

## The Aftermath

Charlotte picked up a few words and phrases as she slipped in and out of consciousness, and it was her brother's voice that she heard the most. She knew that if he was there, it meant she was safe, so when sleep called back to her, she didn't ght it. Besides, the pain in her arms and the back of her head meant that sleep was far more appealing.

"...wake up on her own soon, so we just have to wait."

The pain in her body had marginally subsided when Greg's words broke through her dreams, which Charlotte took to mean she had been sleeping for some time. Opening her eyes still seemed like much too great a challenge though, and even listening to her brother seemed strenuous with all the background noise. Wherever they were, it was noisy.

"That's good man," a male voice, that Charlotte didn't recognize, replied.

"Look, I'm really sorry for everything. They had Charlotte and I just didn't know what else to do," her brother said.

"I'm not going to pretend that what you did was okay, but I think I get it, man. If it was my brother, I would have done anything to get him back," the man replied, and Charlotte's lip twitched up into as much of a smile as she could manage. Maybe her brother had done everything in his power to keep her safe.

"I don't think you know, but it's just been me and her since our mom died. She's all I've got," her brother explained. "You don't know how happy I am that Lily is okay, but Charlotte could have died, and it would have been my fault," Greg said, making her tiny smile fall. What did he mean by that?

"Would you have done things differently if you could?" the other man asked after a short pause, and Charlotte was content that her brother's answer would be 'yes'.

"No, I guess not," Greg replied, making Charlotte's heart clench painfully. "As soon as I found out Lily was pregnant, I knew I couldn't go through with it. I just wish I could have warned her before Erikson got to her though."

She found it hard to follow their conversation, but one thing was clear: Greg had gone against Erikson—to save a pregnant woman apparently, but still at the risk of his sister's life. Charlotte couldn't understand that despite his good reason she found herself angry with him. He was justified in what he had done right? So then why did her chest feel so tight and painful?

"If you did, Charlotte might not be alive right now. You can't keep thinking about what might have happened. Lily is ne and Charlotte is going to be okay too."

"Do you think you'll ever be able to trust me again?" Greg asked, sounding just about as hopeless as Charlotte had ever heard him.

She allowed the rest of their words to drown into the background, her mind caught on what Greg had said. She had had her skull bashed in and both her elbows broken, but he had just admitted that he still wouldn't have done anything differently, that he would let his little sister go through it all again. After their mother had died four years earlier, Greg had promised that he would always take care of her, but that promise didn't ring quite true anymore—at least not in Charlotte's eyes.

But he did it to protect a woman and her baby, she scolded herself. The last thing she wanted to be was selsh, and she knew that her life wasn't worth more than anyone else's. So, just as Charlotte was used to doing, she set her feelings aside. Greg had only done what was right after all, she reminded herself.

She didn't remember falling asleep, but about two hours later, she woke up. Charlotte managed to open her eyes this time, but she had to blink and squint before they got used to the brightness of the room. She could have laughed when she spotted Greg sleeping in a chair next to her bed, his mouth hanging wide open. His soft snores lled the room, but when Charlotte shifted, his snoring cut off and he bolted up in his chair, his eyes widening when he saw his sister was awake.

"Charlotte?" he asked excitedly, looking at her with a hopeful smile. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I was run over by a train," she joked. "Where are we?" she asked him with a frown, not recognizing the white-walled room they were in.

"Still in the Portland pack house," he told her. "But Erikson is dead," he reassured her when her eyes widened in shock.

"Geez I missed a lot while I was unconscious," Charlotte muttered, wincing when she tried to move her head.

"Are you okay? Should I call the doctor? What hurts?" Greg asked as he stood up from his chair, a concerned frown plastered on his face.

"My head," Charlotte replied with a groan. "And yes, a doctor would be nice," she added in amusement.

She could feel something wrapped around her head—a bandage probably—but when she tried to lift her hand to feel it, she realized that both her arms were in slings. She also noticed that she was wearing new clothes—baggy sweatpants and a zip-up hoodie. It was a very good thing considering how badly her other clothes must have smelled.

"I'll be right back," Greg promised, grabbing her hand where it stuck out of the sling and squeezing it gently. "I'm really glad you're okay, little sis."

Charlotte forced a smile in return. "After the doctor checks me, I'd like to know what the hell is going on," she told him with a strained laugh. She still didn't quite know why she'd been dragged into the mess with Erikson or how Greg had gotten her out of it.

"Of course," he replied with an equally strained chuckle.

"Greg, how long has it been since I was taken?" she asked, needing to know how long she had been kept in that cell.

"A month," he told her, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. He couldn't seem to meet her eyes anymore. "Let me go get Claire," he mumbled before leaving the room.

Charlotte could only assume that Claire was a doctor, and the assumption was proven correct when Greg returned with a woman wearing a stethoscope around her neck.

"Hi, Charlotte. How are you doing?" she asked with a kind smile.

"Just a bit sore," Charlotte replied lightly, selling the extent of her pain short.

"Not that surprising," the doctor replied sympathetically. "Is it okay for your brother to stay while I examine your injuries?" she asked.

"Yeah," Charlotte replied easily—her brother had become her guardian when she was fourteen, so he had been around for all her scraped knees and twisted ankles. Guaranteed her injuries were far worse now, but she still wanted him there.

"I'm just going to lift the back of the bed up," Claire warned her, pressing a button on the hospital bed's remote so that Charlotte's back was lifted until she was in a seated position. "I can tell you that your humerus, ulna, and radius bones where they meet at the elbow are broken in both arms," she explained as she unwrapped the bandage from around Charlotte's throbbing head. "They were clean breaks though and will heal within the next four or ve days. I've put splints on under the slings to make sure they heal correctly."

Charlotte of course knew that werewolves healed quickly, but it was still great to hear she wouldn't be stuck in double slings for too long.

"Just make sure you keep the slings on and don't use your arms at all or it will slow the healing process."

"Will do," Charlotte promised.

She waited in silence as the doctor examined the wound on her head, wincing and grimacing every now and again when Claire touched a particularly sensitive spot.

"You didn't have to shave any of my hair off did you?" Charlotte asked, the image of her missing a section of her hair rising up in her mind suddenly.

"No," Claire replied with a chuckle. "Since I didn't have to stitch you up or anything, that wasn't necessary."

"Well that's good to hear," Charlotte said with a sigh of relief. She didn't exactly want to be walking around sporting a bald patch.

"How's the wound?" Greg asked nervously once Claire had wrapped his sister's head up again with a fresh bandage.

"The wound doesn't look like it's healed much," the doctor sighed. "Charlotte, I noticed the marks on your upper arm when I was looking you over earlier," she said, moving so that she could meet Charlotte's eyes. "How often were you given wolfsbane?"

Charlotte saw Greg stiffen at the question. Based on the way his jaw was clenched and the storm in his eyes, he hadn't known about that.

"Every ve hours," Charlotte told Claire, hating the pity she saw in the woman's eyes.

"That would explain why you're not healing as quickly. Your body has been poisoned for weeks and now it's working overtime to heal you as well."

"So what does that mean?" Charlotte asked, meeting Greg's worried eyes before looking back at Claire.

"It means your body will be weak for a while and the healing will take a bit longer than expected," the doctor said gently.

"I guess it could be worse, right?" Charlotte replied, trying to stay positive.

"The trauma to your brain concerns me a bit," the doctor admitted softly, raining on Charlotte's positivity parade. "The damage was severe and even with werewolf healing, the brain isn't so easily xed."

"I thought you said she would be okay," Greg replied in a raised voice.

"She will be," the doctor promised hastily. "There just might be some issues like short-term memory loss, headaches, concentration issues..."

"For how long?" Charlotte asked softly, not liking the idea of being forgetful and unable to focus. She would rather have the bald patch.

"I can't say for sure, but I wouldn't think any more than a few months," Claire explained gently. "The brain is a delicate organ and it will take some time for it to heal properly. If you were a human, I don't think you would have woken up at all."

"Are you coming back to Seattle with us?" she asked Charlotte, who was still stuck on the fact that she might have memory issues for several months.

"Umm..." Charlotte hummed uncertainly. She hadn't exactly planned on it, and she was in the middle of her college semester—a semester that she had already missed a month of.

"I'd like it if you came back with me," Greg told his sister. "At least until you've healed and you're ready to go back to school."

"Yeah, that sounds good," Charlotte agreed. It wasn't like she could do much cooking without the use of both her arms and spending time with her brother was long overdue. They hadn't seen each other since she'd moved to Portland the previous year.

"Great, that means you can come see me every day to monitor how you're doing," Claire explained as she took off the medical gloves she had been wearing and threw them in the trash. "I have an ultrasound to go perform, but send Greg to nd me if you need anything else," she told Charlotte with a wink.

"I will," Charlotte said with a grin.

"Thanks for helping her," Greg said gratefully.

"It was my pleasure. Make sure you take good care of her, okay."

"Of course," Greg promised, moving his eyes to rest on Charlotte as the doctor left. "I'm so sorry that this happened, Charlie," he told her, using the nickname he had given her when they were kids. He sat back down in the chair next to her bed.

"Want to tell me what did actually happen, why Erikson took me?" Charlotte suggested, tired of feeling like she was in the dark and wanting a distraction from the news Claire had given her.

He nodded and took her hand in his as he explained. "You know I moved to Seattle with Greg," he started and she nodded in agreement. "But Lily and Finn moved there as well. You know Lily from high school and Finn is Lily's mate. Erikson, in some weird turn of events, the two of them became the Alpha and Luna of the Seattle pack. A story for another time," he told her when she raised her eyebrows in curiosity. "Erikson knew Lily's mom back in the day, but she did something to piss him off and he's been holding a grudge against her for years. Apparently, with Lily's mom dead, he wanted her daughter so he could full some long-planned revenge."

"And what does that have to do with you or me?" Charlotte asked in confusion. "And your story-telling skills could use some work by the way," she told him with an amused roll of her eyes. Greg had always been better with his sts than he had ever been with words.

"Erikson wanted me to help get Lily here. He knew Lily and Finn trusted me."

"And I was conveniently right within reach," Charlotte said in understanding. "So then what happened?"

"I tried to warn Lily what was happening, but it was too late. Erikson got hold of her, and that's when I told Finn the truth. He got help from two other packs and we attacked Portland. Erikson was killed during the battle."

"I see," Charlotte sighed. She still didn't feel like she had the whole story, but she knew enough—at least for now.

"Why don't you get some more rest?" Greg suggested when a sudden yawn overtook her.

"It feels like I've been resting forever," she complained, but it was true that she still felt tired. "Did my school call you?" she asked, wondering if she would even be able to go back to the culinary school or if she'd missed too much to make up for the time.

"When they couldn't get hold of you, they did," Greg told her as he lowered her bed back down. "I told them there was a family emergency and I didn't know when you'd be sleeping."

"And what did they say?" she asked through another yawn.

"That you were their best student and they'd be waiting for you to get back," Greg replied with a grin. "So you don't have to worry about it, Charlie."

"That's good," Charlotte said, her eyes falling shut against her will. "Very, very good..." she added before she fell into a strange dream.

A dream in which the delicious smell of oranges and freshly ground black pepper surrounded her only to vanish soon afterward, a piece of her soul feeling like it was leaving with it. Only it wasn't a dream at all.