

Captured

It was the wolfsbane in Charlotte's coffee that made the real difference. If not for that, she would have been more than able to defend herself against the two male werewolves who attacked her. She had picked up her usual caramel mocha from the same vegan café she always stopped at before her classes—if she wasn't running late that is. Only this time a male barista she'd never seen before, and who she could tell was a werewolf, made Charlotte's drink.

He was one of the few werewolves Charlotte had seen since arriving in Portland, but with two or three humans in the place, she couldn't exactly acknowledge their shared ability to shift into furry fanged creatures.

"Thanks so much," Charlotte said with a friendly smile as she took the hot coffee cup from him.

"You're most welcome," he replied with a wink—a wink that Charlotte took to mean he had registered her werewolf status as well.

"See you tomorrow, Helen," Charlotte called out to the young woman standing behind the register.

"Bye Charlotte," the woman who had been taking Charlotte's coffee order for months said with a small wave. "Enjoy the mocha."

"I always do," Charlotte told her with a chuckle before opening the café door and walking out into the slightly chilly street.

Charlotte had perfected the art of drinking her morning coffee: she knew that by the time she had walked ve blocks in the direction of the Oregon Culinary Institute, her coffee would have cooled to the perfect temperature. But when she took her rst greedy gulp of the coffee as she made her way to campus, it burned her mouth and tongue and she could feel it burning its way down her throat. She knew immediately that it wasn't from it being too hot.

A passing woman stared at her with concern as she coughed and spluttered, but Charlotte knew that a human could do nothing to help her. Sure enough, she had dropped the cup of coffee right there on the street, her concerns about littering temporarily forgotten, and jogged two blocks closer to the culinary school when her limbs started to grow heavy and weak. It conrmed her suspicion— there had been wolfsbane in her drink.

Real fear started to work its way through Charlotte's body as she half-walked and half-staggered forward. She felt as if she was in one of those dreams where you're trying to run, but no matter how hard you try your legs just won't move. In other words, she felt helpless, and that wasn't a feeling that Charlotte Hill had often.

The small campus was tucked away in a quiet part of South West Portland, so when a black SUV screeched to a stop and two men got out and approached Charlotte, there was only an elderly homeless man to witness the scene unfold.

"What do you want?" Charlotte asked them as she stumbled backward in an attempt to put distance between herself and the two werewolves.

Charlotte recognized the shorter of the two as the man who had made her coffee. He chuckled and told her, "We don't want anything from you. Alpha Erikson on the other hand..."

He trailed off with a smirk, but his evil expression didn't scare Charlotte half as much as his unfinished sentence. She had heard whispers and rumors about the Portland Alpha, all of which painted a picture of a man who Charlotte never wanted to meet. She had made sure that the campus and the apartment she stayed in were outside of his pack borders, so the fact that he had sent goons to get her was as surprising as it was terrifying.

"Right, well I actually have a class in ve minutes. So why don't we just take a rain check?" Charlotte suggested with false bravado, her words sounding slightly slurred.

She turned and walked to the edge of the sidewalk, intending to cross the street and get around the two men, but her movements were sloppy and slow, making it far too easy for the pretend-barista to catch up to her and grab her arm in a vice-like grip.

"Nice try, but I don't think so sweetheart," he scoffed.

"Get off of me," Charlotte seethed, and with the little energy left in her body she punched him in the throat, nearly having to lift up on the balls of her feet to reach her target— she wasn't exactly the tallest at ve feet.

It was a move that she had reluctantly used once or twice on her older brother, Greg, during their one-on-one training, but now she took immense pleasure in watching the man who had drugged her clutching his throat and gasping for air. Unfortunately, the wolfsbane in her system was making it harder and harder for Charlotte to keep herself upright, and much as she tried to get away, she only made it about a quarter of a block before the man's wheezing had died down.

She was just about to turn her head to look back over her shoulder when she was grabbed and yanked backward by a chunk of her shoulder-length hair. It sent stinging pain through her scalp and brought tears to her eyes, but the years of training with her mom and brother kicked in and she used her backward momentum to her advantage. She jabbed her elbow out behind her and the force of being pulled back added strength to her blow to the man's stomach.

"f**k," the man swore, sounding pained, but his grip on Charlotte's hair didn't loosen. Instead, the pain in her scalp only increased as he yanked her head back viciously, forcing her to crane her neck backward so that she was looking up into his angry face. "Stop ghting, you stupid b***h," he spat.

As much as she didn't want to, Charlotte did as he commanded— not for any reason other than that the wolfsbane was starting to make her vision blurry.

"What's wrong? Wolfsbane starting to kick in there?" he sneered as her legs gave out under her.

The only reason she didn't fall to the ground was that he grabbed her upper arms and unceremoniously chucked her light body over his shoulder. If Charlotte had the energy to speak, she would have told him that weakening a tiny female by drugging her was as cowardly as it comes, but unfortunately, she was succumbing to the effects of the poison and speaking seemed like an impossible task.

"Get her in the car," his partner snapped impatiently from where he was holding the back door of the SUV open. "Beta Lawson is expecting us."

Charlotte had to drowsily wonder why he was even there since he had left all the work to the other man. It seemed a bit unfair to her. It also seemed unfair that after the years of intense and grueling training she had done, she had been taken down so easily. Her last thought before her vision went completely dark was that her mother would have been so disappointed in her.

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When she came to, it took her eyes minutes to adjust to the darkness before she could make out the bars of the tiny cell she had been thrown in. There was no bed and no toilet, only a bucket for her to do her business in. She was still in the same light blue skinny jeans, white sweater, and white sneakers, but the warm plaid coat she had been wearing was gone, leaving her with little defense against the cold.

It was pure hell, and she didn't even know why she was being kept there. Somehow the not knowing made it worse, and despite what the guy who had drugged her had said, Alpha Erikson had made no appearance.

The only time she got close to being told why they had taken her was when three guards had come into her cell, gagged her, tied her arms behind her back and one of them had held up a phone and told her to smile into the camera for her brother. They had untied her and left her with her tear-streaked face in her cell. She was as confused as ever and for the next few days, she wondered what the hell her brother had gotten himself into to land her in that mess.

Charlotte quickly lost count of the days she had been kept hostage in the Portland pack— being kept alone in an underground basement with no windows made it hard to even track the rst day let alone the ones that followed. It could have been three days or seven for all she knew by the time she found an opportunity to escape.

The same guard who had taken the photo of her had brought Charlotte a tray of unappetizing-looking food, and as much as she wanted to sit there and devour the entire disgusting bowl of what looked like grey oatmeal, she decided a few more hours of hunger would be better than staying in that damp and dark cell for a second longer.

So, after the guard had unlocked the door to her cell and was using his one free hand to open the metal gate outwards, Charlotte jumped to her feet, grabbed the bars of the gate, and with all her strength pulled the door back towards her, slamming and breaking the guard's ngers between the metal. He screamed in agony, dropped the tray of food, and cradled his hand to his chest as she pushed the gate back open and ran past him. She had no idea where the hell she was going, but could only hope that she would be able to nd a way out.

It took her about twenty seconds after leaving her cell to gure out that escape was impossible. She ran up the stairs and let out a sigh of relief when she found the door at the top unlocked. Knowing she needed to act with more stealth now, Charlotte slowly opened the door and peaked out to nd a blindingly brightly lit but thankfully empty hallway in front of her. She breathed out an inaudible sigh of relief after she'd tiptoed down the hall and peered to the right, seeing no one in sight. Any relief she felt died though when she looked to the left and saw a group of about ten male werewolves walking towards her.

With her head sticking out around the corner, they had spotted her immediately. Charlotte swore and ran to the right like her life depended on it—which it kind of did—and was followed by a group of yelling men. They must have been keeping her in a pretty secluded part of the pack house because she didn't run into anyone else as she wound her way through seemingly endless hallways and a series of empty rooms. The place reminded her of a museum with the way all the rooms fed into one another.

She made it pretty darn far, using her small size as an advantage to zip around corners faster than any of the large men could, before the rst of them caught up to her. She made pretty short work of him, but the others had caught up and surrounded her by the time she had kicked him in the groin and slammed the lower part of her palm into his nose with an awful crunching noise.

"I don't suppose you're willing to just let me go?" she asked them with a sigh.

A particularly mean-looking man stepped forward and took a swing at her, his st missing her face by an inch as Charlotte ducked down— she took that to mean no. Grabbing the man's outstretched arm by the wrist, Charlotte spun under his arm, twisting it behind his back. In a move that her brother had drilled into her, she kicked the man in the back, letting go of her grip on him as he fell forward into the wall.

She turned just in time to see another st ying towards her. She used her forearm to hit the man's hand to the side, ignoring the bruising pain it caused and focusing instead on punching him in the solar plexus, a particularly sensitive spot if you could land a blow, with quick sharp jabs. Her punches held less strength than she would have liked, but with enough of them she had succeeded in doing enough damage that the man fell to his knees with a pained grimace.

"What the f**k," she heard one of the other men mutter, and Charlotte couldn't contain her smile at his surprise. She was used to being underestimated by people, but it wasn't often she got the chance to prove them wrong. It felt good.

Charlotte put up a good ght, but one woman against ten men— or seven by that point— wasn't exactly good odds, and when they had eventually restrained her, both she and a few of the men were sporting bruises and cuts. She had known that her brother had been holding his punches back in their training, but the hits the men had landed on her still throbbed more painfully than she had imagined they would as she was dragged back to her cell by three of the men. What awaited them in the basement made her instantly forget about the pain though, and even made the group of guards come to a surprised stop.

A forty-or-so-year-old male werewolf with pale hair and glacier blue eyes stood over the now dead body of the guard that had been bringing Charlotte food. He exuded the type of strength and power that made everyone around him aware of his Alpha blood, but it was the cruelty and coldness in his eyes that sent a shiver down Charlotte's spine as he narrowed his eyes at her.

"You escaped," he noted, his voice as unforgiving as his gaze.

"I didn't make it far," Charlotte replied with a swallow, looking down nervously at the corpse at the Alpha's feet. She hadn't liked the man, but that didn't mean she had wanted him dead.

"Hold her," the Alpha ordered the guards.

Charlotte struggled as their hands dug harder into her arms, and when Erikson stepped closer to her with a syringe in his hand, she kicked out wildly at him, not caring what the consequences might be. But the Alpha simply grabbed her ankle and twisted it harshly, making Charlotte scream in pain as her bones and tendons strained with the awkward angle.

"This will make sure you don't pull a stunt like that again," the Alpha said.

A sharp stinging in her upper arm let her know that Erikson had injected the wolfsbane into her and soon her whole body felt like it was burning from the inside. All that escaped her was a small whimper of pain though.

"Put her in the cell," the Alpha commanded as he dropped her foot, and the men were quick to do as he said, pushing Charlotte roughly through the door and locking the door behind her. "Leave us," he snapped once she was back in her cage.

She could almost see their shoulders slump in relief at being allowed to leave alive.

Seconds ago she had hated them, but now as she sat with her back slumped against the cell wall, she wished they would stay. Being left alone with Erikson, even with the cell door between them, scared her enough that their presence would be somehow comforting. It seemed a crazy thought.

"Do you know why you're here?" Erikson asked her, staring at her with those cold cold eyes.

"It has something to do with my brother," Charlotte said uncertainly, gritting her teeth in pain and feeling the sting of tears behind her eyes while she watched the guards close the basement door.

"I need him to do something for me and you're here to make sure he does it," the Alpha explained.

"What does he need to do?" she asked, hating that she was being used against Greg.

"He needs to bring me someone," he said impatiently. "His Luna to be exact."

"Greg will never do that," Charlotte told him, blinking as her vision went hazy. Apparently wolfsbane worked much faster when injected into the blood stream.

"Even if I threaten him with your death?" Erikson asked, smirking as she remained silent.

Charlotte knew that her brother would do anything to protect her, so she knew the Alpha was right. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked through a clenched jaw.

"So that you understand just how important it is for me that you stay in that cell," he told her, stepping forward threateningly. "I'll be ordering the guards to give you a dose of wolfsbane every ve hours, but just in case you still nd the strength to try and leave again, death would be a gift compared to what I'll do to you."

Charlotte couldn't help her eyes from ickering back to the guard's body. It was hard not to believe Erikson with the proof of his cruelty staring right at her through glazed and dead eyes.

"I can see you understand, but I'll have the guards leave him here for another day just in case you forget," the Alpha said, kicking the man's body cruelly before he left the basement.

Had Charlotte not been drugged again, she probably wouldn't have been able to sleep that night, but as it was, she slipped into a dreamless and restless sleep. She was woken up what must have been ve hours later to the sound of the door creaking open, but before she could open her eyes, pain aared in the same arm Erikson had injected her in, and darkness pulled her back in. Waking up only to be drugged again— that would be her life for what seemed like countless days afterward.