

BOUND TO THE FAE  
EVA CHASE

BOOK

1

The cover features a young woman with long, flowing, multi-colored hair (pink, purple, and blue) sitting on a dark, rocky surface. She is wearing a purple top and blue jeans, with a long, flowing purple cape draped over her shoulders. To her right, a wolf's head is shown in profile, looking upwards. The background is a dark, misty forest with a large, glowing full moon. The overall color palette is dominated by purples, blues, and pinks.

CAPTIVE OF  
WOLVES

# CAPTIVE OF WOLVES

EVA CHASE

BOUND TO THE FAE

BOOK



Captive of Wolves

Book 1 in the Bound to the Fae series

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner without the express written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

First Digital Edition, 2020

Copyright © 2020 Eva Chase

Cover design: Yocla Book Cover Design

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-989096-82-6

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-989096-83-3

## CONTENTS

[Free Book!](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Next in the Bound to the Fae series](#)

[Cruel Magic excerpt](#)

[About the Author](#)

# Free Book!

Get *Raven's Fall*, the companion novella to the reverse harem urban fantasy series *Their Dark Valkyrie*, FREE when you sign up for Eva's newsletter.

[Click here to get your free ebook now!](#)



# 1



## *Talia*

I can always tell when they've come to steal my blood. It's only those times that my captors arrive all together, the three hulking men-who-aren't-men marching into the room that holds my cage.

When they enter on their own to shove food and water through the bars or to change my toilet bucket, they have a curt, preoccupied air as if paying me any attention bores them. The group effort gets them excited. They always come in chuckling and giving each other hearty smacks on the shoulders, congratulating themselves on a job well done before they've even done it.

Or maybe it's mostly done already. I have no idea what they want my blood for or how large a part of those activities it is.

All I know is that while my entire existence here is awful, these days are the worst.

The second I hear their merry voices on the other side of the door, my fingers clench around the scratchy fabric of my wool blanket. Every nerve in my body clangs to propel myself away from the threat. But the farthest I can go is the corners of my cage, which isn't anywhere at all.

It'll be over faster the more cooperative I am. And my one chance at ever

getting *out* of this awful existence depends on me tamping down on my dread enough to focus all my attention on listening.

As my captors walk in, my fingers keep clutching the blanket. It's the only protection I have against their harsh gazes and sneers. They can't be bothered to go to the trouble of clothing me, but they don't want me coming down with a chill either. I'm valuable enough to be kept alive but not remotely comfortable.

The man at the head of the bunch gazes down at me where I'm crouched on the hard metal floor of the cage, his nose wrinkling in undisguised revulsion. It must stink in here—I must stink, considering I can't remember the last time they bothered to even hose me off. I've lived in filth for so many years I can't tell anymore.

As far as I've been able to tell, that man—the one with hair as brilliantly yellow as the petals of a sunflower and ears that rise to inhuman points—is the leader. Yellow doesn't do much other than watch and order the others around. But he's the one who unlocks my cage. I have to concentrate on him.

The second of my captors, the one with the rotund belly and heavy feet, goes to the plain cupboard that's the room's only other furnishing. I think of him as Cutter because of his role in this ritual. He gets out the little ivory-handled knife and a glass vial. My skin twitches in anxious anticipation.

The third of the men bends down beside the cage until he's almost at my level. His lips curl into a grin that looks cut into his ruddy face. He isn't burly like the other two but all sharp angles, from the tips of his ears to the toes of his narrow boots to the tufts of his blueish white hair that poke from his scalp like icicles.

I'm uncomfortably familiar with Ice's angles. Occasionally he gets bored enough with whatever else his life consists of to saunter in here and "play" with me. He'll poke and prod until he forces out a gasp of pain.

They have a rule about injuring me—I've heard them talk about it. Nothing that could jeopardize my life is allowed. Ice has made a hobby out of discovering all the ways he can torment my body without causing any tangible damage.

Not surprisingly, he's always the one who volunteers to pin me down.

I could make it even easier for them. I could sprawl out on my belly the way they'll want me positioned so he has no reason to shove me down. But he'll push me around anyway, and whatever small fragment of pride I've somehow held onto balks at the thought of prostrating myself quite that



willingly.

Yellow leans forward. Black tattoos in unfamiliar symbols mark all of their bodies, but he has the most, several on his arms and neck, one poking from his hairline at his temple. A twisting line from one stretches across his chin all the way to his lips.

He's going to say the word—the word that spills from his mouth with a resonance that prickles down my spine. The word that opens the door.

The word I have to learn.

He rests his hand on the latch. His lips part, and the sounds slip out fast and sibilant, one blending into the next. "*Fee-doom-ace-own.*"

That's what it sounds like to my pricked ears, anyway. That's what it's sounded like since I realized some kind of magic holds my cage closed and that the word is the key, although it took several attempts before I was sure of each of the syllables. I replay everything I've heard my captors say over and over in my head, searching for meanings beyond the obvious that might offer a helpful clue to ending my torment, but that word is the one I've returned to the most.

I'm still not *really* sure of it, or I'd be able to say it properly, wouldn't I? Just how much does his voice lilt upwards with the "ice" bit? How long does he stretch out the "o" in "own"?

What am I missing?

I might be missing the capacity to work any kind of magic word at all, no matter how well I say it. In the back of my head, I know that, not any flaw in my concentration, could be the problem. Because these *aren't* really men, and they have powers beyond anything I understood before they threw me in this cage. He says the word quietly and quickly, but I don't think he's all that worried about me overhearing it.

*He* doesn't think I could use it. But it's all I have.

He unhooks the latch. The hinges squeak as the door swings open.

The cage is barely big enough for me. When I'm sitting, I can touch the bars overhead without raising my arm completely. Standing is out of the question. But the doorway is large enough for Ice to squeeze through. There's just enough space for him to grab me by the back of my neck and slam my face against the floor.

Pain radiates through my skull. He clammers on top of me with his pointy knees digging into my calves and the spikes of his elbows jabbing my ribs. His weight bears down on my back, squashing most of the air from my lungs

until I'm on the verge of suffocating. He grinds one of those elbows into the tender spot just below my shoulder blade, and I catch my lower lip between my teeth.

I hate the whimper that slips out of me anyway. I hate his fingers burrowing into the hollow between my cheek and my jaw to press my face even harder against the grubby metal. I hate that he knows exactly how to take me from discomfort to agony in the space of a breath.

I hate the jagged snicker that tells me how much he loves it. There are easier ways they could position me, but this one is more fun for them.

A jolt of adrenaline shoots through my veins, more panic than anything else, and I have to clamp down hard to smother the urge to thrash against Ice's hold. There is no escaping him. I know that. And the one time I tried, when I didn't know very much yet, the man on top of me repaid me in spades for the one kick I landed to his gut. He grasped my foot and twisted his hands, and the bones snapped in an explosion of pain.

That pain has never quite gone away. They didn't let the fractures heal right—a little extra security against me running away. I can't really walk in this cage, but any time I put weight on that foot, a dull ache spreads through it. Extra security and a constant reminder of the consequences of fighting back.

I have other ways of defying them that they can't see. I pull all the way back into my mind, into the depths where the pain is only a distant buzzing, into an imagined vision of the world they wrenched me from. It isn't a part of that world I ever experienced in real life, but one I dreamed about traveling to someday back when I could have dreams that large.

Before me lies a broad pool of turquoise water surrounded by weather-sculpted rock. Brilliant sun beams down to glitter off the ripples. I would drift in that pool, embraced by gentle warmth, gazing up at the clear blue sky...

Cutter lets out a raspy sound of amusement. "Can we have her arm already?"

Ice leans his weight onto his left elbow in a way that nearly dislocates my shoulder. The spike of pain shatters the illusion I've formed in my head. As he yanks my other arm toward the open door, I grit my teeth, but a little cry seeps out anyway. He snickers again. I squeeze my eyes shut, tears leaking out despite my best efforts.

Cutter doesn't revel in the process, but he doesn't appear to have any objection to his companion's antics. Without another word, he slices the knife

into my wrist.

It's a shallow stinging, mostly drowned out by the cacophony of hurts already coursing through my body. From the glimpses I've gotten of the vial, they only take a few teaspoons. He pinches the flesh and then ties a thin bandage over the wound with a perfunctory tug to fix it in place.

Cutter straightens up. Ice pushes off me, knocking my head against the metal floor once more for good measure. When he's clambered out, Yellow shuts the cage door and voices his magic to lock it.

Normally, this is when they'd leave. Instead, Ice peers down at me, folding his arms over his chest. The light glittering off the pale, spiky tufts on his head turns them even chillier-looking.

"She barely responds anymore," he says. "It makes this rather tiresome."

Cutter shakes his head. "Only you would wish for a fight."

"I'm only saying that while we have her, we might as well make use of her for some entertainment in between more vital matters."

"What did you have in mind?" Yellow asks as if he doesn't really care about the answer. He's eyeing the vial rather than me, with a triumphant gleam in his eyes.

Ice rubs his jaw, showing the tattoo that spears across his knuckles. "We could give her the run of the castle. Make it more of a chase."

Hope flickers to life in my chest despite the throbbing of my ribs. I might not even need to make the magic work to get my chance. If I could get that much closer to—

His sneering voice cuts through my thoughts. "Of course, I'd break her other ankle to ensure she can't get far without our say so. She can crawl around the place like the vermin she is."

My blood freezes, a wave of hopelessness dousing the flare of hope in an instant. *No*. Fleeing this place with one unsteady leg would be hard enough. Escaping without the use of either... They might as well cage me within my body and swallow the key.

"Let me think on it," Yellow says in the same distracted tone. "It is something of a waste putting her to use so infrequently. Perhaps she could polish the floors while she's down there."

He's really considering it. I bite back the scream that's trying to bubble up my throat.

"Sleep well, dung-body!" Ice calls over his shoulder to me, and they all laugh as they head out.

A shiver runs through my limbs. Within moments, I'm shaking so hard I can't get a hold of myself. I roll onto my side and pull my knees up to my chest, gulping air and groping for control.

I can't let it happen. I can't. I can't. I'd rather be dead.

But they won't let me take that escape either.

Listen. I have to listen to that magic word again. Listen and then try, oh please, oh please...

I close my eyes and reach back to the turquoise pool I pasted into my scrapbook of wonderful places years ago, when I was still a kid. I can't quite conjure up the warble of the breeze over the water or its warm caress against my face, but gradually, my shudders peter out.

Over time, I've built an extensive imaginary world inside my head. Along with the exotic locations from my scrapbook, I summon up scenes from favorite movies: mine, sweeping fantasy epics of heroic adventures, and the ones Mom always loved, comedies where everyone speaks in arch remarks and often with British accents. In the long stretches of when I'm left alone, I fantasize about stepping into those stories, joining conversations with comments that sound just as valiant or smart. It stops my brain from turning into mush with boredom.

If it weren't for that pretend world, this existence would probably have reduced me to a mess of vague thoughts, shudders, and pain by now. I run my fingers down my side to my right hipbone, to the tiny mottling of scars there. One for each year I've been able to mark, digging my ragged fingernail into my skin until it bled. Eight altogether.

How many more years lie ahead if they shackle me to a ruined body and set me to work? Will I even be able to drift away inside my head in between the worst parts, or will I lose even that make-believe escape?

Another shiver ripples through me. I force myself to breathe slow and steady. The chance isn't gone yet. I have to focus on that and not on the terrors that might lie ahead.

As I uncurl myself, I reach toward the ceiling of my cage. I might not be able to walk in here, but I've kept myself strong however I can. Gripping the bars, I heft myself up and down, over and over, until a different sort of ache burns through my muscles.

It isn't comfortable, but there's something satisfying about knowing I still have some small say over what my body is put through. It helps that the exertion makes it hard to think about my future, now even more precarious

than before.

I'm bicycling my legs in an attempt to work those muscles too when the sound I've been waiting for reaches my ears. The muffled but audible thud of what I assume is the building's front door carries all the way to this room.

I flip into a crouched position, keeping most of my weight on my good foot. My captors never say much around me, but from the snippets I've gathered over the years, I've gotten the impression they have to leave this place to complete their plans. I don't know who else might live in the building other than the three of them, but to the best of my knowledge, no one else here has ever seen me. Even if I run into another inhabitant, they might not realize I'm meant to be a prisoner.

If I want to regain my freedom, this is my best opportunity. Possibly the last opportunity I'm ever going to get.

I just have to say that strange word right.

I tip so close to the cage door that my forehead brushes the bars. Fixing my eyes on the latch, I dredge up my memory of my captor's lilting pronunciation. My voice comes out in a whisper. "Fee-doom-ace-own."

When I reach through the bars to rattle the latch, it doesn't budge. I'm *sure* I said it exactly the same way Yellow did. But then, I've felt that way dozens of times before.

"Fee-doom-ace-own," I say at the latch, letting my voice rise, shifting my inflection. "Fee-doom-ace-own. Fee-doom-ace-own. Fee-doom-ace-own! Come on!"

My heart is pounding. I grasp the bars and gather my composure. It's not just being trapped in here that I'm scared of. I'm also scared of what will happen if I *do* get out. What I might face beyond this room. What my captors will do to me if they catch me. Every time I've tried this, that terror lurks right behind my resolve.

I can't let the fear stop me. I *can't*. Nothing could be worse than what I'll face if the sharp-edged man gets his way.

Thinking about dragging myself around this place with its bone-white floors and walls, scrubbing them clean, enduring jabs and kicks all day long, my soul recoils. That tropical pool I dream about is out there somewhere. Even if it feels like a fantasy now, it's a place as real as this one. Wouldn't it be worth anything to get there?

I'll scream at the lock until I'm hoarse if that's what it takes. I can do this. I have to.

I train my gaze on the lock and pull all my determination into my lungs. “Fee-doom-ace-own. *Fee-doom-ace-own*. Fee-doom-ace-own. *Fee-doom-ace-own!*”

The final incantation crackles over my tongue like an electric shock. The hairs on my arms jump to attention, my mouth goes abruptly dry—and the latch twists beneath my desperate fingers.

I’m so startled I nearly choke on the little saliva I have left. Breath held, I apply more pressure, and the latch turns all the way. The door squeaks open at my nudge. The way is clear.

I’m *free*. Of the cage, at least. Oh my god.

In that first moment, my body locks in place. I clench my jaw and tug the scratchy fabric of my blanket around me in a makeshift cloak. I ease out through the opening, first my head and shoulders, then a shuffling step—

A thump and a shattering sound reverberates through the room’s ceiling, and I flinch. Panic seizes me.

They’ve come back. They’ve come back early, and they’re angry.

The thought has barely passed through my head before voices filter through the door. Terror blanks my mind. On pure instinct, I yank the cage’s door closed and throw myself to the back of the space, huddling under the blanket in case something in my expression or my pose will give away what I’ve accomplished.

There’s a scuffling noise outside, which isn’t what I’d expect. Then footsteps tramp in, accompanied by those voices—but now that I can hear them more clearly, I don’t recognize the speakers.

“Phew. Whatever they were keeping in that cage, they obviously didn’t believe in cleaning up after it.” That voice is buoyant with more warmth than I’ve ever heard any of my captors express. He must take me for just a heap of blanket, nothing living in here right now. I will my body to stay utterly still.

It doesn’t sound as if he’s *bothered* by the fact that my captors would have been keeping something in this cage. Even if he seems friendlier than them, that doesn’t mean he’s any kinder. Who are these people? What are they doing here?

“This doesn’t look like a room where they’d be keeping their notes stashed,” he goes on. “Or... how did Syllas put it? ‘Apparatus’?”

The voice that answers is dryly melodic but equally male. “If only Aerik and his cadre had been kind enough to leave detailed instructions posted in their front hall. It appears they’re just as irritating in this as they are in every

other way.”

“I suppose it *is* their big secret.”

“Let’s not have any sympathy for the devils, now. Come on, we may as well have a look in this cabinet while we’re here.”

I’m still tensed, motionless, under the blanket, but the fabric has fallen so that one fold gives me a sliver of a view into the room. A man strides into view, tall with ample brawn filling out his simple tee, dark auburn hair sprouting above his broad, boyish face. As he inspects the cabinet, his eyes gleam so avidly I assume the first voice was his.

He doesn’t look menacing, despite all that powerful bulk, and his ears are smoothly rounded at the top, but my gaze catches on the black symbols inked on his skin. One follows the curve of his bicep; another partly encircles his wrist. Symbols like the tattoos all three of my captors display.

My body goes even more rigid than it already was. Whoever he is, he must be one of them. A man-who’s-not-a-man. A monster in human-like skin.

The other man saunters up beside him: even taller and equally brawny in his high-collared shirt, his tawny hair ruffled into artful disarray. Where the first man gives off an eager, youthful energy, this one is all languid, muscular poise. With the angle of his face, I can only see the corner of his smile—and an ear with a low but obvious point at its peak.

“Well, now we know where they keep some of their empty glassware and linens. No papers in there?”

The boyish one leans in to paw through the contents. “Doesn’t look like it.” He sighs and swivels on his heel with no diminishing of his upbeat energy. “So much for that. Let’s see what else they’ve stashed down here in the basement.”

The poised one holds up his hand. The edge of a tattoo spirals up across the heel to his palm. “Just a moment. There’s something…” He inhales audibly and turns—toward me.

I stop breathing completely. I am a rock. A bundle of rags. A lump of nothingness that should be of no interest to anyone.

My silent pleas have no effect. The man’s nostrils flare, and he stalks toward my cage with a purposefulness that turns my gut to water.

# 2



## *Talia*

With the intruder standing right in front of my cage, I can only make out one leg in trim midnight-blue slacks through the small gap in the folds of my blanket. My body screams out for me to sink into the hard metal floor, away from him—as if I wouldn’t have done that years ago if I could.

Please, no. I was so close. Just leave, leave me alone, let me flee.

My heart is thudding so hard it nearly drowns out his dry voice.

“With all the foul smells in here I almost missed it. Take a good, deep breath, little brother, and tell me what your nose tells you.”

The other one sucks in a breath. My own breath quivers over my lips, as shallow as I can keep it.

“There’s a hint—like the tonic.” The boyish one’s voice vibrates with excitement. “And... human.” Another breath. “Female?”

Oh, no. What do I do now? The cage door—it isn’t even locked. I released the magic on the latch. Horror crawls through me with a betraying twitch of my arm.

“Human, female, and awake, though in what state beyond that I can hardly guess. It would appear this cage is still in use after all.” There’s a



rustle of fabric as the poised man drops into a crouch. “Get our glorious leader. He should be here for this.”

Footsteps thump as the other one dashes away. An ache has formed at the top of my throat. It’s taking all my strength to hold my body in place, frantic tension clutching every muscle.

The way these men have talked, I don’t think they like my captors very much. What does that mean for me? What are they going to do to me?

They could be better than the monsters who stole me... or they could be worse. And even *better* wouldn’t necessarily mean *good*. Right now, all I’m sure of is they’re cutting off my last chance at escape.

The man speaks in a lower, smoother tone. “Hello in there. Why don’t you come out and let us have a look at you? Can you even understand me?”

As long as he thinks I can’t, I have an excuse not to respond. I stay where I am.

More footsteps thump into the room—at least a few sets. How many of these intruders are there?

A rich baritone resonates through the room with a note of total authority. “What’s the fuss about, Whitt? We can’t be sidetracked by Aerik’s vulgar hobbies.”

“I don’t think this is a sidetrack—I think this is *the* track, straight to our goal. Perhaps they have this servant assist them in making the tonic. There’s a whiff of it in here.”

“All the whiffs I’m catching are putrid,” a fourth voice says, this one sharp and grating. It reminds me so strongly of the man who pinned me down less than an hour ago that I flinch.

There’s a pause, and then I sense someone else crouching by the cage. “No, Whitt’s right. Can she speak?”

“I don’t know,” says the poised one who’s apparently named Whitt. “This is all we’ve gotten out of her so far: a very adept impression of a crumpled blanket.”

“Well, we don’t have time to wait for her to warm up to us. Let’s see what we’ve got in here.”

The latch clicks; the hinges squeak. My body clenches up, my fingers digging into the coarse fabric, but of course that doesn’t stop him. A powerful tug on the blanket pulls it partway off me, exposing my bare back and legs to the room’s cool air.

It’s too much. Panic flashes through me, and without any conscious

intention, I'm snatching at the blanket, wrenching it toward me, kicking out with my legs. My good foot smacks a solid arm. I jerk back against the bars of the cage, my pulse hammering—oh god, am I going to have my ankle shattered by *these* monsters?

The man with the resonant voice just... laughs. Not my captors' jeering snickers, but a deep guffaw as if he's a little impressed along with his amusement. "We've got a fighter," he says. "Pitiful thing. Come on now, we just need to talk."

And I'm supposed to believe that? I let the fabric tumble away from my face so I can see what I'm fighting against and find myself staring into a pair of mismatched eyes set in brown skin.

The man who's leaning through the cage door looms even larger and brawnier than the first two, like a grizzly among lesser bears. He carries a mark of at least one violent battle. His right eye, fixed on me, is a dark brown as rich as his voice. The other shines milky white, bisected by a pale, jagged scar that cuts from his hairline across the eyelid to halfway down his cheek.

Thick waves of coffee-brown hair fall to his massive shoulders, but don't quite obscure the steep points of his ears. Curving black lines of tattoos creep up his neck from under his shirt collar. More darken his forehead and the edges of his jaw. Every inch of his being emanates power.

The sense washes over me that if he wanted to, he could maul any of my captors to shreds without suffering more than a few scratches. Possibly all three of them at the same time.

I don't stand a chance.

"There we go," he says evenly. "Answer a few questions about your masters, and we'll leave you alone. We're not here to hurt you."

Someone behind him makes a rough noise. The boyish man-who's-not-a-man peers over the grizzly's shoulder. "Somehow I'm thinking Aerik and them don't have the same qualms."

"It's none of our concern," the sharp-voiced man says from somewhere beyond my view. "Let dung-bodies wallow in dung. We need to know about the tonic."

"Hush," the grizzly says without looking back, quiet but firm. His attention stays on me. "What do they have you do for them, little scrap? Something like cooking? Can you tell us about it?"

My voice stays locked at the back of my mouth. I don't want to tell them anything, but I'm not sure I could even if I did want to. There's a lump as big

and hard as a fist lodged in my throat.

“It appears she’s dumb in more ways than one,” the sharp voice says. “Drag her out and make her show us.”

I can see just enough of the poised one—Whitt’s—face to watch him roll his pale eyes. “Right. Fantastic plan. Take the creature that’s already terrified mute and terrify her more. That’ll definitely open her up.”

“There are other ways we could open her up,” the other snaps.

The grizzly slashes his broad hand through the air, its back dappled with another tattoo. “Enough.” As the others fall silent, his gaze roves over me. Even with the blanket, even though he only has one eye to inspect me with, I feel utterly exposed.

“Ignore them,” he says to me. “This is just between you and me. Your masters let you out sometimes, don’t they? They bring you to another room—somewhere they’re mixing things or bottling things? I only need to know where, and then we’re gone. We’ll see that you forget we were ever even here.”

I do want them gone. Gone so I can scramble out of here before those “masters” return. But I have no idea what he’s talking about. My captors never let me out, and I’ve never heard them talk about cooking anything.

My throat is still closed, but I manage to shake my head, willing him to understand. Willing him not to be angry. I don’t have what they want. I can’t help them with whatever they’re searching for.

“No?” He frowns, which turns his already intimidating face fierce. My pulse lurches. “Do they bring something in here for you to help them with?”

I shake my head again, not quite restraining a shiver at the same time, and the blanket slips over my arm. The grizzly glances down at my wrist, and even though he was crouching there unmoving before, somehow he goes even more still.

Before I can react, his hand shoots out to grab my arm just below the bandage. He yanks it toward him. A yelp jolts out of me.

I try to scramble backward, but there’s nowhere to go, and his fingers grip me tightly. He pulls my wrist level with his nose. His eyes widen.

“Please,” I say, my voice stretching so thin on its way up my constricted throat that it’s barely a whisper.

He doesn’t seem to hear. Still clutching my arm, he turns toward his companions.

“She doesn’t smell like the tonic because they put her to work on it. She

smells like it because she *is* it.”

The one called Whitt guffaws. “She *is* the tonic? She hardly looks fit to be bottled.”

The grizzly glowers at him and jerks my arm up higher. “They bled her today. The scent is clear as anything. *This* is their wretched secret ingredient.”

Through the panic and my scattered thoughts, the pieces click together. What they’re searching for is the same as the reason the other monsters take my blood. They aren’t going to leave me alone. They’re here for *me*.

What fresh hell will they drag me into?

The moment that question crosses my mind, my body is already reacting. I flail and thrash, hitting out with every limb, a piercing wail wrenching out of me. *No, no, no. No more. Not when I was so close.*

“Shut her up!” one of them says.

The grizzly is already heaving me toward him, blanket and all. His powerful arms squeeze me against him, trapping my arms. The smacking of my knees against his thighs doesn’t make him so much as blink. His hand claps over my mouth, and a scent like earth and woodsmoke fills my nose with my next frantic breath.

As I squirm and kick, voices volley around us.

“This isn’t what we planned for. We weren’t supposed to be taking prisoners.”

“If she’s what we need, then she’s our new guest of honor. Let’s get her out of here fast, before she makes such a stir the neighbors catch on.”

“Snap her neck—that would do the trick.”

Panic blares through me with a shriller edge. I struggle twice as hard, as hopeless as it feels. The grizzly hefts me up in his arms like I’m weightless, one arm dropping to catch my legs, and then I’m bundled tight against him, barely able to move. I swing back my head, one of the few parts of me not clamped in place, and my skull slams into my kidnapper’s jaw.

He lets out the faintest of grunts, his grip not loosening in the slightest. “Kill her, and there goes the supply. We’ll take her—now. But we need her pliant to get her out of here unnoticed. August, the blanking grip.”

“But—”

The next word is a snarl. “*Now.*”

I wriggle in his hold like a fish wrapped in a net, my head whipping back and forth, but it’s not enough. The man with the warm, boyish face steps up