

Getting to Know Each Other

Charlotte was sitting at the dining room table with her brother's laptop in front of her when someone knocked on the front door. Greg had gone to work that morning at the gym he, Finn, and their friend Damien owned, so it was just her in the apartment.

"I'll be there in a second," she yelled as she nished typing out her email and sent it off to her three lecturers at the Oregon Culinary Institute. It was a bit difficult with her two arms in a sling, but looking like a short-armed T-rex, she managed.

She still didn't know exactly when she'd be able to go back, especially now that she'd met her mate, but she was hoping they would send her any missed written assignments and she could catch everything up in the meantime. That's if they even allowed her back after all the missed time, and she didn't need to start over the next academic year. Despite what Greg had said about her chefs wanting her to go back, Charlotte wasn't counting on anything— she didn't want to set herself up for disappointment.

Another knock had her closing the laptop and jumping up to her feet. "Coming," she called out as she hastily walked to the door, feeling guilty for making whoever it was wait.

Usually, Charlotte would have just opened the door without much thought, but given recent events, she looked through the peephole first. To her surprise, it was a distorted Liam that she saw when she put her eye to the glass.

Silently cursing Greg for not having a mirror near the entrance of his apartment, she grimaced before opening the door, sure she looked a mess with her unbrushed hair. At least Lily had kindly popped in that morning and helped her change into a pair of mom jeans and one of the white tees that Greg had bought for her the previous day.

"Hi," she greeted him, her voice sounding a bit too squeaky for her liking.

"Hey, Charlotte," he replied with a small smile. "Hope I'm not interrupting anything." He was wearing a pair of dark skinny jeans and a black shirt that hugged the muscles of his arms in a way that was hard for Charlotte to ignore.

"No, now's a good time," she assured him, stepping aside to let him in. "You can come in."

"I was actually wondering if you wanted to go out for a coffee or something," he said, surprising her again. "My treat for running off like that yesterday," he added.

"Oh, yeah, that-that would be great," she said nervously. "Just give me a second to grab some shoes and my phone."

"Sure," he replied easily, stepping inside while she went into Greg's spare room.

She quickly slipped her feet into a pair of too-large sandals— the only shoes she could put on without help— and glanced at her reaction in the mirror, pleased to see that her hair didn't quite look like the bird's nest she had envisioned it did. It seemed the bandage around her head helped to keep it under control.

Taking a deep breath in to try and ease her anxiety, she walked back out into the open plan living and dining room, making a pit stop at the dining table to pick up the phone that Greg had bought her, which she had insisted she would find a way to pay him back for.

"Alright, I'm all set," Charlotte told Liam as she bent down and grabbed the apartment keys from the table in the entrance hall.

He followed her out of the apartment and when he noticed that she was struggling to get the key in the lock, he placed his hand gently over hers. "Let me," he offered softly but without pity.

"Thank you," Charlotte croaked out, reluctantly pulling her hand away from his touch to allow him to lock the apartment door. She had never imagined that someone's touch could affect her in the way that Liam's did. As cliché as it sounded, it had felt as if sparks or electricity were zinging between their skin.

"Is coffee good with you, or do you want to grab an early lunch?" Liam asked her once they were inside the descending elevator.

Charlotte was feeling a bit hungry, but she didn't fancy having to ask Liam to help feed her on what she was hoping was their first date. "Coffee works for me," she told him.

"Cool," he replied. "There's a place right around the corner we can walk to."

"Sounds good," she said, glad that she'd be able to get some fresh air after being cooped up in the apartment building for the last two days.

The rest of the elevator ride was silent, as was the short walk to the coffee shop, but Charlotte found herself smiling when Liam hovered his arm behind her protectively and almost instinctively as they walked down the street. Even though his hand wasn't actually touching her, she could feel the heat emanating from his arm on her back, and that was almost as good.

They ordered their coffees— a black coffee for him and an iced caramel mocha for her— and with a drink in either hand, Liam led them to a secluded table at the back of the coffee shop. Charlotte thanked him when he placed her drink in front of her.

"No problem. I just thought we should try get to know each other a bit better," he explained, scratching the back of his head with his one good arm as he took his seat.

"I'd like that," Charlotte said with a genuine smile, her eyes lighting up with happiness.

"I know from your brother that you were in Portland," he told her. "Were you studying there?"

"Yeah, just a diploma in culinary arts," Charlotte explained, not knowing why she chose to use the word 'just' as if her diploma wasn't important or worthwhile.

"Oh," he said, his eyebrows lifting in surprise.

"I'm meant to graduate this summer, but right now I don't know if that's going to happen."

Liam nodded in understanding. "I'm guessing you're planning on becoming a chef?" he asked.

"Sort of," she replied, nervously playing with the paper from her straw. "I'd like to maybe run my own bakery one day."

"Was your plan to stay in Portland after you graduate?" Liam asked.

"It was, but after what happened there, I don't think I can stay there," Charlotte admitted with a swallow.

"Right," he said in a somber voice, staring down at his coffee like it held the answers to whatever he was looking for.

"And what about you? Lily told me that you're a Council member," she said, trying to change the subject.

Charlotte had told Lily that morning that she had found her mate, only for the Luna to explain with a chuckle that she was friends with Liam and already knew she had had to rush off to school. She didn't know much about the Council, but she had found herself impressed that Liam was part of it because she knew how powerful the organization was.

"You spoke to Lily?" Liam asked her with wide eyes.

"Yeah, she helped me yesterday and this morning since I can't really do much by myself," Charlotte explained, confused at his shocked reaction.

"Oh, okay," he said with a small shake of his head. "Yeah, I work for the Council," he told her, getting back to their original conversation.

"But you live in Seattle?" she asked, not sure how it all worked.

"No, I actually live in Boston," he replied. "I was just here on a case."

"When are you meant to leave?" Charlotte asked, hoping her voice didn't betray how much the answer meant to her.

"In a month," he told her. "I was given that time off because I found you."

"But after that, you have to go back," Charlotte said, putting two and two together. "And I'll be going back to Portland to finish studying." It was far from how she'd imagine things would go after she found her mate.

"Yeah," Liam agreed gently.

"So what's the plan then? I come to Boston after I graduate?" she asked uncertainly, not wanting to appear too clingy, but needing to know what they would do going forward.

"I don't really know," Liam admitted with a sigh. "I guess we just see how things go and maybe we can try visit each other before then."

"Yeah, okay," Charlotte replied with a strained smile, not feeling much better about the situation, but not wanting to push it.

"Anyways, I know you have a brother, but what about the rest of your family? Are your mom and dad still in Hood River?" he asked, moving onto a new topic— one that Charlotte had wished he hadn't brought up.

"It's just me and Greg," she explained, avoiding his amber eyes when she saw the pity in them. "Our dad was never in the picture and our mom died in a car accident when I was fourteen. Greg became my guardian because he was eighteen by then and it's just been the two of us since."

"I'm sorry," Liam murmured with a wince. "I can't imagine how much you miss her."

"Yeah, she was a great mom," Charlotte agreed with a sad smile.

There was more that she could have said about her mom, about the intense training she put her daughter through for as long as Charlotte could remember, about how paranoid she always seemed, but that wasn't something she ever spoke to anybody but Greg about. Maybe one day soon she'd be able to tell Liam, but for now, it could wait.

"And you?" she asked him after clearing the lump in her throat.

"No siblings," he explained and Charlotte got the feeling from the look in his eyes that he wished he had had someone to grow up with. "My mom is a writer and my dad is a Council Master."

"What kind of books does she write?" Charlotte asked with clear interest and Liam chuckled. "What?" she asked him self-consciously.

"It's just that usually people are more interested in my dad's profession than my mom's," he explained.

It made sense for their kind to be more interested in his dad being one of the most powerful werewolves in the world Charlotte supposed.

"She writes mysteries," Liam said.

"That's awesome," she enthused. "I'd love to read some of her stuff. What's her name?"

"Her name's Dorothy, but she writes under the pseudonym Daisy Gold," he explained.

"I'll look out for her books the next time I'm at a bookstore," Charlotte promised. She tended to mostly read food magazines and the like, but she could give mystery novels a try.

"She'd like that," Liam said with a grateful smile. He realized then that he'd never actually spoken to Lily about his mom or anything much about his life at all. Their conversations always revolved around the Council and occasionally Lily's relationship with Finn. It felt good to have someone take interest in him and his life for a change.

They talked about his mom's books for a while longer before moving on to simple things like their favorite bands, movies, and TV shows. By the time they made it back to the Crescent, they had been out for over two hours.

"Are you okay?" Liam asked Charlotte as he walked her to her door. She was looking a bit pale, and her steps were slower than they'd been before. That, along with the way her thin arms stuck out from the shoulders of her shirt and her tiny feet were swallowed up by her too large sandals, she looked almost frail.

"Yeah, just a bit tired," she replied, sounding a bit embarrassed.

"Are you sure? I can call Claire if you're not feeling well," he offered once he'd unlocked and opened the door for her. He could see a sheen of sweat on her forehead and she looked out of breath as if she'd just run.

"I'm sure," she assured him with a tight nod. "I just need to rest is all."

"Okay," he replied uncertainly, and he was about to tell her to call him if she needed anything when his phone started ringing and cut him off. He took his phone out of his pocket intending to decline the call, but when he saw Lily's name on the screen, he changed his mind. "Sorry, I need to take this," he told Charlotte, a pang of guilt hitting him when she saw a brief flicker of disappointment in her warm brown eyes.

"No worries. Thanks for the coffee," she told him. "I had a great time."

"I did too," Liam replied in a rush. "I'll chat to you later, okay," he promised before answering the phone.

Charlotte closed the door as he lifted the phone to his ear and turned his back to her. Despite his abrupt goodbye, she had had a great time with him. She chose to focus on that as she slumped down on the couch in exhaustion. The ve-minute walk from the coffee shop had taken the last of her energy, and what she really needed was a nap. As she drifted off to sleep, she wondered how long it would take her body to recover from the hundred or so doses of wolfsbane she'd been injected with.

Liam had only been looking at her with concern, but how long would it take for that concern to turn into disappointment at his mate's weakness? She hoped she'd never find out.