come on, we’re going to be late picking up the girls. I saw the way Emma looked at you. That bear’s got it bad.”

“She’s all right.” Bodhi shrugged.

“Dude, if you’re going to lie, make sure you’re not starry-eyed when you say shit like that.” Nico chuckled.

“Shut up.” Bodhi laughed then sobered. “She’s the one, man. But, she’s so timid. I’m not sure she’ll ever be ready for someone like me or like our family.

“Guess there’s no time like the present to find out, huh?” Nico stood. “Now, I’m off to find my mate. I’ll see you, later.”

Hayden arranged for them to meet at the dining hall. Something stupid about not wanting to ruin the surprise. Nico joined the table where Alex, Jackson, Rocky, and Bodhi sat. Christoph was nowhere in sight. Not good. He pulled out a chair then, sitting down, he sighed. “Any word from Christoph?”

Jackson snorted. “Yeah. Reagan came and snatched his ass up.”

“Fuck,” Nico grumbled.

“Yeah, and with what the girl is wearing, all she’s looking for is sex.” The dragon pushed back against his chair, balancing it on the back legs.

“You know the plan. Stick with it. If you get laid out, well, you’re taking one for the team. Other than that, have fun.” He hated using one of the guys to make Christoph jealous. It wasn’t their way, but the big dumb lion needed a rude awakening. Bell was worth it. More than worth whatever bullshit Reagan was pulling.

Everything about Bell was a mask. Deep down she was still the traumatized little lioness she was when Nico and Utah found Zoe out in the desert then Rapier found Bell with Raymond Quincy. Of all the Dryers and Rafertys, Bell and Hayden’s lives mirrored each other.

Now, Bell deserved her happiness.

“Good, because they’re here, and I want me a piece of Bell,” Jackson growled, or what could only be described as a growl when it came from a dragon.

Nico turned in his chair. His breath left him in a whoosh. There at the door, wearing a light-blue strapless dress, with a crown of daisies adorning her hair, stood Hayden. Her blue eyes sparkled as she stood there taking in the decorations surrounding her. She radiated confidence and reminded him of her uncles. She was poised. Proud. Since she’d been able to release the wolf within her, her features glowed and there was something else about Hayden, he couldn’t put his finger on, or better yet, didn’t want to mention. No, he needed to give his little wolf a bit more time to grow and mature before he told her what he saw when he looked at her. Hell, at that, it was probably something he’d have to talk with Kalkin about too. Standing, Nico prowled toward her. When her gaze met his, her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink. Fuck. His shaft twitched and filled. “Good evening, little wolf.”

“Good evening, mate.” She grinned. “You look handsome.” She reached out to

straighten his tie. "Definitely edible."

He clasped her hand with his. "You look amazing. Sexy as hell, and I am a lucky man to call you, mate." He pulled her into his arms. Leaning into her, he pressed his lips to hers. Her arms wrapped around his neck, as she softened in his hold while the sweet scent of her arousal clawed at him, turning him on. "Damn you're potent."

"Mmm," she hummed. "So are you." She glanced to where Jackson took Bell's hand. "What's going on?"

"Something I wish someone would have done for me," he answered. "She'll be fine tonight."

Jackson pushed a lock of the pretty little blonde's hair behind her ear and brushed a kiss across her cheek. The dragon leaned in and whispered something to which she giggled. Just like that, the little lioness relaxed and linked arms with Jackson. "I don't want to know, do I?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“You do. But, for tonight, allow Bell to handle this. I’m sure she’ll explain later.” Taking her hand in his, Nico led Hayden to the dance floor. “For tonight, though, I am showing you off.”

“I suppose I can handle it,” she said. “I have to admit, I didn’t think Bell would come with us. However, Zoe threatened bodily harm if she didn’t.”

“Speaking of Zoe, where is she? Rocky seemed...nervous.”

She laughed. “Zoe was with us, but Rocky caught her, and....”

“Ah, no need to expound on what happened.” He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her across the dance floor. “I think Emma is in for a good night too.”

“Oh?” She arched a brow as they swayed to the music.

“Uh-huh,” he murmured. “I think your brother is quite taken with her.”

“No way.” Delight lit her eyes. “How did you find out?”

“Eh, I only had to watch your brother. I believe Alex came alone, but he’s helping Jackson.”

“Bell isn’t going to know what hit her,” Hayden replied with a little laugh. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Everything.” She brought his face down to hers for a kiss.

As the music came to an end, he led her to the table. Situated next to them, Jackson and Alex kept a protective presence around Bell, which he could tell bothered Christoph. The lion’s hands fisted at his sides. A permanent scowl filled his features, and each time Jackson touched Bell, it was as if the lion wanted to bust out of his skin. But, instead of the guy breaking free from Laney, he stayed put. Hardheaded idiot.

The emcee from the games, Victor Lorenz, now dressed in a suit, stepped up to the podium, while the waitstaff brought their dinners. "Ladies and gentlemen, if I can have your attention, please. I thought we'd start the night off right, with the announcement of how much meat from the hunt will be going to local charities and orphanages." A round of applause sounded in the room then quieted. "At the end of the night, over eighteen hundred pounds of meat were collected with eleven hundred pounds being dispersed to sixteen charities." A nice haul for each place. It would at least do in a pinch and take the burden off of those who needed it most.

The rest of what the guy said, Nico blocked out. He didn’t care about that. When they asked him which charity he wanted his portion of the monetary donations to go to, he picked the orphanage in Window Rock. The center was state-of-the-art, but with as many children and teens who kept arriving, Keeley and Danielle would need all the help they could muster. He’d already called Kalkin to let him know about the shipment so everyone would be available to help out when the package of meat arrived.

“You know, little wolf, winter break is coming up,” he whispered as the guy continued to drone on.

“Uh-huh,” she answered, glancing at him. “In about two months. What are you thinking about?”

“Going home,” Nico said. “Word is you’re about to be a big sister.”

She glanced up at him, her lips twitching into a small grin. “True. I guess Christmas with the family would be fun.”

He growled, loving the way her pupils dilated whenever the rasp rumble passed his lips. “I thought you might feel the same way, plus you can tell them all we’re mated.”

“I would.” She took his hand. “Then again, anywhere with you sounds like fun.”

“I agree.”

Finally, when the announcer stopped speaking and after they ate dinner, the music started up again. This time, Nico was content to sit with his mate and watch the others enjoy the evening. Again, he found himself watching Christoph. Right now, Bell swayed on the dance floor with Jackson. He’d give the dragon credit; he was graceful. However, the minute the music ended, Jackson leaned in and brushed his lips over Bell’s.

A roar of anger drowned out the song playing and made Nico grin. “Bingo. I think everything should get interesting from here on.”

“This is not good. I don’t want to look.” Hayden hid her face in her hands, but Nico was undeterred.

Nico directed Hayden’s attention to where Christoph loomed over Bell, his body vibrating with energy. Laney trailed behind him, trying to grab his hand, but he shook off her advances. In an instant, Jackson was at Bell’s back, staring the lion down. The intense exchange had all eyes on the doe-eyed innocent lioness. Christoph snarled something at the dragon, who didn’t back down, but, then again, it seemed both men had taken a liking to Hayden’s cousin.

Christoph wrapped his arm around Bell and kissed her. Hayden's startled expression amused Nico to the point he smothered a laugh. What he hadn't expected, though, was Jackson turning her around and doing the same once again, claiming his stake in the arrangement.

"Holy shit," he whispered. "I knew it could be a possibility, but I never thought this."

Hayden sighed. "At least when we go home, we won't be the center of attention anymore."

"You think?" Nico snorted.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 8:22 am

“Oh yeah. Should be interesting to see how this plays out.” Hayden hummed, unable to look away from the trio.

“Yeah, perhaps.”

“Might even help Bell with earning pledges before those wenches try to take her home,” Hayden added. “You know, we could use this to our advantage.”

“Oh hell, mate, what are you thinking?” Nico stared at Hayden, curiosity grabbing him by the gut.

“I have an idea,” she murmured. “But, for tonight, it’s all about us. Tomorrow, we’ll get to work.”

“Scary as it might be, I love you and the way you think.” He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

“I love you too, mate.”

“So, are you going to spill your idea later, when we’re in bed together?” he growled. “Or are you going to keep me on the edge of my seat until you talk to Bell first?”

"I think I might make you wait unless you'd like to get out of here now?" She gave him a coy smile and winked at him.

“Now, definitely now.” He rose from his seat. “I already won the one thing I hoped for. You. I don’t need some stupid party to celebrate that.”

“When you put it that way”—she stood with him— “lead the way, mate. I’ll follow you anywhere, as long as we’re together.”

“Damn straight, little wolf. My home is always with you.”

THE END