The Courage of Stars

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The Courage of Stars

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Summary

Laura's not sure if she's cut out for the world of magic, but that doesn't mean she's going to give up--either on her studies at Hogwarts, or on figuring out the many secrets Carmilla seems to be hiding.

Or: the Marauders-era AU no one asked for.

Notes

This story is set during the Marauders era at Hogwarts, but the Marauders--and most familiar HP names--are side/background characters.

There will be a happy ending eventually, I promise.

2018 Update: This story currently updates once per month, with plans to post on a much more frequent basis once I have the final third of it squared away.
Prologue

She could not feel the stone under her feet. They were bare—they had been for days—and it showed. The numbness seemed to resonate throughout her, though, not playing favorites with any particular limb or region. There had been a point when she was certain it was over, and that she would not wake again... but her eyes had opened once more, and here she was.

Like someone that had tipped past the edge of starving, she no longer felt the madness of the torture, no longer screamed or felt her thoughts spinning. As if the color had been sucked out, the world felt dull at the edges, like she could tilt and the whole of her existence would pour out into a murky puddle.

It was a very odd feeling.

The staircase was long, or at least it felt that way, for her head kept bobbing with every jolt, her knees hitting the walls as she was man-handled about the turns. The spiral was narrow, and her captors had to continuously re-adjust their grip at her elbows.

Perhaps a few days ago she would have considered taking advantage—fighting back while they were distracted. A few days ago, she might have still had the will to live. Now, though, she found that she did not really care where she was being taken. Even the faintest curiosity seemed too much effort, like her skull would crack with the effort of interest.

They paused, one of the men tapping his wand against the doorknob of a very large, very heavy-looking door, and it occurred to her that they had stopped moving, stopped traveling down. The lock made a metallic click that seemed utterly out of place, but the hinges made up for the dainty sound, creaking in a near-roar as the door swung open before them.

They tossed her in, and her shoulder hit the floor hard, her skull cracking and sending stars spinning across her vision. For a moment, she mused that maybe this would be how she died, and how maybe it wouldn’t be so bad... but then the door slammed, and her vision cleared.

She did not sit up, letting her body lay sprawled as it had fallen, her hands resting in a dusty collection of hay scraps. Her breath seemed to rattle, when she let it out—a necessity rather than a conscious decision—and it stirred the dust such that she had to blink against the water that built up in her eyes.

And then she noticed the figure.

She sat up slowly, her expression blank, her arms breaking into pins and needles at the unexpected pressure. There was someone else in the tiny room with her, someone with their back turned and their shoulders hunched. Their silhouette was cast in sharp relief against the glow of moonlight that broke in from the sliver of grated window.

It was night, apparently, and this was news to her. She had lost track of the date some time ago. The ghost of a spasm shook down her spine, and she curled away from it instinctively, a tiny whimper slipping free.

The form turned, then, and the whimper turned into a yelp, her back slamming hard into the wall and her palms slapping against the stone behind her.

The girl’s pale, white face seemed to shimmer in the dim light, curtains of matted, dark hair falling down over her eyes. Her chin was a dark, glistening crimson—and her teeth seemed to glow, jaws
parted in a snarl and canines sharp like fangs.

A word—a *name*—caught in the gulp of her lungs, her lips parting but no sound making it out, for the girl was upon her in a flash, teeth burying themselves in the flesh of her neck with a sickening, wet *shnick*.

Eyes wide, her breath rattled out as a question, as a last gasp of disbelief.

She had expected to die.

And yet, she had not expected Carmilla.
"She’s glaring at you," came the amused mutter from her right. Laura Hollis turned, eyes sweeping past the ginger flop of LaFontaine’s hair to find a set of dark eyes locked on her. The girl did not turn away, nor look fazed at being caught in the act. If anything, her eyebrows seemed to lift a little, as if in challenge.

Laura rolled her eyes and turned her focus back to the parchment before her.

“It would take more than a look for her to keep me from winning that Cup,” she hissed back.

From LaFontaine’s other side, Perry made a low, tutting sound in the back of her throat. Her nose was practically pressed to her paper, her quill scratching with dangerous speed. There were little flecks of ink on her cheek.

“Chill,” urged LaF, giving her an elbow in the ribs. “We’re studying, not taking a test.”

Perry’s eyes narrowed, and she lifted her head and straightened her back, squaring her shoulders such that she looked the very picture of posture. To Laura, she just looked uncomfortable—not that she would voice such an opinion aloud.

“We are studying for a test. And if you keep distracting one another, you won’t finish the practice questions before class lets out, which means you won’t know what you need to ask Professor Flitwick, which means you will instead pester me while I try to finish the Potions assignment tonight.”

“Uh, potions assignment?” Laura gulped. Her alarm earned a reproachful stare, rife with judgment.

“Not due until next week,” LaF prompted quickly, under their breath. Laura deflated. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“Thank goodness. Don’t scare me like that, Perry.”

Perry sniffed. “If you two insist on doing all of your work at the last minute, you won’t be prepared for exams. And I won’t help you—I’ll let you fail. That will teach you.”

LaFontaine snorted. “You wouldn’t let us fail. You love us too much. Maybe you’d let us sink to ‘Acceptable’ or even ‘Poor,’ but you’d dig us out before we stooped to ‘Troll.’”

“Don’t test me,” Perry snipped, and her hair flounced as she dropped her nose back to the page.

LaF watched her a moment, and then leaned in close at Laura’s side and hissed, “We already tested her. Last year… and the year before that…”

Laura hid her smile, biting back a chuckle before re-reading the questions on the chalkboard. Professor Flitwick shuffled past, stopping to speak with Rita Turnwell, who had a stuttering question on summoning charms.

She wasn’t worried about exams. Not really, anyway. Yes, she and LaF would likely be up until the crack of dawn reading Perry’s meticulous notes and attempting to understand the complex magic they’d been studiously day-dreaming through over the course of the year… but it would all turn out
fine in the end. What Laura was truly worried about—a far more pressing issue, really—was the Quidditch match on Saturday morning.

Hufflepuff was boasting particularly good Chasers this year, and if Gryffindor fell, the odds were high that the Cup would fall into Ravenclaw’s hands—which was completely unacceptable.

No team with a Chaser as dreadful as Carmilla Karnstein deserved to win anything.

Almost subconsciously, she swiveled in her seat, eyes narrowing in on the other girl. Dark hair cascading onto her parchment, she appeared to be doodling absentely rather than working on anything serious. Her face, resting in the cup of her palm, expressed utter boredom. Laura scowled as Professor Flitwick swept past her, failing to comment on her lack of dedication.

She was his favorite, and Laura felt a wave of dislike that she knew he did not deserve. He was a good professor. Possibly one of the best at Hogwarts.

To combat her bitterness, she spun back to the front, glaring at her messy handwriting and the splotches of ink that had leaked off her quill and into the margins. One section had smudged, and it now looked as though she thought there was great importance in ‘swinging and flipping’ when performing levitation charms.

“We should go to the library to finish this,” Perry declared, the moment they had been dismissed. The words jarred Laura from her thoughts. She had been counting down until the end of class for several minutes, running through flight patterns in her head and drawing Quaffles in the columns of her notes rather than taking in any of the words.

LaF made a face. “Can’t it wait until later?” they said, at the same time as Laura cut in with “I can’t—I’ve got practice.”

Perry’s brow got the little crease in the middle that it always got when Laura brought up Quidditch. But how could that possibly be more important? she always seemed to be thinking.

“Well,” she said tersely, “I guess it will just be the two of us, then.”

“But—” LaF started to say, shooting Laura a look of betrayal. They didn’t get the chance to finish the protest, because Perry hooked their arm rather menacingly, and swept them off up the corridor.

Laura winced guiltily. Yet, an extra skip slipped into her step on her way down the stairs, through the halls, and out onto the familiar path to the Quidditch Pitch. LaFontaine would be fine—once Perry let them break for dinner—and whatever success they had at studying they would surely pass onto Laura later that night, complete with a recap of every maddening thing Perry had said and done.

“Sometimes I just don’t get her,” LaF would grumble, glaring at the pages of precise notes Perry would leave them—having safely stowed away her complete homework in order to ‘remove the temptation’ so they would ‘actually learn the material.’

Despite their words, Laura suspected LaF got Perry just fine.

It was a perfect evening for Quidditch. The sun was still hovering over the horizon, the days stretching with the approach of summer, and the clouds that had blanketed the sky during their Herbology lesson that morning had been swept away by the faintest of chilly breezes. The sky was awash with pink and orange and indigo, now, and clear as could be.

Laura didn’t even mind the encroaching cool of dusk as she soared up into the open air, closing her eyes and letting the sensation take her over. It was like an elevator, or a roller coaster, but not quite. It
was at once vastly disquieting—the openness around her, the ground falling away—and deeply familiar. The tug in her gut was rife with memories, and she smiled stupidly to herself as she blinked her eyes back open and swiveled in mid-air, much higher than she had intended to climb. The castle was laid out in full glory, lights already flickering in a few windows of Gryffindor Tower.

Somewhere far below, a piercing whistle cut through her serenity, and she dropped into a quick descent.

Their last Chaser had finally arrived, accompanied by his usual trio of comrades. The boys claimed seats high up in the stands, cheering rowdily. Laura noted the way the new kid swept his hand through his already unkempt hair, tousling it as though he’d been flying for hours. She rolled her eyes.

Second years.

“Alright, team, listen up!” Danny Lawrence towered over them, six feet of intimidating smolder. She was in full Quidditch gear—despite this having been branded a ‘practice’—and her arms were on her hips as she surveilled them. There was something disapproving in the set of her jaw, though that was hardly unusual.

“We are one game away from the Quidditch Cup. I don’t need to remind any of you that Gryffindor has not won the Cup in seven years. We don’t just want this win, we need this win—and it is up to each-and-every-one-of-you—” she pronounced each word carefully, making unsettling eye contact with each team member in turn. “—to do your part.”

Laura met the Captain’s stare with an eyebrow raise, crossing her arms. She was more than ready to do whatever it took—Danny didn’t need to intimidate her into wanting the win.

There was little she wouldn’t do to wipe that infuriating smirk off of Carmilla’s face.

As if she understood, Danny gave her a minute nod before lifting her chin and continuing her speech: “We need at least seventy points before we catch the Snitch. Ravenclaw has six hundred and twenty points. We have four hundred. And if we do not score at least ninety points total… we are coming in dead last.”

She paused, as if to let that information sink in—as though she had not been professing it in every waking moment of the past month. Laura herself had been cornered on Tuesday between classes to be ‘inspired’ about how intensely she needed to be preparing.

“We will not be letting that happen. Johnson, you’re going to keep Kirsch occupied and away from that Snitch. Fake him out. Take him for a ride. I don’t care; have some fun. But you do not catch that Snitch until I say so. Carter, Pearce! I want Turkwater out of the match. Do what you have to.”

Melanie Carter raised an eyebrow. Davie Pearce grinned and rubbed his hands together.

“Hollis,” Danny practically growled, “You’re the best damn Keeper this team has ever had, but this week I don’t care about saves. I care about returns. Don’t block the Quaffle, catch it. Get it back to us so we can put points on the board. I want precision, I want speed, I want coordination. Anyone who can’t give me that should get off this pitch.”

No one moved. Laura, like her fellow teammates, was all-too-familiar with Danny’s overzealous coaching. When Laura had joined the team the year before, Davie had warned her that their newly-promoted Captain was deeply competitive. At the time, he had suggested that she would ‘get into the groove of things,’ and calm down eventually.
Davie had been wrong. If anything, Danny had become more obsessed over the course of the past two years.

“I’ve put together a series of practice drills that we’re going to run through—and we will stay out here until we’ve got them perfect. Let’s go.”

They did not get the drills perfect.

They stayed on the pitch until well after ten o’clock, gritting their teeth through all of Danny’s critiques, until Professor McGonagall appeared, called them down, and berated them for risking illness with such an important game looming. Then she sent them back to the Tower—thankfully sans punishment—but not before Danny extracted a promise from them all to meet again Friday afternoon for one final practice.

“Hey,” LaF cried, snagging Laura’s wrist before she could drop her next ingredient into her cauldron. “It’s supposed to be beetle wings, not legs.”

“Oh,” Laura gulped. Her cauldron bubbled ominously. It was a goopy, deep purple. In contrast, the cauldron LaF and Perry were sharing was a pleasant pink, and it smelled faintly of rosemary.

Rather uselessly, Davie Pearce was scowling at his worn-out textbook beside her, shaking his head.

Laura had been distracted through all of her classes that morning, her head still on the pitch, but potions had never been particularly intriguing. This was not be the first time she had required a rescue. There was one incident in particular, from first year, that LaFontaine was gracious enough to never bring up. Perry was less accommodating. When she was particularly frustrated—usually when LaFontaine was not around to balance them out—she would mutter “snake eyes,” with biting ferocity and a sweeping flush of shame would rise on Laura’s chest.

LaFontaine eyed the side of the room, where Professor Slughorn was surveying the work of two Hufflepuff girls. Sighing with dramatic flair they had picked up from Perry, they measured out the remainder of their own beetle wings with precise movements and scraped them into Laura and Davie’s cauldron.

It began to sizzle. Laura winced, but LaFontaine’s lack of concern suggested that this was the correct response to the new ingredient.

There were so many reasons Laura hated this class.

“Stir three times counterclockwise, once clockwise. Do that ten times, got it? And for Merlin’s sake, read the board.”

Laura nodded hurriedly. Davie was now frowning at the cauldron, as though confused at why it was now making noises. His eyes shifted back to the book.

“Thanks,” Laura muttered.

Professor Slughorn appeared, a jolly grin on his face. “LaFontaine and Perry, ah, what a beautiful brew! And is that… a hint of mint that I detect?”

“To counteract the bloating side-effect.”

“Oh, of course! Ingenious, ingenious… twenty points to Gryffindor, eh?”
He tilted his head to glance into Laura’s cauldron, grimaced, and ducked away without comment. Laura’s ears burnt crimson.

“You messed with the instructions again,” Perry commented. There was disapproval in her tone, though she clearly did not dare make any accusation—not when they had earned points for Gryffindor.

“Uh-huh,” LaF agreed. Laura caught their grin, and suppressed one of her own. It was not nice, after all, to taunt Perry when she was distressed.

“Dammit, Laura,” came the mutter, not two minutes later. LaFontaine steadied her hand again, and didn’t bother explaining as they plucked the knife from her grip and used the blade to crush the juice out of the cranberries before tipping the liquid into the cauldron.

The color it turned was closer to maroon than pink, but it was progress. And the goopy-ness had gone, which had to be a good sign. There were potions that were supposed to be goopy, but LaFontaine’s own cauldron was decidedly smooth and glossy, its color a dark brown reminiscent of melted chocolate.

Perry’s lips were very thin, and very pale. Her brow was knit into one long line. She said nothing, but the whole of her posture was complaining ‘Laura will learn nothing if you keep helping her, LaFontaine.’

Laura felt a swelling desire in her chest. It was an inward, crushing sensation, and not unfamiliar despite its unpleasantness.

If only she were good at something, the way Perry’s wand worked flawlessly through her Charms lessons and LaF intuitively knew how to handle every ingredient in Potions. It seemed like every class was a struggle, like she was re-reading every set of instructions three times before she even got close to the results she wanted.

The only time she really felt free, or talented, was when she was up in the Quidditch Pitch, and she did not need Perry’s reminders to know that Quidditch did not count as a real skill. She would never be good enough to earn a spot on her beloved Holyhead Harpies, and what was the point of flying well if she wasn’t the best?

Still, she had only let in three Quaffles from Slytherin, during the last match.

It was the Ravenclaw misses that got to her, from the first game of the season. Slytherin had been an easy win. Johnson had snatched up the Snitch in less than one hour. Ravenclaw, on the other hand, had stretched their game out nearly four hours. The stands had half-emptied, by the time it was over. They had been behind by twenty points when Johnson nicked the Snitch out from underneath Jenna Martin’s nose.

Laura had let in eighty whole points, while the Snitch was in hiding. Gryffindor had only scored sixty in the same timeframe. She replayed those points in her head endlessly, in the weeks after the game. She was still replaying them—sometimes in her sleep, wondering how she could have timed her moves better, how she could have anticipated Huxley’s throws…

Because it was Huxley, undeniably, who was the real star of the show. Without their Captain, Ravenclaw was a sinking ship.

And the anchor was one Carmilla Karnstein.

Laura would give anything to win on Saturday, if it only meant keeping the Quidditch Cup out of the
hands of that miserable girl.

‘HOLLIS IS A KEEPER’ glittered the shining banner that hung from the front of the Gryffindor stands. An entirely-too-proud-of-himself Sirius Black had put the finishing touches on it the night before in the common room. He wolf-whistled, as Laura shot past on her way to the hoops.

As she took up her position, squinting to watch the play at the other end of the field—Danny was carrying out one of her newest maneuvers, flanked by her fellow Chasers—she caught sight of the banner as it changed colors, displaying ‘HUFFLEFART’ in block letters.

Laura couldn’t help it. She laughed.

And then three canary yellow blurs were streaking towards her, and the stands became much less interesting. She squared up, adjusted her grip on her broom handle, and let her instincts take over.

She caught the Quaffle with ease and lobbed it straight into the waiting hands of Danny, who shot past and arched her way across the field.

The first goal was hers, sailing smoothly through the center hoop after Turkwater fell for her right feint.

*Classic Lawrence.*

The Hufflepuff Keeper was far from inept, though. He dodged every bludger that the Gryffindor Beaters launched his way—and saved several of the Quaffles at the same time. It was a testament to just how good Danny was—and how hard she pushed the team—that Gryffindor was up 40-0 when the first hour mark chirped on Laura’s watch.

*_Just thirty more points,*_ Laura was thinking, when the crowd roared and all eyes spun to find the Seekers. Johnson was rocketing on the heels of Wilson Kirsch, and, though Laura could not make out the Snitch, she knew it must be there, just beyond the tips of Kirsch’s outstretched fingers.

She did the math without thinking about it, having run every possible scenario over and over in her head the night before.

If Hufflepuff won right now, they would claim second. And Gryffindor, having not yet made ninety… would fall behind even the dreadful Slytherin. They would be making history, too. Gryffindor had not come in last in nearly fifty years—or so Danny kept telling them.

“HOLLIS!” Danny roared, as the Quaffle soared past her and through the left goalpost. She dove to reclaim it, hearing the game commentary in the distant background as she lobbed the ball back to one of the players in crimson. She barely noticed which of her teammates it was.

“*Hufflepuff sneaks one by Hollis—that’s a first for this game. And the Seekers are back at it—for a moment there it looked like the Snitch pulled a Houdini, but this time it’s Johnson in the lead. They’re coming up around the Hufflepuff side of the pitch… Oh! That was a low blow! Turkwater’s gonna be nursing that tomorrow. That’s what happens when you take your eye off the Bludger, folks…”*”

She searched the pitch for the Seekers, catching sight of the stands just as the banner was being magically wiped clean of its newest image—a profane visage of a badger and an eagle enjoying one another’s company. Professor McGonagall seemed to be lecturing the three second years, who were no doubt completely un-apologetic for their behavior. If she were closer, Laura did not doubt she’d see three sneaky grins on their ducked faces.
A moment later, McGonagall was leaning out towards the pitch, shouting enthusiastically, reprimands forgotten. The Seekers whirred past, Johnson barely ahead of Kirsch.

Laura straightened up just in time to throw out an arm and block the Quaffle that soared out of nowhere. It plummeted, and Danny swept past underneath her to claim it.

*Get your head in the game, Hollis,* Laura urged herself, giving her head a little shake. One of Danny’s biggest training points was her emphasis that they each play their own game.

“I don’t care what the seekers are doing, Hollis, all you need to care about is that Quaffle!”

She ducked a particularly agitated Bludger, dodging around the hoops as it gave momentary chase, boomeranging its way back into the main pitch. Pearce batted it away, shooting her a thumbs-up.

“What’s this? Johnson appears to be taunting the Hufflepuff Seeker. It doesn’t look like there is a Snitch after all, and Kirsch barely saves himself from a face-plant on the field! And GOAL for Gryffindor! Potter puts a neat one away. Turkwater seems to be favoring his left after that Bludger—which really should have been a foul, come to think of it—and the Gryffindors are certainly taking advantage… Quaffle goes back to Gryffindor after yet another tricky Bludger from Carter… looks like Lawrence is going to try for another—YES! Back-to-back for Gryffindor, and Hollis might as well take a nap, for all the attention she’s getting."

The scoreboard read 60-10.

Spurred on by the humiliation, all three Hufflepuff Chasers surged down the pitch towards her, the Quaffle flying between them in perfect synchronisation. The Gryffindors were far behind—Pearce was chasing one of the Bludgers in an attempt to launch it down and interrupt the play—but the timing was off.

Laura dove, her fingertips brushing the Quaffle as it slammed off the rim and cut its way through the hoop.

She cursed as she chased it downwards, barely saving it from hitting the ground. Copeland circled her, giving her a nod of encouragement as she accepted the Quaffle and headed back towards the Hufflepuff goal—keeping low to the ground.

The Hufflepuff Chasers soared overhead like vultures, and Laura watched their progress as she rose back to her place in front of the center Gryffindor hoop.

Two goals, she thought bitterly. And they still needed another score of their own if they had a hope of pulling through for the Cup.

Merlin, she needed this. She was going to fail potions for sure… she needed something good…

Her gaze sought out the stands again, resting upon the distant forms that she knew to be Perry and LaFontaine. They were seated side-by-side, decked out in full Gryffindor gear. Laura grinned, knowing that Perry had not come to such an attire choice on her own. LaF had probably paid heavily in promises to spend afternoons in the library.

She appreciated the support.

Her focus swung down the stands, finding the sea of blue and silver that was Ravenclaw House. Many of them were sporting Hufflepuff yellow on top of their own House colors. She didn’t have the time to seek out Carmilla, but she knew that the other girl would no doubt be wearing some sort of shit-eating grin, wearing her traditional blue streaks across her face.
For someone so useless at the sport, she had a lot of pride in her team. Maybe she was just exceptionally grateful that they had let her on—perhaps her pureblood parents had bribed the team to get her a spot. Laura couldn’t see how else she deserved to be allowed to play.

The rest of Ravenclaw must be utterly dreadful.

*When Huxley graduates next year...* she thought eagerly, that will be the end of them.

“Lawrence comes up with another goal! That’s excellent form from an excellent form, if I say so myself... and if I’m not mistaken, that puts Gryffindor tied with Slytherin for the bottom of the Cup bracket. Now, all they need is one more—”

Laura did not hear the rest of JP Armitage’s commentary. Johnson had dove abruptly towards the ground, and Kirsch was pursuing—if this wasn’t a red-herring, then the game was within inches of Gryffindor’s grasp, and the Cup along with it—and then Kirsch pulled up abruptly, swerving as though he had been struck by something, though there were no Bludgers in sight...

And he was holding a hand up. Laura was too far away to be sure that she saw the flash of gold in his glove. There was no way… but Johnson pulled out of his dive empty-handed, turning with his mouth hanging open, and Laura’s heart was already in her throat, her gut twisting.

Danny had already landed, throwing aside her broom. Laura knew she was cursing.

Tied for last, Laura thought painfully, was the same thing as last.
The Important Things

Chapter Summary

The gang starts their Fourth Year at Hogwarts, well-aware that things outside the castle walls are turning very dark, indeed.

Fall of 1973 (Fourth Year)

“Who’s that, honey?”

Laura turned, following her Dad’s gaze. She scowled, scuffing her trainer on the platform concrete in agitation.

“No one, Dad.”

It was not no one. It was Carmilla Karnstein, and she was standing, alone, about five meters away, sipping her coffee with a self-satisfied grin.

“Well, she was just sizing you up,” he muttered, an eyebrow raised pointedly.

“Oh god, Dad, no,” Laura declared firmly. “Just… no.”

“Okay, okay. She looks like she’s in your year, and she’s, y’know, she seems—”

“Don’t finish that sentence. Please.”

He fell silent. Laura checked her watch. Quarter to eleven. The train should be there any moment. Her trunk sat heavily at her side, one hand resting on it possessively. Her new broom was strapped to the side, and she had asked the store-witch to put a series of protective charms on it… but that did not stop her from worrying.

It was a Cleansweep, the second-to-newest model, and it had been dreadfully expensive. She was still thanking her Dad up-and-down for insisting upon purchasing it as a late birthday present. He had argued that he had been planning on getting her one for quite some time, and lamented frequently that he did not get the chance to see her play.

She thought of the last game against Hufflepuff, and couldn’t help but be grateful that parents were not regularly invited to Hogwarts grounds. It was bad enough reliving the event in her head. She couldn’t imagine if she had been forced to spend the summer with an actual witness to her failure.

He had said “Aw, sorry, kiddo,” when she shrugged and told him that they had only pulled off a last-minute tie for third place. She had not felt like expanding further on the semantics of Quidditch, and he had seemed to sense this, not bringing up the topic until they were standing in Diagon Alley and he was waving her through the doors to the 2nd Hand Broom Shop… looking like a kid, himself, all the while.

Dad was always excited about the wizarding world—he didn’t need a special occasion or purchase to make his face light up when she talked about magic, and witnessing it first hand in the streets of wizarding London took years off of the wrinkles on his face.
“Can you do that?” he would ask, pointing zealously to a witch or wizard that was performing some standard spell in the streets. It was usually as simple as sweeping up or setting out wares, and she would just smile, promising that she would show him everything when she came of age and could do magic freely at home.

She was going to charm the dishes to wash themselves, and the clothing to put itself neatly away in their closets. He would never need to sweep another floor or bleach out the old claw-foot tub in their lone bathroom. The oven would self-clean, and set its own alarms so that he never ate another burnt roast.

Laura was going to give her single father some well-deserved rest.

“You’re going to get some fancy, magical job after you graduate,” he would argue, when she would list off these sorts of plans.

Sometimes, Laura feared the truth of his words. Days like today, though, when she was preparing to say goodbye for another long year away from him at Hogwarts, she swore to herself she would never let such a thing happen—even if she led the rest of her life as a Muggle and only ever did magic at home.

Some things were more important than the wizarding world. And she would give anything to preserve what little of that she had left.

“You’re sure you have everything you need?” he asked. The train whistle sounded distantly. Nearly time.

“Yup,” she assured him. He had already asked the question five times, between the loading of the car and their arrival at King’s Cross. “I’ll write you all the time. Every week,” she promised, as the train puffed its way onto the platform, shrouding them with white smoke.

He kissed the top of her head. “You better, or Cogs will come find me on his own. You know I’m his real favorite.”

She laughed, falling easily into his shoulder for a sideways hug. He squeezed her to him, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

The tiny screech owl hooted resolutely in his cage. He knew his name better than any dog. Sometimes she was certain he understood everything they were saying, and judging in silence. His golden eyes had a lofty, all-knowing gleam to them that she found endearing if not slightly unnerving.

“Well, he’s a smart owl,” she said softly.

She loaded her trunk into the luggage compartment, and then hopped free for one last, long, embrace.

“Every week,” he said, pointing a finger at her as she rested one foot on the platform and the other on the first step. Her fingers tightened on the railing.

“Every single one,” she insisted. “I’ll tell you all about practice—Danny will be over the moon when she sees my new Cleansweep.”

A shoulder rammed into hers. She stumbled, her smile faltering.

“Better point him back towards the barrier,” Carmilla snipped, thin eyebrows raised haughtily.
“Wouldn’t want a Muggle getting lost where he doesn’t belong.”

Laura ground her teeth, but spun back to give a final wave and a forced smile as the train began to shift, the whistle sounding. Dad waved back obliviously. His pale eyes were shiny.

Carmilla was already gone, when she turned down the row of compartments. The narrow aisle was filled with students in their Muggle clothing, laughing and greeting one another. Laura slipped past a trembling group of tiny first years—was I ever really that small and helpless?—and peered into each compartment in turn, searching for familiar faces.

She had not run into LaF or Perry on the platform, which was unusual.

“Hollis!” Danny Lawrence towered over her, beaming. The seventh year pulled her in for a hug.

“Oh my god, Danny!” Laura exclaimed, catching sight of a shiny new badge on her robes. “You’re Head Girl?”

Danny puffed out her chest proudly. “Yes! And my parents bought me a Cleansweep ’75 to celebrate! We’re going to dust those bloody Ravenclaws.”

Laura grinned, pushing aside the sinking sensation in her chest. She did not mention her Cleansweep ’69.

“We’re going to practice harder than ever this year. I need everyone at their best—you included. I can’t promise positions to anyone, even Gryffindor veterans. I’ve got a whole new routine planned, and tryouts are going to be intense this time around.” She gave Laura a hard look. “I’m only giving you a heads-up because I think you deserve the most consideration—but that doesn’t mean I won’t cut you if Gryffindor stands a better chance with someone else. Fair warning.”

“I’ll be ready,” Laura promised, suppressing a chuckle. “Perry!” she called, leaning around Danny as she caught sight of the other ginger poking her head out of an open compartment door.

With a quick see ya later, Danny headed past her, drifting towards the front of the train, and Laura embraced Perry first, and then LaF when they, too, emerged from the compartment.

“Found an empty one,” LaF said, prodding a thumb over their shoulder.

“I love your hair.” LaF had trimmed it again—it was buzzed neatly on the side, and the swoosh they had put into the top was extra dramatic, with a little curl at the end. LaF gave it a little toss, shrugging abashedly.

“How was your summer?” Perry pushed politely, as they settled into their seats. Outside, London had faded away, and they were rattling through green fields and shrubbery. LaFontaine tugged the window open, and the mixed scent of recently cut grass and acrid train smoke filtered in on the sharp breeze.

“Pretty solid. Dad bought me my own broomstick!”

“No way!” LaF cried, eyes lighting up. “What model?”

“Cleansweep ’69. I haven’t even had a chance to try it out, yet. We just went to Diagon Alley yesterday. I’m dying to get on the pitch. And, actually…” she raised a hopeful eyebrow and dropped her voice. “I might try to sneak down after the Start-of-Term Feast.”

“Sweet. I’ll be your lookout, if you let me have a go!”
“Uh, of course!”

Perry made a little sound in the back of her throat. “You two are going to start off the term with detentions—that’s not a great way to begin Fourth Year, you know. This is the time when our studies are starting to become very serious. We have O.W.L.s next year.”

“She’s been like this all summer,” LaF informed Laura, shaking their head. “Can’t stop talking about the damn O.W.L.s. You’d think they were next month, not two years from now.”

“It’s not two years,” Perry huffed. “It’s twenty months.”

Laura bit her lip to hide her smile. “Yes, sorry, Per, that’s definitely much sooner.”

“Be sarcastic all you want, Laura Hollis,” Perry sniffed. “Some of us will be working at the Ministry when we graduate—others will be cleaning the stands after Quidditch matches.”

“Such high hopes for us,” LaF piped up. “I thought I was going to be living in your basement—wasn’t that what you said second year, when I was refusing to study for the Defense exam with you?”

“I’ve concluded that I won’t have the space. Economically, it makes sense to get a small flat in London and begin building savings early. Supporting you simply won’t be in the cards, LaFontaine.”

“I’m crushed.”

“Now, hold on, Perry,” Laura interjected. “After you become Minister for Magic, then you’ll let us live in the basement of your mansion, right?”

Perry glared. “Let us hope things do not come to that.”

“What about you, Laura?” LaF tried, “When you’re a big, famous Quidditch star you’ll let me sleep on your couch, right?”

Laura felt a tug in her chest. She pushed it aside. “Of course, LaF.”

Perry rolled her eyes.

Outside the compartment, there was a rather loud crash. The three of them jumped in their seats. Perry pulled open the door to peer out.

“No need to panic,” James Potter professed. His hair was askew, half his face covered in soot. He was grinning from ear-to-ear. “Just a little incident. The tiniest of things. Go back to your regularly scheduled programming.”

Perry tugged the door shut with a cluck of her tongue.

“When I’m a Prefect…” she muttered under her breath.

“Eh, Snape probably deserves whatever it is,” LaF shrugged. They were reading a copy of the Daily Prophet, now, shoulder leaning against the window and feet up on the seat beside them. The headline read ‘CHAOS IN LIVERPOOL’ over a large, moving image of running figures and flashing spells.

Laura opened her mouth, a question forming as her brows drew together, but Perry spoke first.

“And how do you know it was Snape, hm?”
“Because it’s always Snape, when it comes to those four.”

“And you don’t think four-on-one is a bit unfair?”

“He holds his own. Besides, I caught him testing out some nasty spell down by the lake last spring. That kid is into some dark stuff.”

“That’s not something to joke about, LaFontaine,” Perry warned, her tone suddenly serious. “Just look at what you’re reading.”

“What happened in Liverpool?” Laura cut in eagerly. She couldn’t make out the words below the headline, and LaF kept shifting the paper as the train bumped along.

LaFontaine opened their mouth to reply, lowering the paper, but a cry of “Trolley!” came from the aisle. Their eyes lighting up, they hopped to their feet and extracted several sickles from their pockets with some difficulty. A minute later they dumped their haul on the open seats, gesturing for the others to help themselves as they tore open a chocolate frog box.

“Liverpool?” Laura pushed.

Perry glanced at the compartment door, and then slid her wand from her pocket, muttering a spell under her breath. There was a faint click. She turned back to Laura seriously, taking a breath.

“Have you not been getting the paper?”

Laura shook her head.

“Giants,” Perry said stiffly. “It was an attack by… by giants.”

Laura’s mouth fell open. “Giants? In Liverpool? I thought—I thought they lived in the mountains!”

“They’ve come out of hiding,” LaF said, their expression grim. “He’s brought them out.”

Laura did not have to ask who he was. She frowned, letting her gaze shift out the window. The sun was cutting down through the clouds. They were somewhere in the north of England, probably just past Newcastle, and she imagined they would be crossing into Scotland, soon. The air leeching through the cracked window had turned cool and lost its welcome.

She stood and fought with the latch for a long moment, none of them speaking. Finally, the glass relented and slid upwards, locking back into place. With the wind cut off, the silence was obvious and stifling.

“I shouldn’t have let my dad come with me to the station,” she murmured, still standing in the narrow space between the seats. She didn’t turn from the window.

The sun had disappeared behind a tall cropping of trees.

“Laura—”

“No,” she cut LaF off, shaking her head. “It’s not safe. I should have just put my savings into a Prophet subscription… then I’d have known.”

“We should have written you,” Perry said. “I should have thought to.”

“You thought I knew,” Laura shrugged. She couldn’t meet either of their gazes, though she felt them staring at her, and knew they were wearing identical expressions of concern. She took a steadying
breath, focusing on her hands, resting in her lap. “What else?” she asked. “It can’t just be that—other things have been happening, too, haven’t they?”

Fresh silence followed her question. It was LaFontaine who finally cleared their throat to answer.

“Well… yes,” they said, their voice uncharacteristically small. “A—a family of muggles was killed in their house in July. The muggle papers painted it as a gas leak.”

Laura’s head lifted, eyes going wide and darting between her friends. “Were they related to anyone magical?”

Perry bit her lip, giving her head a little shake. “It was… his followers that did it. The Death Eaters, they’re calling themselves. As far as anyone can tell, there wasn’t even a motive. Just… random killing.” She cleared her throat. “It’s horrible.”

Laura pictured her father, making the solo journey back to their cottage on the coast. Random, she thought, a shiver creeping up her spine.

“We’ll be okay at Hogwarts,” Perry urged, trying to put some pep in her voice. “It’s the safest place in the country.”

Dimly, Laura managed a nod. It wasn’t herself she was worried about.

She replayed Carmilla’s words in her head: wouldn’t want a Muggle getting lost where he doesn’t belong.

If only parents could visit Hogwarts, she thought regretfully. She’d let her father watch every last miserable Quidditch defeat, if only it meant keeping him safe.

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The first match of the season was Hufflepuff versus Ravenclaw, on the first Saturday of November. Laura wore her Gryffindor scarf to combat the wind, trekking down to the pitch between Perry and LaFontaine.

“I don’t know who I want to lose more,” she muttered.

LaFontaine scoffed. “Oh, please. It’s Ravenclaw. You want to see them routed. Don’t even deny it.”

Laura laughed. “Alright, true. But I’m still bitter about Hufflepuff—don’t disregard that.”

“Well, we’ll just hope for a nice quick match. The less points they earn overall, the better.”

“True.”

Perry tugged her scarf tighter around her neck. “Quick is better,” she agreed, as they filed one after the other into the narrow staircase up to their seats.

“Pity Karnstein made the team, again,” LaFontaine commented, when the teams flowed out of the changing rooms and onto the field.

“Nah,” Laura said, sniffing. “It just means the rest of the House must have been truly dreadful.”

LaFontaine snorted loudly. Down on the ground, the Captains were shaking hands. Madame Hooch tossed the Quaffle into the air.
Laura felt the vicarious high go through her, as the brooms shot up into the air. She watched attentively as the Keepers looped up into their places, mentally critiquing their form and calculating how they would move when the opposing Chasers came after them.

The new Hufflepuff Keeper looked positively terrified, and she smirked openly as he let an easy shot through. She knew Danny, wherever she was watching from, would already be coming up with plays. She was big on revenge.

Carmilla had the Quaffle, and she ducked a Bludger on her way up the pitch.

Laura cheered when Teddy Jordan knocked into her and she lost her grip. Hufflepuff took the Quaffle back up for another easy goal.

“Shame the Bludger missed her,” LaF muttered.

“There’s still plenty of time,” Laura declared.

Perry glared at them. “Honestly, you two. I know she’s… terrible. But this sport isn’t that important.”

“This isn’t about the sport,” LaF argued hotly, “It’s about principle. You remember what Karnstein said to Laura on the train. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was thinking about joining up. She’d be just the type, even if she’s not a Slytherin…”

“LaFontaine!” Perry snapped, her eyes flashing dangerously. Her voice was a hiss when she continued: “Don’t say things like that!”

“It’s true,” LaF muttered.

Laura’s stomach churned. It was strange to think that LaF might not be wrong. Had Carmilla not just last week jinxed her in the corridor, hissing filthy mudblood as she strutted past? Had she not purposefully trod on Laura’s already battered Charms textbook, breaking the spine?

She hadn’t exactly been alone for that encounter, either. Rosier and Avery had been there, right at her side.

Laura found Carmilla again, streaking down the pitch in her blue and silver robes, dark hair streaming out behind her. She was a horrible person, yes, but was she capable of torture… or murder? No, Laura couldn’t find it in herself to think such terrible things of any of her classmates—not even the darkest of them.

Still, the thought tugged at her, and she struggled to pay attention as the match progressed. She wondered if Carmilla would be happy if Voldemort succeeded, if the world were ruled by dark wizards and muggles were forced to bow to their will. Would Carmilla find that fitting? Would she be pleased if Laura were captured and tortured like the muggleborn Auror that had been found washed up on the beach not two weeks prior?

She bit down the bile in her throat to cheer as the Seekers dove into hot pursuit, chasing the seemingly invisible Snitch through the center of play. The Quaffle tumbled to the ground.

Laura bit back her disappointment as the Ravenclaw Seeker came up triumphant, the little golden ball clutched in her glove. She pushed aside her dark thoughts, let the present take up her focus. Gryffindor’s first game was only weeks away. That was what she should care about right now.

There was no use driving herself crazy with fears of a future that might not even happen.
“Ugh, you can’t be serious,” LaFontaine groaned. Laura met their stare with determination, quill poised above the parchment. She made no move to stand up.

“Just because Laura has decided to be productive does not mean you have to be,” Perry noted smugly. “Though it would certainly be in your best interest.”

“I hate when I’m outnumbered,” LaF muttered, dropping down into one of the comfy chairs by the fire. “And I feel tricked. We were supposed to go down to the pitch, Laura!”

She sighed. “Yes. But… I don’t know. This seemed more important.”

Laura was surprised Perry’s neck didn’t crack from the speed with which her head shot up. She darted her gaze between Laura and LaFontaine, mouth open. “Did she just say that? Did I hear that correctly?”

“Of all our classes… this one is the most important,” Laura said. Her voice was quiet, uncertain as she forced the words out. “We might actually… need this stuff.”

Perry was silent, all traces of gloating washed out in the wake of Laura’s words. LaFontaine pulled out her books without another complaint, unrolling a scroll of parchment.

Laura re-read the paragraph on shielding techniques, and then cleared her throat. “I’d like to learn how to do the nonverbal version,” she voiced, trying to put confidence into her tone. She glanced up at Perry, who’s eyebrows lifted.

“That’s sixth year material,” she pointed out.

“Are you saying I’m not capable?”

Perry’s face reddened. “Of course not! I’m just… surprised, Laura. Here,” she turned the textbook to read the passage Laura had been musing over. She gave a prim nod. “This could be an excellent project. I’ve been dying to do some more advanced work… oh, I’m so excited that you’re taking an interest!”

Laura forced a smile, accepting Perry’s attempt to lighten the mood. The ginger was shoving her things into a bag, though, and Laura was about to ask what on earth she was doing when the other girl motioned impatiently for her to hurry up.

“Come on, then. This calls for hands-on, and there’s not enough space, here. We’ll find an empty classroom.”

LaFontaine eyed her, and then Laura. “I’m sorry. Did she just suggest going out after hours?”

Perry rolled her eyes. “This is a worthy cause. Now move, before I change my mind.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said LaF, grinning widely.

The empty classroom that Perry shuffled them into did not seem random, nor did the way she pulled several books down from the shelves and set them out on the professor’s desk, flipping through them and muttering to herself.

“I feel like she’s just dragged us into her lair,” LaF muttered, shooting a pointed look at Laura. “I blame you for this.”
“So, uh, Perry? Where do we start?” Laura asked, toying anxiously with her hair.

“Well, I’ve never actually performed a nonverbal spell, myself, you know. We’re all going to be learning, here, together.”

“She is way too happy about that,” LaFontaine hissed, their nose scrunched up.

“I can hear you, LaFontaine,” Perry said breezily. She murmured a spell under her breath, shifting the furniture aside to clear space at the front of the room. “We’ll have to be quiet, of course, so let’s not try anything too serious. I think a verbal disarming spell will work best as the attack. Anything physical and we’re liable to have Peeves come down on us… or Filch.”

“Jeez, Per, how often do you do this?” LaF asked.

“If you weren’t busy pulling all-nighters all the time trying to keep up, perhaps you’d know a bit more of what I do in my free time,” Perry intoned. “Now, Laura, you wanted my help… let’s get started. Come on, stand over here.”

Laura made a face, pacing over to stand where Perry indicated. The other girl padded across the room and spun on her heel, raising her wand in front of her face in traditional dueling stance. Swallowing, Laura mimicked her.

“Y’know, I’m not sure how I feel about this,” she started to say. Perry was already slashing forward with her wand, though. Laura jumped, but felt nothing.

“What..?” she started to say.

Perry shrugged. “Well, I thought I’d give nonverbal a go… seems I’ll need plenty of practice, too. No matter. We can trade off as we go.” She squared up again, and this time Laura was ready, facing her with the same determination she would an oncoming Chaser.

“Expelliarmus!” the ginger declared sharply, her curls flying as she threw her arm forward.

Protego! Laura thought, throwing her shoulder to the side as she slashed her wand through the space before her. It jerked from her grasp, burning her fingers as it spun end over end across the classroom. Perry reached up to catch it, and missed. It clattered into the wall, and LaFontaine gave a snort.

They were watching from a spot slumped against one of the empty desks, their arms crossed over their chest.

Perry’s heels clicked as she collected it, returning it to its proper owner. It hummed in Laura’s grasp, and she thought a silent apology at it.

“Alright, again,” Perry said. She raised an eyebrow, waiting as Laura put herself into a defensive stance.

It took three more run-throughs before LaFontaine groaned loudly and stormed in between the pair.

“Seriously, you guys, you’ll get nowhere like this. Sometimes you’re so thick-headed…” They snatched up the books, and set one on each desk—three in total. Then they seized Laura’s shoulders and spun her to face the first desk, slipped around to direct Perry at the second, and faced the third themself. “Lift the book. Quiet enough, Per?”

Perry grumbled, but did not argue. Laura smirked. Perry might be the most scholarly of the three, but LaF had always had a better grasp of the practical.
Laura pointed her wand, narrowed her eyes, and thought *Wingardium Leviosa!* as she gave her wand an expert swish and flick.

The spell was a breeze, normally. It was one of the only ones that she had mastered without excessive practice—something she had previously been quite proud of.

Nothing happened.

She tried again, with identical results. Beside her, Perry’s face was slowly turning a dark shade of red, her lips pursed and thin. LaFontaine was working slowly, taking long pauses between attempts, but looked utterly unfazed as their book stared blankly back at them from its perch on the edge of the desk.

Laura tried harder, saying the words with her tongue, forcing her lips to stay sealed. *Fly, dammit.*

And then she took a breath, opened her mouth, and formed the words without pushing them from her throat. The book shifted—it was the tiniest fraction, but it was enough that she immediately had the attention of the room.

“Laura!” Perry cried, and there was a tinge of jealousy in her voice.

“I mouthed it.”

Perry was unmoving. “That’s still nonverbal!” she insisted. “You didn’t whisper it? Even just a little?”

Laura shook her head, turned back to the book, and extended her wand. She formed the words again, swished her wand—and there was nothing.

The tension in Perry’s shoulders fell.

Somewhere down the corridor, a door creaked. All three froze in place.

“You know, I think we’re good for the night,” LaFontaine hissed.

“Uh-huh. Let’s move.”

They slunk back up to the tower, keeping to the shadows. The Fat Lady was disapproving, when they stood before her, but merely *harrumphed* when they gave the password, swinging open to reveal the porthole.

“I could get used to this,” LaFontaine said, as they settled down into their four poster. “Lola Perry, breaking the rules…”

“There will be no getting used to this,” Perry corrected firmly. “But there are some things… that are more important than the rules.” She glanced towards Laura as she spoke the words, and Laura dipped her head, fiddling with the hem of her robes.

“So, you’re saying we’ll do this again, though, right?” LaF pushed.

“Yes. Now, don’t gloat. It’s not becoming.”

“I would never,” LaF grinned. They tucked themself into their bed, sighing contentedly. Laura did the same, snuffing out the lights and plunging the room into darkness.

“Perry,” Laura said softly. “LaF?”
“Yes?” came the dual response.

She swallowed. “You guys are really good friends”
It's Christmas at Hogwarts, and Laura isn't the only one staying for the Holidays.

Christmas, 1973 (Fourth Year)

It was snowing on the Quidditch pitch. Laura shivered, barely able to feel the broom she was clutching. No one had come near the goalposts, and she had been hovering in place for nearly an hour with nothing to do. The boredom was starting to eat her alive.

“Can I at least do laps, Danny?” she yelled.

If the Captain heard her, she was choosing to ignore the question. She was still yelling at the Chasers, pelting them with spare Quaffles as they tried to keep up.

“Is anyone going to try to score?” Laura cried, and then let out an exaggerated groan, throwing back her head. *Enough is enough.* She leaned forward, dive-bombing into the center of their practice.

“Hey!” several shouts burst after her. Laura laughed, doing a barrel roll and coming up brightly at Danny’s side.

“C’mon,” she griped. “If you aren’t going to include me, I’m going back to the Tower. And look at poor Johnson! He’s been circling for hours. He’ll be growing icicles off his nose, soon.”

“Well he hasn’t found the Snitch, yet,” Danny said, as though it were the simplest concept in the world. She was scowling.

“It’s probably halfway to London! Listen, Danny, we’re all tired. It’s the night before the holidays… just let everyone enjoy their last night with their friends.”

“But the Hufflepuff match—”

“Isn’t until February. Jeez, you’re almost as bad as Perry,” she teased.

It was the wrong thing to say.

Danny’s expression turned stormy. She spun towards the ground, landing heavily. Laura glanced at the others, who had all paused, hovering in place with widened eyes. She dropped to the frozen pitch, catching up with Danny halfway to the changing rooms—which was quite a feat, considering the difference in their strides.

“Hey,” she said, reaching for the older girl’s arm. Danny jerked it from her grasp, but stopped, spinning to glare down at her. Laura ducked, suddenly abashed. “Danny, I didn’t mean that as an insult—”
“I know. That’s not why—I’m not mad at you,” Danny sighed. She ran a hand through her frizzed out hair. “This is my last year, Laura,” she said. “I’m leaving Hogwarts in June, and the world is at war, even if the papers don’t dare say the word. I’m muggleborn—just like you. I have no idea what’s going to happen to me. All I know is that… right now, all I can handle caring about is this damn Cup, okay?”

Laura stared, wide-eyed, and nodded.

“Okay,” she said softly. “Okay.”

The team changed quickly. No one spoke until after Danny had ducked out. On the way back to the castle, Pearce and Carter pummeled each other with snowballs, giggling with the flakes still caught in their hair and on their eyelashes.

Potter did not come along. His mates had been at the pitch during practice, goofing off in the stands like always, and she did not doubt that they were making use of the school’s spare brooms, now. Locks had never been a particularly large obstacle for the likes of Sirius Black.

“Hey, you’re alive!” LaFontaine cheered, when Laura hopped through the porthole on her teammates’ heels. She grinned, throwing herself into the nearest open armchair.

“When Danny came through a few minutes ago, we got worried,” Perry admitted. “She looked… upset.”

Well, that was an understatement. But Laura didn’t feel like sharing. She shrugged. “She’s just worried about our progress. What did you guys do, today?”

“Studied,” LaFontaine muttered bitterly, casting a dark look at Perry. “A lot.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I sat on a broomstick in the snow for three hours. Studying sounds nice.”

LaF tipped their head in acknowledgment. “You’ve got me there.”

“Anyways, you guys must have packed, right? You’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

“Perr’s been packed for a week. I threw some stuff together this morning. But, Laura—”

“You guys are going to have a great break,” Laura cut them off forcibly.

“Laura,” Perry tried.

“No.”

“But—”

“No.”

They sat in silence, Laura’s jaw set and a nerve pulsing in her throat. There was a challenge in the way she arched her eyebrow.

“Well,” Perry sighed, finally. “You’ll practice nonverbal spells even without us, right?”

The corner of Laura’s lip twitched up in a smile of relief. “Of course. I’m looking forward to it.”

“We’ll write,” LaF added eagerly. “And your present is sitting on my bed.”
“Oh, yes, mine is on the nightstand!” Perry jumped in. “It’s got your name on it; the house-elves might know to put it with your other presents, but if they don’t, make sure you open it, alright? And on Christmas morning—not before. It’s no fun if you cheat.”

Laura laughed. “I’ll wait. Promise.”

“Good.”

The silence descended again, heavier this time.

“Oh, for goodness sake,” Perry declared finally, seizing Laura and jerking her to her feet for a crushing hug. “We’ll miss you. Both of us. Even if LaFontaine won’t admit it.”

“Thanks, Perry… I’ll miss you guys, too.”

LaF gave her a bashful nod from over Perry’s shoulder, and Laura smiled back. They were family… and they were spending the holidays apart.

But, it was better, this way. For all of them.

Breakfast was quiet and small, with no fanfare—Christmas was still three days away. With the castle mostly empty, the usual studying and relaxation of a Saturday were muted. The enchanted mistletoe that hung in every archway sang off-tune carols as she passed, which seemed to chase her in echoes on her way down to the grounds.

The snow from yesterday had settled in a thick dusting, painting the Forbidden Forest like a winter wonderland. The lake was frozen over, marked with the tracks of ice skates from yesterday’s celebrations. Laura wondered, as she cut past it, what the giant squid did, during the winter months. Did it hibernate? Or was it just particularly impervious to the chill?

She didn’t bother changing, simply shouldering her broom and padding out onto the pitch. Her boots crunched, leaving deep tracks in her wake.

She thought about what Danny had said. What was going to happen to her, after she graduated? Danny wanted to be a Quidditch star—it was all Laura had ever heard her talk about. With the way things were going out there, though? Everyone talked about how Hogwarts was the safest place in Britain. But, after graduation, where was there to hide? Back to the muggle world, she supposed…

She froze, not even halfway across the field. A shadow had cut across her face, as she tipped her head back to look skyward. Apparently, she wasn’t the only one that had chosen today for a solo practice.

A lone figure was streaking across the pitch, a Quaffle tucked under her arm. She flung it through one of the hoops with ease, and then shot into a long dive to snatch it back up before it could hit the ground. As she circled back, low to the ground, she caught sight of Laura.

“Oh hell,” Carmilla Karnstein snapped. “What are you doing here?”

Laura’s lip curled up into a sneer of pure, unfiltered dislike. “I could ask you the same thing. The way you play, I would never have thought you practiced a day in your life.”

She kicked off, shooting clear as the Quaffle flew at her face.

“You missed,” she commented airily. “Surprise, surprise.”
“Fuck off,” Carmilla snarled. She yanked back her sleeve and drew her wand.

Laura raised an eyebrow, and pulled her own out, too. A duel on the pitch—she shouldn’t have been surprised that it was coming to this.

“Are you going to curse me?” she dared. She wasn’t sure where the sudden rush of bravery was coming from, but there was something about seeing Karnstein leveling a wand at her that rose her blood pressure unhealthily. Her mouth rushed onwards without permission from her brain. “You don’t have any of your little Death Eater pals to back you up. That’s what they call themselves, right? Messing around with dark magic?”

Carmilla threw a curse, biting it out between her teeth so harshly that Laura could not make out the words. Whatever it was, it flared red. Laura threw up a shield, but the force of the attack still tossed her back. It was like being hit with a particularly bad gust during a stormy game. She clung to her broom, righting herself and flinging back a jinx of her own.

Carmilla dove out of the way, and this time it was a stunning spell she threw back. She didn’t catch Laura square—but she did singe the edge of her robes.

Laura swore. They had been expensive, and new—a rarity for her.

Fresh fury shot through her like a lightning bolt, crackling in her fingertips. She was shaking with rage. She aimed for the tail of the other girls robes, throwing a spell she had learned only weeks ago from LaFontaine. A trail of silvery blue fireballs, small but vicious, shot from her wand in an arc, homing in on their target even as she dodged. They hit home.

Carmilla spun, crashing into the snow and rolling to put out the flickering blue flames. When she righted herself, her face was pale and racked with emotion.

A horrible chill hit her with a force similar to the crash of Carmilla’s body into the snow, the shaking in her hands nearly unbearable.

“Sectumsempra!” the other girl shrieked, her wand slashing through the air in long streaks.

Laura’s shield charm was not quite quick enough. She hit the ground hard, her broom thrown clear, and jerked her hand up to her cheek. The tips of her fingers came away slick with blood. Her mouth flew open, horror catching in her throat, but when she sat up she found herself alone. Carmilla’s slender figure was already small in the distance.

The cut did not heal, nor did it stop bleeding. Laura spent twenty minutes in the girls’ toilet before she gave in and set a course for the Hospital Wing.

Madame Pomfrey spent an hour on her, trying a collection of spells and magical concoctions, none of which seemed to fully work. She pushed Laura repeatedly on how she had gotten the injury, but Laura had never considered herself a snitch. ‘An accident,’ she said, again and again.

From the set of her scowl, Madame Pomfrey was not buying it.

Laura didn’t care, though. A part of her wondered what would happen, if she gave Carmilla’s name—if Dumbledore called the other girl to his office and issued her a year’s worth of detention. What would Carmilla’s Death Eater buddies do to Laura, then?

She suspected she did not want to find out.
“You’ll have a scar,” Madame Pomfrey sighed, at long last. “If it starts bleeding again, I want you back here immediately.”

Laura nodded. She went straight to Gryffindor Tower, removed the bandages, and studied her face in the mirror.

The wound was not pretty. It ran along her cheekbone, angry and red, arching from her nose almost all the way to her ear. She wondered if it would be thinner, or at least paler, when it healed—and if it would be quite so obvious.

Laura had never considered herself particularly vain, nor pretty, but she couldn’t deny the weighty stone that had settled in her gut with Madame Pomfrey’s words.

‘Scar’ meant ‘permanent.’

A forever gift from none other than Karnstein. She wasn’t looking forward to seeing it for the rest of her life.

And, on a more concerning note, she suspected Carmilla had not just been looking to nick her. She had been aiming for more than her cheek, with that spell.

“What the hell happened to you?” Davie Pearce asked, eyes going wide as she joined him in the common room that evening. The fire crackled merrily.

“Disagreement,” she shrugged, settling into her usual chair and cracking open her textbook to the section on nonverbal spells.

“Looks serious.”

“Eh. I’ll live.”

She had considered writing a letter to Perry and LaFontaine, to catch them up on the events of the morning. When she had taken out the parchment, though, she hadn’t been able to find the right words. Hi, hope you’re having a nice holiday; Karnstein tried to kill me, just didn’t seem like the sort of thing one should put in a letter—especially if she didn’t want her friends rushing prematurely back to Hogwarts.

So, she said nothing, and followed Davie down to dinner in silence when the sun began to set outside the Tower windows.

Laura was not the kind of person that ever wanted to admit she was afraid, but there was something safe about knowing the Fat Lady was guarding the entrance to the Tower… and that Carmilla did not have access.

She scanned the Great Hall quickly, as she came through the doors, and felt the tension drain from her shoulders as she confirmed that there was no head of long, raven hair amongst the tiny collection of students.

Laura piled her plate with cottage pie and green beans, shoveling down the food with gusto. She ignored the sidelong looks she earned for her new scar, settled into a Quidditch debate with Davie and Melanie, and had high spirits by the time she stood to make her exit.

Which was why she was taken so off-guard when a hand wrapped around her elbow and jerked her into the shadows of the main staircase.
“What the—”

“What?!”

Laura blinked, and found herself face to face with Carmilla. Her expression was knitted with an odd, deep concentration. Laura jerked back.

“Stay still,” Carmilla snapped. Her wand was drawn, and Laura did not have time to react as the other girl pressed the tip to her cheek, tracing along the length of the gash as she muttered an incantation under her breath. It sounded almost like a song, rather than a spell, the words lilting smoothly off her tongue.

It took only a moment, and then the girl stepped back and out of her personal space. She tipped her head, as if studying her work, and gave the smallest of nods.

And then she was just... gone.

Laura stood there, numb, for a long moment. She lifted her hand to brush her cheek tentatively. The skin was smooth, unmarred, and cold to the touch.

She shivered.

Laura arrived at the Quidditch pitch early Sunday morning, before anyone had even emerged for breakfast. She wasn’t sure what she was expecting to find, but there was definitely disappointment swirling through her—at least in part—when she recognized that, this time, she was truly alone.

Laura had a lot of questions.

She took to the sky smoothly, doing laps and zig-zagging through the hoops until she was dizzy.

There was still no sign of Carmilla. Laura laid claim to several of the school’s Quaffles, bewitching them to fly at the goal posts.

It wasn’t the same as working with another player, but it was good enough, for lonely mornings like this one. Mostly, it was the exercise of the thing—dodging back and forth and feeling the hard weight of the Quaffle in her grasp—that made the practice effective. Familiarity built muscle memory. It made Quidditch feel natural, when she was waiting for an opponent with the whole of the school roaring below.

The sun was up, and her stomach was beginning to give its first growls of protest, when Laura saw her. She approached slowly, trailing her way down from the school, but Laura recognized her easily, even from a distance.

Who else, besides herself, would be drifting out to the pitch on a Sunday morning during school break, after all?

Carmilla disappeared into the changing rooms, and emerged a moment later clutching a school broom. Laura wondered vaguely, frowning down from where she was doing lazy circles around the pitch, why she had never noticed that Carmilla borrowed school brooms, rather than using her own.

Surely she could afford the latest model—she was not the least bit shy about her pureblooded status.

Laura’s hand shifted to hover over the sleeve where her wand was tucked, swallowing nervously as
the other girl rose steadily to meet her.

Carmilla did not reach for her wand, though, keeping both hands gripped firmly on the handle of the ancient Shooting Star. Her face was pale, her expression blank. Laura watched her stare dart from her eyes to her cheek, and then back.

“It’s healed,” Laura stated flatly. In her mind she was asking why?

Why attack her and then come back to heal the damage? Was it just because she didn’t want to get caught?

“I’m not a Death Eater.”

Well, that was abrupt, Laura thought. She swallowed sharply.

“Cool.”

Cool? Unbelievable. Her hand shook slightly, a phantom from the day before. She was still unsure if she needed to arm herself or not.

She kept hearing Carmilla’s voice, thick with her trademark sneer, throwing the same insult at her, over and over again, across the years.

“We were just talking about which House we thought we might be in,” Perry said, curls bouncing off her shoulders cheerfully. “I’m pretty sure I’ll get Gryffindor—that was my mom’s House, and I take more after her than my dad, anyway. What about you?”

“Slytherin.” There was no intonation to her voice. It was just a flat statement.

“Well, that’s… confident,” LaF mused. The train rattled. “Any, uh, particular reasoning, there?”

“Just a hunch.” She eyed Laura up and down, and then gave a little sniff of a laugh. “What about you?”

“I dunno. I guess I’d like to be in Gryffindor, but I’d be happy anywhere, really. Hufflepuff sounds nice.”

“Spoken like a true mudblood.”

Carmilla was still staring at her, entirely unreadable. She nodded, then, not unlike she had the night before, in the Entrance Hall. She turned, dropping smoothly back to the pitch. From fifty feet, Laura watched her land gracefully and stride away.

She watched her all the way back up to the castle, and only then did she head for the changing rooms, herself.

The morning of Christmas Eve, Laura did not leave the castle. She woke with the familiar desire coursing through her, memories of soaring and cheers still ringing in her ears, half from dreams and half from reality, but she batted these down in favor of a long breakfast and several open textbooks.

She was supposed to be practicing nonverbal spells, on top of the assignments that would be due when classes resumed. Perry’s first letter of the break had arrived the night before during dinner, reminding her of both these facts in no uncertain terms.
Perry’s lack of confidence in her would have been insulting if it wasn’t so well-founded. Laura had not given a single thought to her schoolwork since break had begun.

There had been more important things on her mind.

The spot on her cheek where Carmilla had cursed her was still faintly cool to the touch, though the skin was entirely smooth and there was no sign of damage when she very nearly pressed her face to the mirror in search of evidence. Whatever that spell had been—and Laura had certainly never heard it before, or read it in any textbook—Carmilla had performed the counter-curse perfectly.

Laura tried not to think about why the other girl had known such a curse in the first place, and yet it was the only thought that she seemed capable of focusing on. Despite setting out her notes and books diligently at an empty table in the library, she had not been able to take in a single word of the transfiguration review she was trying to get through. Her gaze kept darting to the windows and the distant Quidditch pitch.

Finally, when she knew she should be feeling the first tremors of hunger and the sun had reached a peak high enough that Laura could no longer see it from the library, she gave up. She was never going to retain anything at this rate, and she couldn’t bring herself to drift into the Great Hall with the lunch crowd. Her stomach was roiling with nerves, not appetite.

She headed for the pitch.

The moment she had given in, her head had begun to spin with possibilities. If she asked Carmilla any of these questions—and there were certainly enough of them (Why did you curse me? Why did you heal me? Why did you find it so important to emphasize that you aren’t a Death Eater?)—what would the other girl do to her? Would she attack again? Would she merely storm off?

Most importantly: would she answer any of them honestly?

Food was the farthest thing from her mind when she came under the shadow of the pitch, nausea sweeping uneasily through her. She couldn’t explain why the sensation was so strong. She was not afraid of Carmilla, or she didn’t think she was, and she had every right to want answers. There was no reason to feel even vaguely guilty, yet that was the best description Laura could give to the unfamiliar sensation clenching in her gut as she collected her broom.

She needn’t have worried. The brief swooping sensation in her stomach when she spotted a figure cutting through the air overhead immediately fell as flat as one of LaF’s badly timed puns.

There was not one, but two figures on broomsticks. Davie and Melanie were chasing a Bludger, whacking it back and forth at one another and yelling cheery insults.

Laura swallowed past the aching sensation in the back of her throat, and forced a smile onto her face as she kicked off to join them.

She nearly took the Bludger in the head, not paying enough attention to her ascent. Melanie called a hurried apology, hitting the ball with a deliberate *crack* and sending it flying far across the pitch. The beaters came up level with her.

“I didn’t think we’d have any more interruptions,” Melanie said. “It’s not like there’s anyone left at the castle.”

“More interruptions?” Laura barely heard the rest of her friendly words.

Melanie’s smile faltered. “Yes. Karnstein was here about—what was it, Davie? An hour ago?”
“Yep,” he said through gritted teeth, readying his bat. Laura slipped to the side to give him more room. He sent the careening Bludger on another lap around the stands. The beaters watched its departure, their eyes sharp in the way Laura’s were when she was focused on the Quaffle.

“She was… unpleasant,” he added.

“Well that’s a given, naturally,” tossed in Melanie. “Good timing, you missing her.”

“Yeah, she’s always had it out for you.”

Laura nodded, ignoring the twinge that resonated through her ribcage and down her spine. She gripped her broom tighter, an unbidden reflex.

“—weird, for sure. Hey, was she the one you had that ‘disagreement’ with?” Davie asked. Laura had missed the beginning of what he was saying, but she was sure it didn’t matter. He had been focused mostly on Melanie as he was talking.

“What?” Laura asked dumbly.

He repeated himself, glancing at Melanie as he did the last thing Laura wanted—explaining further. “When you showed up the other night with that nasty cut on your cheek.” He gestured at her face. “You said you got in a disagreement. I figure it must have been with Karnstein.”

“Oh, tell me you got a shot in,” Melanie said, her eyes lighting up.

“No,” Laura said. The word was harsh and quick and it earned her two identical eyebrow raises. “No,” she tried again, more slowly, “It, uh, wasn’t her.”

The silence was uncomfortable. Laura didn’t know why she had just lied—Davie and Melanie were her teammates, her friends. And, more importantly, it had been Carmilla that cursed her. But she came back and fixed it.

The same why? pressed at her for what must have been the hundredth time that day alone. Laura shook her head.

“There’s some studying I need to do,” she said abruptly.

Davie’s eyebrows drew together. “You just got here.”

“Right. Yeah. I mean, I forgot that I had that to do. The studying. Which I should do… now.”

Their stares were not growing any less perplexed. Laura’s ears were hot; she was sure they were burning pink. She didn’t wait to see if they would argue further and she did not say goodbye.

It was a long trudge back up to the castle.

At dinner, Laura sat with Davie and Melanie, having little other choice when they were among the only Gryffindors still at Hogwarts. Mercifully, they did not bring up the incident from earlier. Melanie asked her how the studying had gone, Laura gave a deceitful ‘good’ in reply (she had made no more progress than that morning), and the topic moved happily on to professional Quidditch.

Davie was a loyal supporter of the Chudley Cannons, which were performing dreadfully this year,
and Laura and Melanie spent the meal cheerfully egging him on as he defended their choice to trade Harvick Jones the year before.

“He wasn’t living up to his contract—I tell you, they’re better without him. It’s a mental thing. Team morale.”

“Great morale booster, losing those last three games,” Melanie put in with a smirk.

Davie sputtered, waving his arms and nearly upending a bowl of mashed potatoes that a second year boy was trying to pass to his friend.

Laura froze mid-laugh, the expression falling off her face as she caught sight of a lone figure at the Ravenclaw table. At some point in the past half hour, Carmilla had found her way into the Hall, and was poking at a plate of turkey with a gloomy scowl set across her pristine features.

Laura had thought there were at least a few members of each house still in the castle, but the table was utterly abandoned. Carmilla looked small, somehow, her shoulders hunched and her gaze distant.

As Laura watched, staring blatantly with little regard to how it might look, the other girl pushed her plate aside and stood up. Laura watched her all the way up the Hall and through the doors, her heart rate quickening into a trot as she followed the slant of her shadow to see which way she went.

She stood up.

“Heading to bed?” Melanie asked, her eyebrows raising as she paused her forkful of pie midway to her mouth.

“Oh. Yeah.” Laura lied.

She hopped the bench and turned left out of the doors, making her way out into the fading daylight.

For a moment, she thought she had been mistaken. And then she caught the flicker of movement halfway down the path and a lone silhouette revealed itself.

No, she was right.

This was a terrible idea, not that she’d had many good ones in recent days. The inkling of doubt was small; it did little to affect the speed of her footfalls as she traced Carmilla’s path down to the pitch.

Answers.

She needed answers.

Carmilla was already in the air, by the time Laura arrived at the pitch. She hovered a moment in the shadows by the changing rooms, twisting her broom handle in her hands. Carmilla’s shape was lithe and quick, dark against the pink of the sky and the grayish white of the windswept clouds on the horizon.

Taking a wary breath, Laura rose up level with the goal posts at the opposite end of the field.

Her Ravenclaw scarf slung over her shoulder, Carmilla was heaving Quaffles one after the other through the center hoop, dodging back and forth as though to confuse an invisible keeper. She had clearly bewitched the Quaffles, as they soared back to her like magnets, giving her an endless supply.

Laura could interrupt her. Swoop into her way and demand that she explain herself. She ran through
the same scenarios she’d been simulating in her head since the incident, and then gave her head a
decisive shake. She should at least get some practice first. Let Carmilla know she was here. Perhaps
if she took away the element of surprise…

It was a naïve thought, but she couldn’t help but hope that Carmilla would explain without a forcible
interrogation.

She couldn’t explain where the idea came from. It most definitely had not come from a place of
experience, or even one of logic. Carmilla was not someone to willingly supply anything that was
not a direct insult. Experience should have taught her that.

There was only one Quaffle left in the school’s supply stock, and it was battered and torn, its insides
popping out through the seams.

It would have to do.

Laura charmed it as usual, swerving around the hoops to guard from the backside as well, as she sent
the battered Quaffle on a wild journey.

The third time her charm lost its hold and was forced to dive to rescue the ball, she lost interest in her
own practice. It wasn’t why she had come up here in the first place—neither earlier today nor right
now.

Carmilla was still dumping her stream of Quaffles through the goal hoops. She did not miss a single
throw, so very unlike her performance during matches.

Laura watched her for a long while, reading the tension in her shoulders, and then shook her head
and headed for the ground. There was something angry in Carmilla’s posture, in her forceful throws.
They had been at this for nearly an hour, not a word spoken between them, and it was clear that
wasn’t going to change.

A Quaffle bounced off the snow just beside her, as her feet touched down. Her head jerked up.

Carmilla was hovering, her other Quaffles floating around her in slow circles. She said nothing, as
Laura picked up the Quaffle and soared back into the air.

“Your Quaffle charm isn’t very effective,” the other girl commented.

“Neither is your playing,” Laura shot back, defensiveness rising on some instinct outside of her
control.

Oddly, Carmilla seemed to find this amusing. Her eyes gleamed with humor, rather than malice.

“Here,” she said smoothly, giving her wand a casual flick. Laura flinched, but it seemed Carmilla
really was only trying to charm the Quaffles, rather than hex her.

The ball hummed as if brought to life, leaping from her grip and quivering in mid-air. It soared past
her, whizzing through the hoops, and then looped around to go at it again.

Laura stared, still hovering in place.

“It’ll just keep scoring, y’know, if you don’t stop it.”

Laura blinked, watching as the Quaffle arched around for another goal. She turned back to Carmilla.

*Why did you use that curse on me? Why are you being nice right now?*
“Thanks,” she said shortly.

Carmilla shrugged, and then leaned to the side and soared back to her own end of the pitch. Laura frowned at her back, saw her resume her tireless practice, and then turned to her own.

*Chicken,* she thought at herself.

Perry had bought her a broom care kit, and Laura found herself touched that her friend, so confused by Quidditch, understood it’s importance enough to give her a gift she would truly enjoy. LaF, true to form, had wrapped up a box of Zonko’s products.

Laura wrote them each a separate thank you letter, and placed them by her bedside for Cogs to take when he returned. She had sent him off with gifts the night before, and did not doubt that he was settled with her father right now, and in no rush to get back.

He was in Ireland. It was the safest place she could think to send him, though he had protested quite strongly when she first brought up the idea. Still, he had friends there. Old buddies from his school days. She had been forced to lie to him, to make it work, and she felt a deep sense of dread and guilt in the aftermath of her scheming.

Someday, she knew he would have to find out what was really happening—the war that was tearing through the world she now lived in. If he knew, she doubted he would let her keep attending Hogwarts. He would never believe that it was the safest place in the world.

And the more he knew, the more danger he would be in.

It was better this way, she told herself, not for the first time, when she unwrapped the box of homemade pastries he had sent for her.

She wrote him a letter, too. A lengthy one.

In none of these letters did she mention Carmilla, or the scar that was no longer a scar.

At Christmas dinner, Professor Dumbledore had passed out crackers, which exploded and produced full-sized presents and gag gifts. The headmaster had spent the majority of the meal wearing a fuzzy pink hat and a rather cheery grin.

Laura was feeling content, as she meandered out to the pitch, her Cleansweep resting on her shoulder and a new lightness in her step. She’d gotten butterbeer flavored chewing gum and a nice set of chessmen in her crackers, and there was just something *magical* about being at Hogwarts on Christmas.

She had always gone home for the holidays, before.

Carmilla was already up in the pitch, which was not a surprise. She had skipped the Christmas feast, which *was* odd, but, then, Laura wasn’t exactly familiar with Carmilla’s habits. She had made a point to not care what the other girl was doing from the moment LaFontaine had slammed the compartment door behind her, that very first day on the Hogwarts’ Express.

The other girl barely glanced in Laura’s direction, but moments after she kicked off she found a Quaffle ducking in and out of her empty goal posts. She eyed the seemingly friendly gesture for a moment, and then sighed. She had already made her decision—had spent the better part of last night
and this morning talking herself into it—but part of her was still questioning the **sanity**.

Laura sped past the other girl, coming up sharply to catch the Quaffle Carmilla had just hurled. Her pulse jumped, as Carmilla’s dark eyes locked on her.

The spares fell away with a flick of Carmilla’s wand. Swallowing her nerves and feeling distinctly like she had just drifted outside her own body, Laura tossed the Quaffle back to her. Carmilla caught it deftly, frowning. Laura’s skin prickled as the other girl blatantly sized her up.

There was a long moment of stillness. Laura adjusted her grip on her broom, feeling the bite of the wind through the holes in her battered, hand-me-down gloves. She wanted to look away, but Carmilla’s stare was unwavering, and Laura wasn’t about to be the one that balked. Carmilla might be the star in charms, or potions, or **any** class, really, but they were on the Quidditch pitch, now.

This was Laura’s domain.

*I’s just like any other match.* They were a keeper and a chaser, and Carmilla’s muscles tensed obviously before she made her move. She hurled the Quaffle with no more grace that during their matches. Laura caught it, giving it a little spin on her fingertips before she flipped it back.

“Try again,” she suggested.

Carmilla scowled, and threw it again—harder. Laura shot to the side, blocking the shot at the right hoop with ease.

She could see Carmilla’s teeth, now, bared in frustration.

*I must be crazy,* she thought. “You’re going about this all wrong, you know.” *Or suicidal.*

“Oh?” Carmilla snapped. Her eyes flashed, and there was the rage, again. Laura bit back her fear, trying not to think of the sing-song incantation smoothing the scar from her face. She could still feel the spot, chilly with phantom pain.

“Yes,” she said. “You can only score when there isn’t a Keeper at the hoops, right?”

Carmilla’s face was tight. “Fuck you.”

“I’m trying to help you, idiot,” Laura shot back. “If you just aim to put the Quaffle through the hoop, you’ll never get past a living, breathing person!”

Carmilla chucked the Quaffle again. Laura snapped it up, toying with it to prove her point.

“Switch,” she ordered, soaring forward and away from the hoops.

Carmilla opened her mouth in protest, but at Laura’s insistent eyebrow lift, she rolled her eyes and flew in front of the center hoop.

“If you want to learn how to **score**, you need to learn how to **keep**.”

She vaulted the Quaffle, and it soared past Carmilla’s left leg, just clearing the edge of the hoop. Carmilla recalled it with a flick of her wand, chin jutting out defiantly.

“I’m not a Keeper,” she griped.

“And what, you think I’m a Chaser?”
Carmilla glared, and heaved the Quaffle back into her arms with much more force than was necessary.

“I’m giving you a cue about where I’m going to throw,” Laura said patiently, pulling back her arm. “Focus on where you think I’m going.”

She gave Carmilla a moment, and then threw. Carmilla dove left. The Quaffle soared smoothly through the right hoop.

Carmilla swore, loudly and profusely. Laura half-expected her to pull her wand, but she just snarled. “I told you left,” she informed the other girl. “And you believed me.”

“You told me to read you,” Carmilla said through gritted teeth. Her broom was shaking in place, her knuckles bony and white on the handle.

“Yes,” Laura said. She was almost surprised at her own calmness. Then again, if Carmilla had wanted to hurt her, she would have done so by now. “Now, read me in the split second before I shoot. Everything else before that? It’s a lie.”

Carmilla squared her shoulders.

Laura showed her left, again, and then threw straight as an arrow. This time, Carmilla did not move. She seemed almost surprised, eyebrows shooting up to her hairline, as she caught the Quaffle smoothly between her palms.

She threw it back—lighter this time. Almost… curiously.

“Again,” she requested.

Chapter End Notes

Update! I’ve edited all of the existing chapters. There’s some new scenes, and some fixes in grammar/wording/etc… BUT the main point is that this story is NOT DEAD.

You can find me on tumblr as jg-firefly, where you are welcome to complain about my terrible updating.
On Top of the World

Chapter Summary

Laura doesn’t know what to make of Carmilla anymore... but figuring her out is easier said than done.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spring of 1974 (Fourth Year)

Laura wasn’t sure why she didn’t tell her friends about the dark curse Carmilla had cast on her. There was no evidence of it, now, but that didn’t erase it from history.

*Sectumsempra*. The spell was burned into her brain. Some mornings, she woke up hearing it, jolting upright to find herself wrapped in sweaty sheets. Other mornings, she awakened feeling light as air, disappointed to discover she was not up in the pitch, after all.

She could not find the curse in any of her books. A part of her wanted to ask Carmilla—take the direct approach… but something was holding her back.

“*I’m not a Death Eater,*” she had insisted, and, crazy as it was, Laura had believed her.

For not being a Death Eater, though, Carmilla certainly kept interesting company. The first day back from the holidays, Laura passed her in the corridor, surrounded by a slew of unsavory characters. Rosier, Wilkes… even that slimy third year, Severus Snape.

Carmilla had not met her gaze.

Perry resumed their late-night study sessions almost immediately, and was frustrated to learn that Laura had made no progress at all on her nonverbal skills.

“You were supposed to practice!” she complained. “What did you even do all break?”

Laura shrugged. “Quidditch?”

This earned her a high-five from LaFontaine, but an eye-roll from Perry.

“We’re gonna *slaughter* Ravenclaw,” LaF insisted. “Man, Laura, if they got last this year, wouldn’t that be fantastic? Now that’d be some quality revenge.”

“Yeah,” Laura agreed.

In her head, though, she was picturing the last day of Christmas break, and the Quaffle brushing past her by a hair for the score. She saw Carmilla’s face burst into a radiant smile, both fists flying into the air as she summersaulted over backwards, whooping.

Laura had never seen anything like it.

“Just *yeah*? How about *hell yeah*?’ C’mon, Hollis, you hate Karnstein more than anyone!”
“Right. I do. Sorry. I guess I’m just tired; it’s been a long first week back.”

“Enough talk about Quidditch,” Perry snipped. She had already tossed aside her robes and loosened her Gryffindor tie. She focused on the book before her, waving her wand.

Laura nodded, lining up with her own target and letting herself fall into routine.

They had each moved their books just slightly, since that first night. LaF had succeeded more than the others, lifting their book a solid centimeter before it thudded down in a cloud of dust.

“Wingardium Leviosa,” Laura murmured aloud, hovering the book up to the ceiling and back. Then, she swallowed and repeated her movements exactly, lips moving without sound. The book gave a little turn, the pages fluttering, and stilled.

It was always like this. She hadn’t had any real success since that first night. There was something lacking, in not being able to voice the words.

Perry seemed to believe that the missing piece was wanting it badly enough that you willed it to happen. Her face was dark and her forehead lined. Her chin jutted out sharply. Thus far, she had had the least success of the three, and it seemed to be wearing upon her.

Laura was about to make a comment, maybe suggest that Perry relax a little… when the other girl’s book lifted upright, tugged as if on an invisible string, and set itself back down, standing up to face her.

Perry seemed to deflate, and she was panting as if she had just run a long race.

LaF clapped her on the shoulder. “Nice, Perr!”

“Well, I practiced over break,” she declared. She was smiling primly, eyes alight with pride.

The door flew open, before they could celebrate further, and Laura jumped, pointing her wand instinctively.

“Carmilla?” she said, her voice escaping without permission.

“You shouldn’t be out this late,” Carmilla declared. She was not out of breath, but she looked wild. Her hair was tossed back as though she had been running. She was in nightclothes, which were ruffled, but there was something in her expression that was hard to read. She seemed to be ignoring the existence of LaFontaine and Perry, her gaze locked solely on Laura. “If you get caught, y’know, that would be a lot of detention. You might even miss the game.”

“Nice threat, coming from you,” LaF snapped. “What are you doing out of bed, Karnstein?”

Carmilla sneered, finally acknowledging that Laura was not alone. “None of your business.”

She spun on her heel and stormed out, leaving the three of them to exchange bewildered looks.

“Well, come on!” Perry hissed, snatching up her things. They bolted, ducking through the corridors and scrambling up the stairs to the Tower. They did not run into any trouble along the way, though Laura swore she heard Peeves tearing about in the Trophy Room as they rushed past, and more than once they froze at the end of a corridor, fearing that a shadow up ahead might materialize into Filch.

Once they were safely in the common room, they collapsed into the empty chairs around the fire, breathing heavily and staring at one another with the widened eyes of criminals who could not
believe their good fortune.

Oddly, they were not the only ones still up—Potter and his cohorts were sitting in the corner, compiling a massive collection of paper cranes. Remus Lupin was the only one who looked up, apparently startled by their arrival. His cloak looked patchier than usual, dirt gathered about the cuffs.

The four of them seemed very awake.

Perry’s eyes had narrowed, no doubt suspicious about their intentions, but she said nothing, closing her eyes and letting out a sigh.

“That was close,” she admitted. “What on earth did Karnstein want, anyway?”

“Yeah, and did you call her Carmilla?” LaF added, their brow knitted together.

Perry was still going, though, and Laura found herself very grateful to have been spared having to answer. “She just… showed up. How did she even know where to find us? And why would she want to, if it wasn’t to get us in trouble?”

Laura just shook her head.

That was a very, very good question.

LaFontaine was already fully decked out, when Laura arrived at breakfast the second Saturday in February. Their face was painted crimson, with a large ‘G’ written in glitter on their forehead. Beside them, Perry looked unassuming, with Gryffindor ribbons in her hair and a lion pin on her chest.

“Eat quick,” Danny warned, as Laura claimed her seat.

“Oh, no,” Perry complained. “You are not going down there early!”

“Relax, Perr, we aren’t practicing. Danny just likes to hype up the team before we play.”

Laura poured herself a tall glass of orange juice, shoveling scrambled eggs onto her plate. Gryffindors kept wandering by, clapping her on her shoulder and calling out their ‘good luck’s. When she dared glance across the Great Hall towards the Ravenclaw table, she found Carmilla hunched over a full plate, making no move to eat. She looked ill.

No one was bolstering her up before the match, or even sitting with her.

Laura looked away quickly.

When she finally set down her silverware, Danny came with her out of the castle, as if she had been waiting. Laura had to double her pace to keep up with the other girl’s much longer legs, and Danny talked a mile a minute as they rushed along.

“Huxley’s got the speed with his new broom to outpace even me, so we’ll need to be on our toes. You may have to hold onto the Quaffle for a little longer than usual; I’d rather you wait than risk it getting back into Ravenclaw’s hands. Now, of course, we won’t need to worry about Karnstein scoring, but that doesn’t mean she’s not a key player when it comes to assists. We can’t just count her out entirely.”

“I know,” Laura said, lip quirking into the faintest of smirks. She had heard all of this already, during the course of the past few weeks.
“Viera is going to try to take you out. I’ve got Pearce set to be your bodyguard, so he’ll be waiting to swoop in and send away any Bludgers that come up-field, so I don’t want you worrying about a hit. That would just be a distraction. This is going to be a long one—we’re going for points, here, so Johnson isn’t going to catch that Snitch even if he’s got the chance. It’s a risk, and we’re taking it.”

Laura simply nodded along. The pitch loomed ahead.

Danny was still talking, as they slipped into the Gryffindor changing rooms, but Laura had tuned her out.

She changed quickly, pulling on her scarlet Quidditch robes. Distantly, she wondered what Danny would say if she knew how her star Keeper had spent the holidays—how she had coached a member of an enemy team.

Danny would never understand. But, then again, Laura didn’t understand it, herself.

And, yet, her gaze sought out the raven-haired Chaser the moment they emerged onto the field. She barely heard the roars from the stands.

Carmilla didn’t look at her, her expression dark and her eyes downcast.

Huxley, in comparison, wore a roguish grin as he clamped Danny’s hand in a brutal shake. She glared back unflinchingly, her hair billowing like fire in the chilly February wind.

When they kicked off, Laura’s heart soared with the familiar rush that she could only get during a match. It was so much different than being at practice, or performing solo drills. Team practice was gritty, painful, and filled with failure. A match was glory, just waiting to be claimed.

Aldi Yeller, the third Ravenclaw Chaser, made an attempt on her right hoop. She almost scoffed, as she caught it with one hand and lobbed it to Potter.

The play focused itself downfield. Potter scored, and Carter got a hit in on Huxley before he could get even halfway back to Laura. Danny recovered, circling the Ravenclaw Keeper and heaving the Quaffle to Copeland, who passed it off to Potter.

Laura let her gaze drift to the flashing sign that was dangling from the Gryffindor section of the stands.

“Ha!” she chuckled, shaking her head.

‘HOTTIE HOLLIS SAVES THE DAY.’

Sirius Black truly knew no shame. She caught sight of him framing his fingers into a heart, and rolled her eyes. And then she frowned. The portly Pettigrew kid was bouncing at his side, but the third member of the James Potter fan club was absent—the Lupin boy.

She didn’t have time to muse.

Carmilla Karnstein was streaking down the field, the Quaffle under her arm and Potter in hot pursuit.

The scoreboard read 30-0.

Laura adjusted her grip on the broom handle, reading the Chaser’s body language. And then she made up her mind, shifting to the left, and felt the Quaffle slam into her outstretched forearm.

There was no chance to see Carmilla’s reaction, because she was already gone, chasing Danny back
towards the Ravenclaw side of the pitch. Laura caught her breath, her arm stinging slightly from the contact.

An hour later, though, when it was Carmilla facing her down once more, rather than Huxley or Yeller, her face was drawn with concentration.

Laura’s heart quickened, and she guessed. There was no tell, nothing to read—just pure intuition. She barely nicked the edge of the Quaffle, but it was enough to knock it from its path. It pinged off the hoop, soaring downward.

Copeland looped around to catch it, but Laura didn’t care about her. She watched Carmilla’s face contort, and then the other girl was gone.

Johnson nearly caught the Snitch four times, during the full three hours of gameplay. Each time he let it get away on Danny’s orders. Laura had never been more relieved than the moment when mercy seemed to win out in her heart, and she shot the signal to their Seeker.

He had the Snitch within two minutes, having apparently been following its progress lazily since his last sighting.

It was the ‘ass-kicking of the century,’ in LaFontaine’s words. It was not an exaggeration: the final score was 260-0.

The party in Gryffindor Tower, in the aftermath, knew no limits.

Several of the seventh years succeeded in lifting Danny over their heads for a round of Gryffindor war chants. Some industrious student secured them a series of food platters from the kitchen. There was even champagne—which mysteriously appeared just after McGonagall departed for the evening, having given a touching speech on their ‘school pride and exceptional teamwork.’

Laura swore she had seen a tear twinkling in the Professor’s eye.

“Hollis!”

She jumped. She had been hiding off to the side for the majority of the party—after her classmates had gotten their fill of chanting her name and proclaiming her the ‘Greatest Keeper in Gryffindor History.’ There was even a little song, which had made her blush profusely.

It was Sirius Black, looking particularly jovial with his tie looped around his forehead. He was taller than she was—a byproduct of her being vertically challenged more so than anything to do with Black’s recent growth spurt—and as a result he had to tilt his head down to meet her gaze.

“With that shy smile, it’s a miracle I don’t have to fend off more suitors to find you. They must be afraid of getting in my way—there’s really no other explanation.”

“Charming,” she commented, raising an eyebrow. “Did Potter dare you to come over here? Is he waiting to see if I’ll kick you somewhere that’s highly improper?”

He staggered back, clutching a hand to his chest. “You wound me, Hollis! My love for you knows no bounds. I would leap this tower, if that would prove my sincerity.”

“By all means, leap the tower if you really feel that strong of a need to show off. But I’m still not going to go out with you.”

“Very well, then. I shall hold out hope for next year!”
He ducked away, receiving claps on the shoulders from his mates—still sans Lupin, she noted—and within minutes he was gulping down champagne and back to making crude jokes. Potter caught her eye, mouthing ‘good choice,’ with a wicked grin.

Laura laughed, but her heart wasn’t in it. Her thoughts had gone elsewhere.

She wasn’t sure what she had been hoping for, when she slipped from the Tower in the early morning light and jogged down to the Quidditch pitch. The sight of the empty playing field, though, sapped all of her energy.

She turned back without changing or even taking her Cleansweep for a few laps—and then froze.

A single figure was winding their way down the path. She paused, too, when she caught sight of Laura. And then turned and started back the way she had come.

“Wait!” shouted Laura, her feet working of their own accord as she dashed after her. Her broom bounced on her shoulder, her robes swishing about her legs.

Carmilla did not wait, but she did not run, either, allowing Laura to catch up with her just outside the Entrance Hall.

“Hey,” Laura gulped, sucking in deep breaths. A line of sweat had formed on her brow. Carmilla blinked, but said nothing. “The— the pitch is yours. Y’know. If you want it.”

“Because I need the practice, right?” Carmilla bit out. “No thanks, Hollis.”

She spun, and even Laura calling her name did no good. Carmilla was gone without another word.

“Psst. Look!” hissed LaF, amusement thick in their voice.

Laura lifted her head from her notes. Professor Binns was still droning on at the front of the room, facing the board. She swiveled to follow LaF’s pointed head tilt, and found Carmilla in her usual seat in the darkest corner.

She was alone, the seats around her abandoned, and her eyes were rimmed with red. She looked sick. Hell, she looked dead.

“Someone’s not coping well with the loss,” LaF muttered.

Laura could not bring herself to agree, knitting her brows together as she studied the Ravenclaw’s face.

When Carmilla’s eyes flicked up and found hers, the other girl glared. This time, Laura did not look away. She lifted her fingers, tilting her head with the question: *Seven?*

Carmilla looked away, her expression twisting. When she looked back, though, and found Laura still maintaining the contact, she rolled her eyes and gave a little nod.

Laura was distracted, through the rest of their classes. LaF lost twenty points for Gryffindor after practically making her entire potion for her, and Perry went on about it all the way through dinner.
Across the hall, Laura caught sight of Carmilla eating her dinner. She was alone, again. Two of her own Housemates passed behind her, saying something that made the girl’s shoulders stiffen. They laughed.

“Look, I’m sorry!” Laura snapped, cutting off Perry mid-rant. “I’ll study more. I’ll read the board. Just drop it, okay?”

She had never so much as raised her voice at her friends before. She had gotten flustered, and she had ranted and stammered, but she had never yelled. Perry’s eyes grew wide, and LaFontaine went very still. Laura regretted the outburst at once, a hot weight settling in her stomach. She dropped her gaze down to her untouched stew.

“Um… Everything okay, there, Laura?” LaF probed, their voice tentative.


“Uh-huh,” Perry said slowly, doubt pouring off of her. “Laura, you know you’ll get the nonverbal spells, soon, right? You’ve been making excellent progress, and LaF and I were really just lucky the other night—”

Laura dropped her silverware with a clatter.

“I’m gonna go for a walk,” she said.

Though they shifted in their seats and glanced at one another, neither of them followed her.

She waited on the pitch from six until nine, pushing her broom to its limits as she soared in and out of the goal posts. The sun had set long ago, and Laura knew she was being overly hopeful in thinking that Carmilla might yet show. Once seven had come and gone, reality had begun sinking in.

Still, when she saw someone making their way down to the pitch, her heart leapt.

And then it sank.

“HOLLIS!” McGonagall growled.

Laura dropped obediently, landing lightly in front of the professor. The older woman glared at her, eyes glinting with open disapproval. “It’s past dark. What are you thinking? Twenty points from Gryffindor. And now I have to give you detention… Five o’clock, the next three Fridays. My office.”

Laura opened her mouth in protest, but McGonagall held up a finger. “And before you start arguing that you have Quidditch practice, you should have thought of that sooner. I’m only doing what any other professor would.” Her lips were very thin, a vein jumping in her neck. “Make no mistake, Miss Hollis; I am not happy about this.”

“Yes, Professor,” Laura mumbled, her face burning.

She followed McGonagall back to the castle in silence, slipped past her friends in the common room without a word, and headed straight for her four poster. Her head was like a hornets’ nest, thoughts buzzing with humiliation and anxiety and, above all the rest: disappointment.

At least there was one thing she knew for certain:

She was done trying to help Carmilla Karnstein.
I did promise an update in December, didn't I? I am still planning to fully finish this before I begin any active posting... but for now I will promise an update by the end of January at the very least.

Thanks for reading! Drop me a line on here, if you like, or feel free to come find me on tumblr as jg-firefly.
Questions (I've Got a Few)

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spring of 1974 (Fourth Year)

“I’m never going to get this,” Laura declared, throwing herself into the nearest chair. A cloud of dust kicked up and she watched the flecks drift through the dim candlelight.

She had still not lifted her book more than two inches. Even with the interruption to their sessions—Perry had point-blank refused to indulge in more late-night adventures, after Carmilla’s interruption—her friends had found their individual successes with seeming ease.

LaF was floating theirs around the room, these days, while Perry had returned to more advanced matters—things like the nonverbal shielding charm that Laura had suggested from the start. The pair of them paused in the middle of one such exercise at Laura’s interruption, the book LaF had been trying to throw at Perry falling with a clatter to the floor.

“Now, Laura, that’s not the right attitude,” huffed Perry, crossing her arms. “You’ve got to keep trying if you want to make it work! I can practice with you, again, if you like—”

“No, no, I think I’m just—I’m done for the day.” She stood, shouldering her bag, “I’m going to head down to the pitch.”

“Oh, dear. You’ll wear yourself out, trying to fit in more Quidditch all the time... and really, Laura, you’re already the hero of the Gryffindor team. No matter how much James brags.”

She shrugged, though her cheeks did flare a bit at the compliment.

“I still owe it to the team.”

This was not entirely true. Certainly, her final detention was due in just a few hours, during the full team practice, and there was no denying that Danny had been furious from the moment she heard the news—especially seeing as she had confronted McGonagall directly about it, with unpleasant results (“I want the Cup just as badly as you do, Miss Lawrence. You’d do well to remember that.”)—and yet, right now, Laura was craving the pitch in a separate way. One that had nothing to do with the pitying look she had received from Davie in Herbology, or the way Danny had scowled not quite at her, but definitely in her direction, that very morning.

The corridors were mostly abandoned, as she wound through the castle. She caught the final staircase just before it spun out of reach, and when she slipped onto the grounds and into the cool March breeze, she felt like her lungs were working properly for the first time in days.

All she needed was an hour, maybe two; enough time to clear her head, feel the familiar weight of her Cleansweep beneath her and relish in how singularly easy it was to be one with the broom. There
was no thought required, no careful calibration of wandwork with memorized spells. Quidditch just... was.

Laura had nearly kicked off, pulse thrumming and feet sinking into the spring mud under the turf, before she saw the shadow and felt the kick of déjà vu like a blow to the gut.

It could have been anyone—her vision was not nearly good enough to make out a face properly from the ground—but Laura knew, with a sticky, sinking sensation, that it was not.

“Hey!” Carmilla shouted, in the precious seconds while Laura hesitated on the pitch below.

Laura’s broom jumped to her shoulder as she fought the squelch of her boots back towards the changing rooms and the path that lay beyond.

Why can’t just one thing go right? she cursed internally.

Maybe Perry was right. Maybe she should have just stayed in the castle and let them cut back their own lessons to baby her through the phases they had already mastered...

Carmilla landed with a thud, directly in front of her, and Laura nearly lost her balance. She skidded in the mud, the impromptu walking stick of her broom handle the only thing that saved her from a tragic face-plant.

“You look like hell, Hollis,” the other girl commented. There was a little crease in her brow, a wrinkle in her nose.

Laura could have shot back you too, or something similar, but she did not have the energy.

“Gee, thanks,” she muttered, instead, and side-stepped Carmilla with her head down.

“Hey, wait,” Carmilla insisted. She blocked Laura’s path again, somehow graceful despite the mud, and drew her to yet another sticky halt. She sank further into the pitch, and crossed her arms, glaring expectantly.

Carmilla cleared her throat. “We could... we could practice, for a little while? Run those drills.”

For a moment, Laura could only blink. The words seemed to process far slower than she was used to—even slower than the names and dates for her History of Magic notes—but then they clicked, and a surge of anger shot through her. Like a candle blazing back to life after a gust of wind.

She could feel the slap of McGonagall’s disappointment as freshly as though it had just been slung at her.

“Why the heck would I agree to that?” she snapped. “I guess today is convenient for you, but when I’m the one asking, then it’s not worth it?”

Carmilla flinched as if she’d been burned.

“Listen, last month—” she started, but Laura was already shaking her head.

“Just practice by yourself, Karnstein. You got here first, today, and fair is fair, or whatever. Just... just don’t be here tomorrow. Okay?”

She turned to go, jerking her boots out of the sucking mud, but Carmilla grabbed her arm.

“I’m sorry.”
These two words clicked much faster.

Laura’s breath rushed out, her eyes slipping closed. As she blinked them open, slowly, she recognized the expression on Carmilla’s face as sincerity. She actually meant it, and, more surprisingly, Laura found that she believed her—same as she believed Carmilla was not really a Death Eater.

And there was something about her touch. Her fingers were still wrapped about Laura’s arm, but they were not angry or insistent—they were simply there. Like a plea all of their own.

Catching the way her eyes dropped to the contact, Carmilla let go, dragging the offending hand up and through her hair. She left it to scrub at the base of her neck.

“Sorry for what?” Laura managed, at last. She was grateful when her voice came out clear, strong—perhaps even a bit defiant.

Carmilla only hesitated for the barest of seconds. “For what happened, before. At Christmas,” she admitted. “And for not coming down that night, when you got detention, but… mostly for Christmas.” Before Laura could formulate a response, she shook her head and added, “Hollis… why didn’t you turn me in?”

Her eyes, which had previously been locked on her feet, were pinned on Laura, now—dark and swimming with uncertainty.

“I don’t know,” she said. Fear, doubt, confusion… there were too many options to pick from. “I mean, I-I thought about it. I just… I never did.”

Carmilla’s silence was heavy, unreadable, and Laura distracted herself in the pale tint of red that never seemed to fade from the rims of her eyes, and the dark hollows that suggested she was not sleeping properly. And her robes—Laura had never noticed, but they were too short in much the same way that Laura’s own were too short for her. Today they were muddy with the evidence of hours on the pitch, but not all of the stains were new.

There was a hole in one of her sleeves, too, and she wore no gloves despite the chill that was still in the spring air. Laura could just make out the faded title, on the handle of the splintered broom she held, dated nearly a decade prior.

Her mouth got ahead of her, again, blurting without her permission.

“Aren’t you a Pureblood?” she asked.

Whatever perplexing thoughts had been holding Carmilla’s tongue, they vanished in an instant. She bristled.

“What does that mean?”

Laura flushed red. “No, I just meant—I mean, I know that not all Purebloods have—” she released a groan of frustration. “I just figured that someone with magical parents probably had a family broom or something! And you always use one of the school ones.”

Carmilla glanced at the Shooting Star, her knuckles going white on the handle.

“Well, for that,” she said quietly, “I would need parents.”

If the words could have carried a physical weight, Laura imagined she’d be buried in the mud, right
about now. Instead, she felt the ache resound within—felt the stone drop heavy in her gut.

She hadn’t known.

Her thoughts raced back, jumped through every shitty thing she had ever said, had ever agreed with when it came to Carmilla, and felt the remainder of the color falling from her face.

Face blank and tight, Carmilla kicked at a clump of mud and set it flying a few meters to the side.

What could she say? Trying to sympathize seemed the wrong route, and Laura hardly expected Carmilla would want to bond over their shared parental losses.

“I don’t talk about it,” Carmilla said, breaking the silence herself. “I just… I hate people knowing.”

This, at least, she could work with: “Well, then I promise I won’t tell anyone. I happen to be very good with secrets.”

A curious, astonished sort of look washed over Carmilla’s face, and was gone again in just a blink. Laura barely had time to process it—to wonder at where it had come from or what it meant.

“C’mon,” she said, when her fears of Carmilla walking away outweighed her nervousness. She dropped her broom to her side, climbing astride and letting herself drift upwards, rather than launching straight into the skies as was her habit.

Carmilla blinked, her broom lowering more out of surprise than actual purpose.

“What?”

“You wanted to practice, right? Let’s practice.”

The other girl didn’t protest, just gave her an odd sort of half-smile—one that sent a warm shiver down Laura’s spine—before joining her in the air.

While Laura lined herself up in front of the goal hoops, Carmilla called a Quaffle to her hand, holding it balanced lightly in one palm as she considered her options. Laura caught her first attempt with ease. The second, though, she did not even see—it went through the left hoop, and she had flown to the right.

“Ha!” Carmilla cried.

“Don’t get cocky,” Laura warned, even as she smiled. “We’re just getting started.”

Carmilla missed another shot. “I’m not the one who’s cocky,” she said, but there was still a smirk playing on her lips.

Laura caught the next shot, too—just barely—and they entered a game of halfway catch. More often than not, it was Carmilla who was calling back the Quaffle, cursing under her breath at another miss and drawing the ball back in the same breath for another try.

“You put us in last place, you know,” Carmilla commented, as Laura batted away yet another shot.

“Ah. Yes, that had occurred to me.”

The Quaffle tipped through the center hoop. Carmilla punched the air, but did not miss a beat. This time it was Laura who retrieved the Quaffle and tossed it back to her.
She aimed again almost immediately. Laura caught it.

“You’ll be captain next year, won’t you?” Carmilla called. The question was almost casual. Friendly.

This time, when the Quaffle shot past, it was because she was distracted, not because she missed. She frowned.

“I guess I’m... I’m hoping for that, yes.”

Carmilla nodded. She made another shot.

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“Why did you burst in on us, that night? Were you trying to get us in trouble?”

They were sitting in the stands, Laura’s feet slung up on the back of the bench in front of her. Carmilla was lying beside, hands folded together over her abdomen.

There hadn’t been much conversation, since they’d settled in. On the pitch, they pushed each other in a way that Laura’s own teammates—and she suspected Carmilla’s, as well—simply could not. She wasn’t even sure how they had wound up here, just that it had seemed like a natural progression when they landed.

Laura had found that she did not want to go back to the castle; not when she still had time left before she was due in McGonagall’s office. Carmilla, apparently, felt similar.

Laura was trying not to consider why that might be.

“I had my reasons,” Carmilla answered cryptically.

It had been like this with most of the questions she had dared to put a voice to—the only real answer she had obtained thus far was that Carmilla did not have any other living relatives. Or, at least, that was the assumption she made when Carmilla reluctantly admitted to living in a muggle orphanage somewhere in London.

Carmilla was also a very still person. Somehow, across the four years they had shared classes and corridors, Laura had never noticed, and yet, the Ravenclaw girl barely seemed to breathe, let alone fidget in place the way Laura did. If she were bothered by the disjointed string of questions Laura had shoved on her, her posture did not show it.

The problem was, Laura did not know where the breaking point was. And, as much as she wanted to know things—to know everything, in fact—she did not want Carmilla to leave.

“Um, so, I heard the next Shooting Star model is supposed to be unbelievable,” she tried, her voice light with forced enthusiasm. “There’s a shrinking compartment built into the handle. And self-grooming twigs, can you imagine? You’d never even need a broom-servicing kit—not that I can even afford one when I actually need it... oh, and, uh, Moisture-resistant charms, too! Uh-huh. No slipping in a storm.”

Carmilla stared at her for a long moment, enough to make Laura uncomfortable. There was something in her expression that Laura couldn’t read, half her face cast in shadow.

“What?” she asked self-consciously. She halfway wanted to apologize for her babbling, wondering if perhaps that would be what drove Carmilla off.
I still have so many questions, though.

“I don’t actually care about Quidditch, you know,” Carmilla murmured, at long last, and the words were pained. They sounded like they cost her something.

Laura sat up straight, blinking down at Carmilla in confusion.

“Wait, what?”

The other girl’s hair brushed against the side of Laura’s leg as she shrugged her shoulders. Her eyebrows pinched together in a wince. “I just… I’m not all intense about Quidditch. I know you are. All of my teammates are, too. I guess… maybe if I was better at it, I’d care more.”

Laura toyed with her next words, very aware of how close the other girl was lying to her. She could touch her hair right now, if she just lowered her hand. It looked very soft, all curvy waves and silky fly-aways.

“You are good at it, though,” Laura murmured.

She played with her robes to busy her fingers, her eyes on one particular strand of Carmilla’s hair. It was so close. She could slip it between her fingers, see if it was as soft as it looked… Carmilla might not even notice…

Carmilla frowned up at her, her upside-down furrow making Laura’s stomach jump guiltily. Did the other girl know where her thoughts were? What would she say if she did?

She pressed her palms flat on her lap to keep her fingers from trembling.

Touching Carmilla’s hair—touching any part of Carmilla at all—was a terrible idea.

What is wrong with me?

“That last game,” she stammered, trying to reclaim her line of thought. It had gotten away from her. Way away from her. “You were the best player on the pitch.”

“We didn’t score a single goal, Hollis.”

Laura shrugged, licking her lips to put some moisture back into them. “I’d say that’s more a testament to my Keeping skills than it is to your Chasing.”

“How very humble of you.”

The teasing in her voice was blatant and easy. Laura’s shoulders relaxed.

“Hey, I’m just saying. Context is important. Think of it this way; how do you do against your own Keeper, during practice?”

Carmilla scoffed. “He’s dreadful. He couldn’t stop a butterfly from making it through those hoops.”

“Oh, right. That’s true.” Laura ran her hand through her hair, thinking. It just seemed… wrong, that Carmilla wasn’t having as much fun as she was. Sometimes, Laura thought Quidditch was the only good thing she had going for her. “Tell you what. Wait for the Slytherin game. On a scale of one to ten, your Keeper is a two. But Slytherin… I’ll give them a six. You play them, and then you can tell me if you really don’t care about Quidditch.”

Carmilla smirked. “And where exactly on that scale do you put yourself, Hollis?”
She laughed and did not answer. Instead, she glanced at her watch, and then down at Carmilla once more. The other girl had closed her eyes, and Laura could see her smiling, ever so slightly. Her eyes were still rimmed with red, though the rest of her was unearthly pale. Even her lips lacked color, and she still hardly seemed to be breathing.

Laura looked away before she could be caught staring, and then got to her feet.

“I have to go,” she said. “I have that detention with McGonagall, and you know how she feels about tardiness.”

“Oh. Right.” Carmilla blinked, but didn’t move. There was a tiny crease between her eyebrows.

Just as Laura turned, ready to make the walk back alone, she found the other girl at her side, pulling her raven locks up into a loose ponytail.

“I think it’s going to rain,” she commented, as they emerged from the stairs and hit the winding path.

Laura wrinkled her nose, scowling at the sky. “Oh, goody.”

Carmilla shrugged. “I like storms, actually. Distant rumbles of thunder, the smell of rain…”

Was Carmilla Karnstein offering something akin to a personal fun fact? On her own, without any pushing? Again? Laura couldn’t help the smile the played at the edge of her lips.

“But wouldn’t you prefer a sunny day? I mean, birds chirping, the smell of fresh-cut grass… you could use the tan,” she teased.

The other girl jerked to a stop, eyes suddenly wide and serious. “What?” she demanded.

Laura pulled to a halt, turning back with a frown. “Wha—I was just joking.”

Surely you know how pretty you are.

The thought came out of nowhere, and she stomped it down quickly, glad that it had only resounded in her head and not out loud. She could analyze how she felt about it, later. Right now, Carmilla was shoving past her, her angry footfalls throwing up splashes of water.

“Hey!” Laura threw her hands up. “Carmilla! It was just a joke!”

The other girl did not turn back. Letting out a frustrated “Aarghh!” Laura shoved her hands deep in her pockets and headed the rest of the way alone, utterly at a loss to explain what had gone wrong.

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“Karnstein,” repeated Professor Slughorn. Laura, like the rest of the students clustered about in the dungeon classroom, was watching the Ravenclaw girl expectantly. She was slouched in her seat, picking at a spot on her pants, but at this latest pronouncement she jolted slightly, as if she had just awakened from a long, distant thought.

“Yes?” she sighed, shaking her hair out of her eyes and blinking slowly.

“Glad you could join us,” said Slughorn. The dungeon tittered with muted laughter. “I was asking you about the properties of cleaning potions, and how they vary from cleaning spells.”

“Well, cleaning spells usually focus upon the act of rearranging a space,” Carmilla began slowly, hardly shifting her posture. Her voice was grainy, but lilting in a poetic sort of way. Laura had never
noticed that; not until they had stopped throwing insults and curses long enough to sit and talk. It was a lovely voice. Laura could listen to her endlessly.

“They require organization and a mindfulness from the user to direct belongings into their spaces. Someone would be unable to effectively use a cleaning spell on an unfamiliar space, without spending extra time to learn the room, or without getting a few things wrong.”

Slughorn was nodding sagely, his relief visible. He had no doubt called on Carmilla because he expected her to know the answer. He usually posed similar questions to LaFontaine, beaming at the response as though the credit for their brilliance was all upon his own shoulders.

Carmilla was still talking: “Cleaning potions are more straightforward, and focus upon the removal of unwelcome substances, which might not respond to spells or charms. Dragon blood, for instance, cannot be vanished with a spell, and has to be charmed into a container of some sort. A proper cleaning potion could dissolve it without a trace.”

Slughorn clapped his hands appreciatively. “Excellent, excellent. Twenty points to Ravenclaw.”

He launched into an explanation on the cleaning spells they were going to be brewing and identifying in their upcoming lessons, but Laura’s gaze stayed on Carmilla, who had returned to her sullen slouch the moment the spotlight had slid away.

It had been several weeks since they had spoken on the pitch. Laura’s head hurt with all of the questions she had not gotten answered: the dark curse and subsequent healing, the Death Eater friends, the unexpected apology, the sudden outburst of anger and the relative silence that had followed since…

Carmilla looked up. Caught her staring.

Laura jumped guiltily, biting her lip and darting her gaze away. She counted her heartbeats, her leg bouncing until she reached ten and dared shift her eyes back to Carmilla. The other girl was looking down at her lap again, but there was a smirk playing on her lips.

Laura’s shoulders relaxed.

It had been like this, ever since that evening—moments like this one, interspersed through their shared lessons. Carmilla would watch her with the faintest of head tilts, or chuckle softly at something she said from across the room, and Laura would melt into a useless puddle.

Whatever had upset Carmilla so thoroughly—and Laura had replayed the words over and over, unable to find anything truly offensive in them—had clearly passed.

She wanted to see her again, wanted to ignore all of her pressing questions in favor of exploring each and every little way she could get Carmilla to smile. It had become so abruptly important to her that it sometimes took her breath away when she caught herself absentely picturing the other girl’s eyes, or the line of her jaw, or the angle of her shoulders.

It’s not a crush, she told herself, for the umpteenth time. Carmilla was just… interesting. Mysterious.

And very, very pretty.

(How had Laura never noticed that?)

Carmilla looked up again, amusement flickering in her dark eyes. Laura took a breath, and held up her hands with the sort of bravery she had not known she possessed. Her eyes were hopeful as her
fingers asked: *Seven?*

When Carmilla shook her head, it was with actual regret, tugging her lower lip into her mouth and furrowing her brow.

It was the regret that got Laura, more than the rejection. She nodded a little too quickly, smiled a little too obviously, and nearly snapped her quill when she hurried to press it to her parchment with faux-note-taking-eagerness.

*Sure*, a little voice probed sarcastically at the back of her mind. *Not a crush. Nope. Not at all.*

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The sun was out, it was finally starting to feel like spring, and Laura had finally, *finally*, succeeded at floating her textbook across the practice room without so much as moving her lips.

She settled into the stands next to LaF, ready to enjoy the thrill of a game day where she had no expectations to live up to. Even her homework was fully completed.

In every realm except one, everything was lining up perfectly.

“I hate to say it, Hollis, but I think I’m actually rooting for Ravenclaw,” said LaFontaine.

“Well, you should be,” Laura agreed. She was proud of the objectivity in her tone. “Slytherin might be our biggest threat, this season. We beat them, sure, but not by a very large margin. If Ravenclaw can keep them from putting points on the board, we might not even need the Hufflepuff win to take home the Cup.”

“Laura, I really wish you cared as much about Transfiguration as you do about Quidditch statistics,” Perry sighed, fixing her hair behind her ears.

“I know, I’m wasting my talents, yada yada…” Laura waved. And then she lowered her voice, “*But,* I’m also one of only four people who can do a nonverbal spell as a *fourth* year. Surely that counts for something in your book, Perr?”

She saw LaF frown, the word *‘four’* forming on their lips questioningly. Thankfully, Perry was already speaking.

“It counts for plenty. In fact, I’m excited to start working on more serious spellwork. Just *think*—”

“Hey, hey! Not during Quidditch!” LaF complained.

The teams were striding out onto the field. Laura leaned forward earnestly.

Carmilla looked confident, for once. She had her shoulders squared and her hair pinned up neatly… she wasn’t even scowling, though she was hardly grinning, either.

Laura wondered if that was how *she* looked, when she strode out onto the pitch before Gryffindor games.

She applauded with the others, as the Ravenclaws and Slytherins shouted the names of team members and waved banners. Laura noted a conspicuous lack of support for Carmilla, and felt a strange twinge of *annoyance*.

She told herself, this time, that she felt this way because someone with her talent deserved to be recognized. No other reason.
And it was perfectly normal to recognize that another girl was pretty. To think their hair was perfect. It didn’t have to mean anything.

This was Carmilla Karnstein, after all.

She couldn’t let it mean anything.

The players took to the air, soaring into their roles. Carmilla launched into hot pursuit of Tim Duranicore, the lead Slytherin Chaser, who had claimed first possession of the Quaffle. He scored easily, and the ball fell into the waiting arms of Huxley. Carmilla dodged after, just a hair too late to be involved.

Huxley missed, and so did the Bludger that went for Duranicore. Slytherin scored again.

And again.

“At least the Seekers look bored,” LaF commented, when the scoreboard racked quickly up to 50-0. They were on their way to a repeat of the Gryffindor match, and Carmilla had still not gained possession of the Quaffle once. “Although perhaps it would be better if they put Ravenclaw out of their misery sooner, rather than later…”

“Yes!” Laura squeaked, jumping in her seat. Huxley had just been grazed by a Bludger—but that was not what she was cheering for. The Quaffle had dropped into Carmilla’s arms, and she was heading straight for the Slytherin goal.

Laura’s hands clenched in her lap, her nails digging half-moons into her palms. *Come on… come on…*

Carmilla angled upward, aimed, and then threw on the brakes and *heaved.*

The Quaffle soared clear through the right hoop, and Rex Marcus looked positively astounded. Laura threw both hands up, cheering with the loudest of the Ravenclaws.

Perry shot her a judgmental, sidelong look, but LaF was too occupied shouting about the foul they believed should have been called on Duranicore, who had made a very rude hand gesture.

Huxley passed to Carmilla, on the next strike. It was the first time he had ever done something of the kind, and he seemed as astonished as the crowd when she sent it soaring through for another ten points.

She was majestic.

Every time she got ahold of the Quaffle, she took it to the hoops. She did not miss even *once.* Marcus was disheveled, by the end of the match, his hair flattened to his forehead, slicked with sweat. The Ravenclaws were beside themselves, jumping atop one another in the stands. They had just begun to chant Carmilla’s name in unison, when a hush swept across the pitch.

It was the sort of hush that only ever meant one thing.

The Seekers were nearly on top of one another, jockeying for position. Even Carmilla stopped to watch, positioned close beside her own Keeper, as both Seekers stretched for the shimmering golden Snitch.

The roar was positively deafening, when Jenna Martin jerked free of the spiraling blue and green blur, waving the Snitch over her head. Ravenclaws Laura did not even know were grabbing her in
hugs and clapping her on the back, whooping and throwing up general chaos.

Surely, Carmilla would like Quidditch, now. Laura was already practicing her ‘I told you so,’ in the back of her mind, even as she replayed Carmilla’s best plays (and her widest smiles) in the forefront.

*Oh, what the hell,* she thought helplessly, her gaze following the head of perfect—if somewhat windblown—raven curls as Carmilla was borne off the field on the shoulders of her cheering teammates.

It was *definitely* a crush.

Chapter End Notes

For now, I plan to maintain monthly updates on this, so I will see you all in February! Until then, drop me a line here, or on tumblr (jg-firefly). I love all of your thoughts.

Thanks for reading!
The Long Fall

Chapter Summary

Carmilla deals with a newfound spotlight. Laura deals with a roller coaster of broken hopes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Spring of 1974 (Fourth Year)

The first time Laura had won a Quidditch match had been in her second year, in a rather blustery game against Hufflepuff. The wind had worked well to her advantage, giving the Quaffle enough rightward lean as it flew at her hoops that she only needed to guard half as much space against the inexperienced Chaser that had been running point for the other team.

Despite the help of luck and circumstance, nothing had dampened her spirits in the aftermath of the victory. When Gryffindor celebrated, they chanted her name along with the rest. Students she did not even know were recapping her better saves, eyes bright with excitement, and first years would approach her in the Great Hall during breaks to ask her for tips on joining the team when they were older.

Being a Quidditch player, Laura learned, was akin to holding a small status of celebrity within the halls of the castle. The attention faded with time, but there was nothing quite like the rush of it, in the moment.

She was not surprised, therefore, that Carmilla was too busy to meet with her, in the weeks following her victory. She had gained a small following of supporters and overly-eager study buddies. First and second years nervously asked for her autograph during meals, and, one night before an Astronomy lesson, Laura eavesdropped on several Hufflepuff fourth years discussing how her moves were reminiscent of a number of retired Chasers from the ‘40s. There was a near-constant stream of

“Carmilla, do you want help with your Transfiguration essay?” and “Carmilla, do you want to borrow my Potions notes?”

When the days stretched into weeks, and finally into an entire month, though, Laura began to find these moments wearing at her patience. Carmilla had rejected three separate invitations to meet at the pitch, each time with a regret that had begun to feel more mocking than genuine, and on the nights when Laura snuck out to check the field herself, she found it abandoned.

Laura kept her head down, when she found herself in the same room as the other girl. She focused on the lessons, or on her books, and fought the urge to shoot extra glances Carmilla’s way.

She hardly needed further confirmation that Carmilla no longer wanted anything to do with her.

“Ignore them,” LaF would say, on the occasions when she caught Laura’s shoulders stiffening as inevitable giggles rose from the back corner of the room, “Just because she can actually play, now, doesn’t mean she’s not still a total bitch. And, besides, you’re way better.”
Laura would just shrug or nod, and keep her lips pressed tight.

She did not want to have a deeper conversation about Carmilla Karnstein. Not even a little bit. It seemed that all the snide, angry things she used to say about the girl—mostly to an agreeable LaFontaine—now felt bitter on her tongue, while all of the things she actually wanted to say were like needles, stabbing into her gut.

When she would catch a glimpse of her profile, trapped between the outlines of her eager fans, she hated that her anger faded so quickly into longing: that there was still a pang in her chest at the very sight of her sharp jawline, her thin lips, the gentle fall of her hair over slender shoulders.

As such, when she found herself waiting for a turning staircase alone, one evening in early May, she was not particularly thrilled to discover that she had company. Especially not given that Ravenclaw was due to play Slytherin in two days’ time.

“Hollis?” Carmilla said, and there was a clipped shock to her voice that told Laura she had not been expecting the run-in any more than Laura had.

“Karnstein,” Laura replied with as much cool disinterest as she could muster.

Carmilla was staring, her eyebrows up and her mouth slightly open. She had paused several meters away, and shuffled her feet in place, hands buried in her pockets.

“You—you’re alone.”

“Observational, aren’t you?”

Carmilla recoiled a fraction, eyes widening, “You just… haven’t been at the pitch,” she said.

Laura almost wanted to laugh. Instead, she scraped her palms over the front of her robes and swallowed against the surge of her heartbeat. She did not meet Carmilla’s gaze; she was not about to give away just how frequently she had gone to the pitch to wait for her, even if it was the truth.

“Yeah, well, I found better things to do,” she lied.

The other girl frowned, “Oh.” She teetered, worrying her lower lip, and then glanced up at Laura through her eyelashes, and Laura had to dig her nails into her palms to focus on anything but the rush of heat that went straight to her ears. “I had just… thought I’d see you there.”

The surge of emotion that hit her at the words barely had a chance to resemble hope before it boiled away into anger.

“Why?” she snapped, “Do you need more tutoring? Am I finally useful to you, again?”

Carmilla’s mouth fell open, bewilderment tearing its way through her features, and suddenly Laura could see the girl from the pitch, the girl that had laid out beside her, hair spread free, eyes vulnerable and curious.

“Is that what you think?” Carmilla demanded, her voice thick with shock.

It cut through Laura like a knife of regret.

“No,” she muttered swiftly, her hair falling over her eyes with a shake of her head. “Just… it’s whatever. Never mind.”

Forgetting all about her destination, and the moving staircase that had finally ground into place
before them, Laura turned back the way she had come and all but ran from the scene.

This time, she was the one who didn’t look back when Carmilla called her name.

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Perry insisted that they miss the final Hogsmeade weekend of the term to prepare for finals. Watching a particular Ravenclaw leave the Great Hall on Saturday morning, trailed by a gaggle of fans, Laura almost missed the proclamation.

“You can’t be serious!” LaFontaine exploded. “We skipped the last one, too. My Zonko’s supply—”

“Is hardly more important than your test scores. There are twelve months until the O.W.L.s, LaFontaine. You can keep scoffing at my timeline, but just you wait. It will be one month to go and you will regret not listening to me.”

LaF sputtered. “Laura, help me out, here!” they demanded.

“Huh?”

The last of Carmilla’s cohorts had just slipped out the doors behind her.

“I’m trying to save our souls, L. Perry wants us to spend the whole weekend in the library.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

Carmilla would probably be heading to Hogsmeade. With that giggling parade in tow. A mixture of what felt like heartburn and nausea buffeted through her, tossing her gut and making her scowl.

“That’s a very mature response,” said Perry.

“She’s not being mature, she’s clearly ill. Seriously, Laura, you feel okay?”

Laura shrugged, forcing her gaze back onto her friends. Perry had just pushed aside her cleaned plate, while LaFontaine was tearing strips off of the crust on their toast, their eyes clouded with frustration and a dose of actual concern.

“Fine,” she lied. She ignored her untouched breakfast. “Let’s just get to the library now, before all the good spots are taken.”

“They won’t be taken, it’s a Hogsmeade weekend!” LaFontaine griped. Yet, they still trailed Perry to the library, their words more protest than their feet were willing to put up. Laura let the two of them bicker through the corridors, her thoughts still far away.

Quidditch practice had turned grim, with Danny counting down her days at Hogwarts by pushing them to their limits. More than once, a team member had left practice bloody and Laura had a number of bruises on her shoulders from where she’d taken a Quaffle or even a Bludger. She had been fortunate not to need the hospital wing—Melanie Carter had spent the better part of yesterday evening there, having her snapped collarbone put back in place.

Laura missed her solo practices.

She missed the freedom of running her own drills, catching the Quaffle, soaring laps without someone yelling at her about her timing.

She missed the company.
“Oh no,” Perry sighed.

They had arrived at the library, and Laura glanced up only because Perry’s exasperation was a surprise. Were there no seats? Hadn’t LaF just said—but that wasn’t what Perry was responding to.

By the windows, a group of students—most of them first, second, and third years—were crowding about several tables, whispering and giggling behind their hands.

Carmilla was pulling books down from the stacks, her back turned to her admirers.

She hadn’t gone to Hogsmeade, after all.

“Why must they be so distracting?” Perry muttered as she ushered LaFontaine and Laura into seats at the table closest to the door. She glared in Carmilla’s direction. “Honestly. She’s not even that good.”

“You barely follow Quidditch,” LaFontaine reminded her, “and she is good. That’s the problem.” They glanced at Laura with a frown. Laura yanked her books out of her bag.

As LaFontaine and Perry turned to their studying, arguing in whispers over the importance of History of Magic in their homework timeline, Laura’s gaze strayed away from the notes she was not truly reading.

Carmilla had returned to her table and was blatantly ignoring her followers. She had kicked her feet up on the desk, and her nose was buried deep in a book whose title Laura could not make out from across the room. The spine looked battered, the leather fading.

Before Laura could dart her gaze away, Carmilla’s head lifted. Perfectly wavy tendrils of raven hair tumbled off of her face, and her eyes locked onto Laura as if she had known the other girl was there all along. The startled jolt of her eyebrows up to her hairline was enough to discourage that theory.

Laura couldn’t look away.

Carmilla blinked, and then, darting her stare to Laura’s distracted companions, she rested her book on her knees and held up both hands, raising her fingers.

Seven?

Laura cursed her quickening heartbeat. This was a terrible idea; Carmilla most certainly did not like her, and this crush was going to be the death of her if she kept expecting reciprocation and answers where there clearly would never be any.

But, Carmilla’s gaze was soft, and pleading, and she was somehow more painfully beautiful for it.

Laura nodded.

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Laura hated herself for going along with this. She had half a mind not to show up—to let Carmilla be the one with all the questions, for once.

All of those thoughts were quashed before they had any real life. For all of her frustration, Laura was not petty.

She stayed late at dinner that night, an open book next to her plate, and waved off her friends when they asked if she was coming up to the Tower with them, insisting that she would be there ‘eventually.’
It wasn’t an outright lie. She would join them.

Eventually.

When Laura arrived at the pitch, Carmilla was already doing lazy laps through the goal hoops.

Her heart was blazing in her chest, her thoughts arguing with themselves in the background just like typical banter from Perry and LaFontaine, but Laura tuned out everything except the weight of her broomstick and the unexpected warmth of the evening breeze on her face.

She rose into the sky.

At her interruption, Carmilla pulled to an abrupt halt, hovering in place just far enough away that she did not feel comfortable starting a conversation. The other girl seemed to be regarding her, her hesitation unnatural, and they both glanced towards the stands at the same time.

Laura’s laugh did not quite part her lips, but it tickled in her throat and curved her expression into a smile. She beat Carmilla, though they were not racing, and chose to stand with her arms draped over the edge rather than claiming a seat as she had last time.

Carmilla landed lightly beside her, coming up to lean against the railing at her side.

She didn’t say anything, and Laura felt the tremors of long-standing agitation stirring in spite of the relief that still circled her.

Carmilla was actually here. She had set the time, without prompting, and was now standing very, very close to her.

“They’re driving me crazy,” the other girl said, out of nowhere.

Laura let her gaze dart to the side, taking in the drawn lines of Carmilla’s pale profile before she cleared her throat to ask, “Who?”

Shaking her head, Carmilla ground out, “My fan club.”

“Oh.”

A strong wind buffeted through the pitch, tugging at Laura’s hair such that she had to tuck it back behind her ears to see properly. Carmilla merely looked like a model, of course, her hair fluttering out behind her serenely.

Laura’s pulse skipped, her chest all the way up to the tips of her ears going warm. Her fingers tingled as if they had gone to sleep, and she turned to stare down at the ground, far beneath them.

“I wanted to thank you,” said Carmilla. The words were faint, whispered more towards her feet than to Laura’s face.

“Um. For… what?”

Carmilla furrowed her brow. She raised one hand off the railing, letting it gesture vaguely at the field in front of them. “This. You—you were at the matches, weren’t you?”

“Of course I was there,” Laura couldn’t think of a single reason she would miss any Quidditch match, regardless of who was playing. And she had certainly been there on Saturday, when Ravenclaw wiped the floor with Hufflepuff.
Silence descended again. Carmilla, who was always so still, so poised, was picking at her nails, her foot scuffing against the railing.

“So you are mad at me.” Her voice was small, resigned, and wholly un-Carmilla-like. It was jarring.

“What? No. I’m not mad at you,” Laura stammered.

It wasn’t entirely true, but, at the moment? Inches from brushing shoulders, Carmilla’s expression tight and vulnerable? Laura had never felt further from anger.

“You’ve been avoiding me ever since that Hufflepuff match,” Carmilla accused. “And then you practically yelled at me last week. I haven’t been able to get away in the evenings, so I’ve been trying to catch you after our classes, or in the Great Hall, but you’re always with the gingers. And they hate me more than you do, so I didn’t—”

“I don’t hate you, Carmilla,” Laura’s throat felt tight, horror rising from some deep recess within her. “Of course I don’t hate you. I mean… I couldn’t. I couldn’t hate you.”

The words were escaping faster than she could think them over. She sputtered to a halt, her breaths uneven. Her cheeks were flushed.

For some crazy, stupid reason, she couldn’t stop looking at Carmilla.

And she kept hearing her last words, as if they had been set on repeat in her brain, declaring over and over that Carmilla had tried to see her. That Carmilla had wanted to see her.

“Oh,” the other girl agreed slowly. “You don’t hate me.”

Her dark eyes were impossible to read. Laura swallowed hard. Her mouth was so dry, and there was a shadow across Carmilla’s face, lining up with the perfect arc of her jaw…

“I’m glad you don’t like them,” said Laura. “The fans, I mean.” She shrugged. “I thought you… well, I just thought you were enjoying it.”

Carmilla’s scoff was almost a laugh, her voice coarse, “Laura, I don’t think I’ve ever been further from enjoying myself.”

She looked away once the words were out, and there was a shrug rising in her shoulders that Laura suspected had nothing to do with the cold, but that wasn’t what she was caught up on.

Carmilla had rasped out her first name, had let it fall as easily off of her lips as if she had used it a hundred times before. Laura had been so used to the call of Hollis, to the way Carmilla had turned the surname from a near-slur into a murmur, that she could not say she had given pause to consider the alternative… or the effect it would have on her.

If her ears weren’t pink before, they were certainly edging on crimson, now. She turned quickly, tugging at her hair so it fell to cover the side of her face, and stared hard out across the pitch.

“What about Quidditch?” she asked, finally, clearing her throat. She wondered if she was imagining Carmilla’s tension beside her. “How do you feel about Quidditch, now?”

“I’d say Quidditch is a ten,” Carmilla murmured. When Laura dared turn towards her, she found Carmilla already staring back.

There was no way she was imagining the other girl’s smile.
It slipped, though, her expression darkening, and a muscle jumped in her throat as she sucked her lower lip into her mouth and blew a breath out of her nose.

“Laura, what you said, last week, about my reasons for asking you here—”

“I overreacted,” she said hurriedly. Her heart was racing, pounding loud in her ears. It seemed to be beating out a rhythm of questions, of things that Carmilla might say next, if Laura did not stop her. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Carmilla’s lower lip was shiny, where she had been rolling it between her teeth. There was an uncertainty in her dark gaze, and Laura was as desperate for her to continue as she was afraid of just that.

Carmilla, after a moment’s hesitation, murmured a quiet, “Okay.”

And that was it. Laura had sabotaged her only chance to get confirmation, to know for sure that Carmilla wanted to see her for her.

Before she could process the disappointment, her brain was jumping twelve steps ahead, and she was blurting, “We should keep in touch this summer,” without thinking.

She felt her own eyes widen, matching Carmilla’s.

“I mean, if you want to. I usually write, to like, Perry and LaF, which is easy, because they live next-door to each other, so it’s really like writing to one person and they just share the letter…but sometimes I write to Danny, too, so it’s not like I’m…I mean I’m not opposed to writing multiple letters.”

Carmilla still hadn’t answered.

“I like to write,” Laura finished lamely.

Carmilla ran a finger along an old, worn gash in the railing. “And talk,” she said. It could have been condescending, but there was a lilt to the word, and a curl at the edge of her lips. “I just… don’t usually get mail.”

Laura nodded. “Right. If you don’t want—I mean it was just a thought, like, pen-friends, or… or whatever.”

There was no way Carmilla didn’t notice the blush sweeping across her features.

She shouldn’t have asked. It had been a stupid idea.

“I didn’t say no,” said Carmilla. Her gaze was gentle, contemplative. Laura’s eyes darted down, and then quickly back up.

She swallowed again.

Did Carmilla notice that?

The other girl turned away, staring calmly up at the stars that were beginning to peek out of the velvety sky. It had gotten very dark.

“We should probably get back.”

Laura had been thinking the same thing, but there was something about Carmilla suggesting it—
Carmilla being the one to urge the departure, that pulled down on Laura’s gut like an unwelcome anchor. It reminded her of the past weeks, and all the times Carmilla had said no.

“Right,” she agreed too quickly. “Filch.”

“And you have that match in a few days.”

Laura wished she could believe Carmilla’s hesitation was the same as her own—was not just awkwardness or tiredness or concern for being caught on the grounds after hours—but she knew that was naïve.

They pulled away from the railing together, and made the journey back to the castle in silence.

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Laura let herself slip again.

From the final night together on the pitch until the last Saturday of the term, she let herself catch Carmilla’s eye in class, let herself smile back without expecting another meeting. Time was short, and exams were stressful, and she would send an owl in the first week of vacation anyway.

She’d open with something casual. Maybe try to get Carmilla interested in the Harpies. There were several old Quidditch magazines in her closet back home that she could send.

But then it was the morning of the final Quidditch match—Hufflepuff versus Gryffindor—and Laura burst into the old classroom where she, Perry, and LaF had taught themselves nonverbal spells.

They had not used the space in weeks; not with the library taking up most of their time in preparation for exams. Perry had become particularly irate, the night before, because she did not know the name of the shielding spell’s inventor. LaF had been carefully force-feeding her tea in the aftermath, gently reminding her that no one actually knew who had invented the spell, and therefore she wasn’t supposed to know a name.

Breakfast was nearly wrapped up, down in the Great Hall, and Laura was expected down at the pitch any minute, but Perry had already been gone from her bed when LaF had shaken Laura awake, and they had been on a rather frantic search ever since—urged on mostly by LaF’s dramatic insistence that Perry might be ‘lying dead under a pile of books somewhere.’

Laura was fairly certain the other girl was just holed up in some private nook, determined to avoid the match and make use of the hours of peace it provided in the castle… but at this point she did not dare argue with LaFontaine.

It seemed everyone’s nerves were shot this time of year, not just Perry’s.

Perry’s name died on her lips, though, as she skidded to a halt just inside the classroom.

Carmilla jumped, putting a solid distance between herself and the other student in the room—Remus Lupin.

He flushed a dark red. Laura’s gaze darted back and forth between them, her mouth working and no sound coming out.

Of all the people she would have expected to walk in on, these were the last two she would imagine finding alone together.
In the nearly empty castle.

Looking highly embarrassed.

Laura’s face flushed, too, and suddenly she found the pattern on the ceiling incredibly interesting.

“I—I’m sorry. I should… I’m gonna go,” she finally stammered.

“Laura!”

She didn’t want to be followed, but that didn’t stop Carmilla. Laura made it around only the first corner before the other girl caught her by the elbow, yanking her to a halt. She spun, jerking her arm free, and Carmilla hopped back a pace as if just realizing what she had done. Her eyes were very wide.

“If you want to tell me to pretend I didn’t see anything,” Laura began breathlessly, “then you don’t have to worry. I should have knocked. I won’t—I’m not going to tell anyone.”

Carmilla shook her head. “No, Laura, I swear… it—it’s not what it looked like.”

“It’s fine,” Laura bit out. She was already backing away. “It… it doesn’t matter.”

“Laura!”

She was already gone.

She didn’t stop until she had made it to the Entrance Hall and found herself surrounded by jovial students rushing on their way to the pitch.

Her head was spinning. She pressed herself up against a bannister to let a group of students pass, but none of them paid her any mind, the mixture of Hufflepuffs and Slytherins eagerly discussing today’s match without another care in the world.

“Hey, Laura!” Perry called brightly.

Because of course she would be here, right when Laura had given up looking. Right after she had just seen something she could never un-see.

The other girl was on the stairs, fighting the flow of traffic with her arms full of books.

“Perr!” Laura said. She plastered on a smile, struggling to catch her breath, and hoped her face wasn’t still red. “Did LaF find you?”

She was picturing it again: Carmilla jumping away from Remus. His face flushing.

“Oh. Well. Yes… they were rather… distressed.”

Perry looked away, cleared her throat, and adjusted her grip on her books. It was clear that her thoughts were too far away to notice anything odd about her friend. Laura’s heart was still racing, even as she schooled her expression and put together a response.

“I’d say LaF was pretty eager for you to come to the game. And, from the looks of it… they did not win that one.”

“Ah. No. I’m sorry, Laura, and I do hope you win, of course, but I just have so much studying to do…”
“Oh, Perry, you’re fine!” It was no secret that Perry really did not gain any enjoyment from Quidditch—not the way she or LaF did. That, and Laura needed this conversation to end sooner, rather than later. “Really. Go study. Have fun.”

Perry lit up. “I will. And you… catch that ball and… and stop it.”

Laura had finally caught her breath, and managed to chuckle. “Will do.”

She was late, now, and she knew it. The grounds flew by in a blur as she ran full-pelt down to the pitch. She was unsurprised, if not a bit flustered, when Danny towered over her the moment she slipped into the Gryffindor changing rooms.

“Where have you been?”

“I was… held up.”

“What could be more important than this match?” Danny demanded. Her nostrils were flaring, her hair sticking up at odd angles.

Laura swallowed. “Nothing, Danny. I’m sorry.”

Right now, it did not matter what Carmilla was doing with Remus. Danny needed her—needed all of them—to do this one last thing for her. This was her last Hogwarts Quidditch match, after all. The whole of the team had been walking on eggshells around her for weeks, obeying her every whim without question.

The captain did not give her much time to change. Laura was still struggling into her gear when Danny ordered them all to gather around. She hobbled into the circle, trying to tie up the last of her laces while still appearing attentive.

“Alright, Gryffindors. This will be the most important game of your lives. This determines everything. We are standing up for the very honor of our House. Gryffindor needs this. You need this. I need this.”

James Potter caught Laura’s eye, making a face by scrunching his eyebrows and puffing out his cheeks. She looked away quickly, before she was tempted to laugh. Damn Potter. He must have a death wish.

“When we win this,” Danny was saying, “we will be heroes. No one will forget this season. After all, this is the same team that tore Ravenclaw down from glory after their greatest year in House history. Together, we’re going to make sure they never have another one.”

Laura bit her lip. That was a tad dramatic… even for Danny Lawrence.

“If we’re going to make this happen, we need a synchronized effort. We need to be a machine. This is the first time Gryffindor has held a steady lead since my second year. It was stolen from us then, but it won’t be stolen from us now. Hufflepuff’s got weak Keeping. Potter, Copeland! We’re going to take full advantage. Johnson, you find that Snitch and catch it as fast as you can. I don’t want us leaving anything to chance. Pearce, Carter… I want you on top of Kirsch the whole game. Do not let him rest even for a second. I don’t want him to catch so much as a glimpse of that Snitch.”

“To clarify,” Potter piped up, “You don’t actually want them to maim your boyfriend… right?”

Danny glared. “Just focus on the Quaffle, Potter.”
She reached her hand forward, and the team joined her, chanting “Gryffindor!” as they broke apart.

It was a long walk out onto the pitch. Danny held her head up high at the front of the pack, but Laura could see the way her hands clenched at her sides to keep them from trembling. The stands erupted into cheers the moment their feet hit the grass, and, while Laura had grown used to having the eyes of the school upon her, this time felt different.

Even Potter looked grim, his jovial humor in the changing rooms lost now that they were moments away from kicking off. She caught him glimpse apprehensively at Danny, just before they came to a halt facing the Hufflepuffs.

She thought back to what Danny said to her, after the holidays. How she was muggleborn, too… how she was afraid of what came after Hogwarts.

Laura wanted desperately to give this win to her, and she knew the others felt the same. She had been their captain for three years—the whole of Laura’s time on the Gryffindor team. She couldn’t imagine what Hogwarts would be like without her.

“I want a good, clean game,” Madam Hooch snapped, the Quaffle balanced on her fingertips. “Shake hands, now, you two.”

Danny stepped forward to meet Kirsch. He grinned at her, his eyes bright with their usual enthusiasm. Danny gave him a firm handshake, but offered no sign of affection. Her face was a mask. Had Laura not witnessed the two of them snogging in a corridor after the Start-of-Term Feast, and again only a few nights ago, she’d have never known they were dating—though it had always been fairly clear that one of them was interested.

Kirsch had been almost as bad as Potter. Except, of course, that Kirsch had actually stood a chance, whereas Potter was kidding himself, in the same way that Sirius Black was when he flirted with her.

Well… not quite the same way.

The whistle sounded, and all of Laura’s reflecting cascaded away, her world narrowing to right now. The air had a morning chill to it, as it bit at her cheeks on her way to the Gryffindor goal posts.

She resisted the urge to let her gaze sweep the crowd once she was in position, afraid that her eyes would betray her and not stop when they located LaF. They might be tempted to stray where they did not belong, to places such as the Ravenclaw section.

There was already a vicious scuffle going on for control of the Quaffle. Laura had sped past it on her mission to protect the goals, but now she saw that the Bludgers were actively in play, with both Hufflepuff Beaters looping about the mass of Chasers as the Quaffle tumbled between grasps. Madam Hooch hovered close by, her whistle glinting warningly in her hand. Laura could not even see the Seekers, who must have already vanished to the distant corners of the pitch to begin their individual searches.

Danny came out triumphant, but Madam Hooch blew her whistle before the scuffle could disperse. Laura cringed as the foul was called on the Gryffindor Captain for ramming her elbow into the eye on an opposing Chaser. Third year Zachary Godby was pulled out for a quick medical enchantment, and the Hufflepuff back-up Chaser flew uncertainly onto the field.

Laura saved the penalty shot, and Danny wasted no time in claiming the Quaffle again. Laura bit her lip as she watched the other girl soar downfield, lobbing her shot at the right post, only for Easley to kick it clear.
Verner came up with it, barrel-rolling past Potter to put himself in the lead towards the Gryffindor goal.

Laura steeled herself, a grim smile working at the corners of her lips. This was what she needed right now. The greatest distraction in the world. Quidditch was a thrill—it was the wind whipping against your face with the enemy flying at you head-on, knowing you were going to best them.

The Quaffle snapped into her gloves as if magnetized, and the thump it made was satisfying. She vaulted it away without having to even think about it, confident that Potter would arch up to meet it with their usual synchronicity. He was gone in a flash, Danny taking up the guard beside him and claiming the brunt of the ramming from Godby, who had apparently been restored to duty while Laura had been distracted by the last play.

Kirsch looped by overhead, cruising easily with his neck craned forward. Distantly, Laura could make out his scarlet twin, making the rounds behind the Hufflepuff posts. No sign of the Snitch yet, Laura thought, and she wasn’t sure if she were relieved or disappointed.

The idea of the Snitch cropping up, now—except, under Kirsch’s nose instead of Johnson’s—made her stomach churn unpleasantly. The last thing she wanted was to live through another glum end-of-term, especially knowing she would be saying a final farewell to Danny when it was all over.

Potter scored, and Laura allowed herself a brief moment of celebration with the crowd before she geared up to block the next Hufflepuff shot. She was spared the need by another foul. Verner had seized the tail of Potter’s broom while he was attempting to dislodge the Quaffle from Godby.

While Madam Hooch was making the announcement, Laura’s eyes got the best of her. She hadn’t even been looking—or at least told herself that she had not—but somehow her gaze had landed on the Ravenclaw section, and she had picked out Carmilla amidst the masses within seconds.

It really wasn’t difficult. She was exceptionally pale, after all.

She was sitting with the rest of the Ravenclaw team, which was new. Normally, Carmilla sat alone. Of course, Laura had to remind herself, Carmilla had earned herself glory in recent weeks. She was the star now.

Still, it was a relief to find her amongst the Ravenclaws, and not grouped in with her Slytherin pals. Or, worse… with certain Gryffindors.

Just like that, it played through her mind, again.

She should not have let it. The Quaffle soared past her, completely unobstructed, and when she dove in a belated attempt to retrieve it, she discovered that Verner had beaten her to the punch. She only barely made it back to the hoops in time to block the second goal, and even then it was a clumsy return that Danny nearly missed.

Though the redhead did not yell anything, Laura could sense the displeasure radiating off of her as she zoomed away.

Laura swallowed, watching the distant play as Danny managed to make back the points Laura had just lost them. Even as she tightened her grip on her Cleansweep, though, eyes focused on Godby, she was hearing Carmilla’s attempted apology in the corridor.

She had been so foolish. They had not really spoken in weeks. The other night at the pitch had clearly been nothing more than Carmilla’s conscience finally getting the best of her. She had thanked Laura, after all. Maybe that had been the whole point.
Laura’s own words shot back at her like stinging curses. She had misinterpreted everything. She had asked Carmilla to write to her.

And the whole time…

Carmilla had never cared about her.

(She had been right, not to let Carmilla finish her explanations.)

There were tears building in her eyes, and Laura could not bring herself to blink them away. She had forgotten about the pitch, forgotten about the game, forgotten about how important this was—how much Danny would kill her if she missed another goal.

She was staring distantly at the north quarter of the pitch, remembering the way the sky had been clear that first evening when she and Carmilla sat there, so close that Laura had been afraid to breathe, to make any sudden moves.

She did not hear the cries from the crowd, though LaF would later tell her that everyone was on their feet. She did not see Danny streaking up the pitch, or Potter cutting a sharp angle to head straight for her.

She also did not see the Bludger.

Chapter End Notes

Please forgive me for the inaccuracy of my Hogwarts timelines for Quidditch matches. Let’s just pretend schedules were a little more creative in the ’70s, shall we?

Share your thoughts here, or drop me a line at jg-firefly on tumblr :)

...
Three Badges and a Feud

Chapter Summary

A summer interlude.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Summer of 1974 (Post-Fourth Year)

Someone was shouting. Laura groaned, reaching to tug the blankets back up over her head, but found nothing. Slowly, she cracked open her eyes and peered around the empty room. Her covers had slid off the side of the bed, and were crumpled on the floor.

The shouting was coming from downstairs, and, as Laura sat up, she recognized the voices.

LaFontaine and Perry were having another row.

This had become somewhat of a thing, in the past weeks. Perry was panicking over the upcoming schoolyear, insisting that LaF and Laura quiz her on O.W.L. topics in the middle of perfectly good Quidditch weather. LaF, unfortunately, had chosen to combat Perry’s panic by telling her she was being ‘absurd.’

The result was that Laura had just spent two weeks delivering messages between the two while they were not talking, and feeling oddly like a third wheel when they were. To top it off, every minute that LaF spent at their own house and away from them, Perry hovered over Laura and peppered her with a million questions about whether she was ‘having a good enough time’ or if she ‘needed more snacks.’

Grumbling to herself, Laura rolled out of bed, tugged on a robe, and padded down the winding staircase to the kitchen. There was a single Hogwarts letter open on the table—a shiny Prefect’s badge laid atop it. The pair paused mid-sentence, practically nose-to-nose, as they recognized that they were no longer alone.

“Oh! Laura. Good morning,” Perry breezed, stepping back and smoothing down the front of her blouse. She smiled. “How did you sleep?”

Laura raised an eyebrow, glancing between them in disbelief. LaFontaine was suddenly very interested in the ceiling beams, shuffling their feet.

“Great,” she said finally, her voice flat. “I slept great.”

Perry missed the sarcasm—or chose to ignore it, “Excellent! There are some muffins on the counter—mum baked them this morning before she went off to work. They’re oatmeal cranberry, which I know is your favorite—”

“Oh, seriously?” Laura interrupted. She snatched up the Prefect’s badge and held it out accusingly, “Are we not going to talk about this? Perry, you’ve been dying to be a Prefect since we were first years, and I wake up to find you two fighting about something that’s been set in stone for years—”
“It wasn’t set in—” LaF cut in hotly, at the same time as Perry cried, “It’s not mine!”

Laura blinked, and, eyes widening, focused her attention back on LaF. They were turning an increasingly darker shade of red with every passing second.

“Hey, I didn’t ask for it, okay! But she’s already had plenty to say about how I clearly don’t deserve it!”

“Stop putting words in my mouth, LaFontaine! That was not—”

“It was the intention of what you—”

“—all I meant was that I have worked hard for this, while you—”

“—so clearly you think I’m not worthy just because I don’t study as much—”

“GUYS!” Laura yelled. They both fell silent, seething. Laura picked up the letter as though afraid it might bite her, and gave it a quick read-through.

It was fairly standard.

_LaFontaine, you have been chosen by your head of house… as you know, two fifth years are selected to be role models to their peers… these added responsibilities should not be taken lightly…_ Yada yada.

When Laura looked up, they were glaring at each other again. She sighed heavily and set both the badge and the letter back where she had found them.

“Alright. I am… surprised. But, McGonagall must, y’know, have had a reason…”

“Yeah. Maybe she thinks Perry isn’t involved enough. It’s hard to be a role model when you spend all of your time hiding in the corner of the library where no one can find you.”

Perry let out a little scoff. “As if brewing dangerous concoctions in one’s dorm room is role model behavior. Or sneaking out after hours to help another student break into the Quidditch pitch.”

“You don’t have to break in, Perr! They don’t lock up the giant field. You’d know that if you ever bothered to go to the games—y’know, the ones where your best friend is playing? I’m supportive of my Housemates!”

“Again, with Quidditch! Why is a sport more important than everything else? We don’t go to Hogwarts just for Quidditch, you know, but if anyone listened to you and Laura, they’d think broomsticks were more important than exams! And it’s dangerous! Look what happened last year!”

“How about we just leave me out of this one?” Laura piped up. Neither of them acknowledged her.

“Well, if you had it your way, there would be poor little first years crying in the corridors after every class, panicked about their grades with absolutely no fun at all to break up all the studying! Oh! And they’d all be tied up in bubble-wrap!”

“Well… well, if you had it your way, there wouldn’t be any studying!”

“Maybe there won’t be. Maybe I’ll be the mandatory-fun-Prefect.”

“That’s not a thing!”
“I could make it a thing! After all, I’m the one that’s a Prefect!”

They both sputtered, jumping back as a bird soared between them, landing somewhat ungracefully on the table and knocking aside the letter and badge. A smattering of feathers shed onto the floor.

The unfamiliar screech owl was wind-ruffled but bright eyed, and he held out his leg with pride, giving a little hoot. Laura untied the letter quickly, her fingers trembling.

*It couldn’t be…*

It wasn’t.

The letter was sealed neatly with the Hogwarts crest, and the adrenaline that had momentarily surged through her left just as quickly, taking the rest of her energy with it. She broke the seal methodically, dropping into a chair at the small kitchen table.

LaF had already received their Hogwarts letter that morning. Laura knew she shouldn’t be surprised that this was her own.

It wasn’t like she should be expecting mail from anyone else.

She didn’t get a chance to read the parchment that she pulled free, because there was a metallic clatter, and something shiny rolled up against her bare foot.

The kitchen went very, very still, three sets of eyes locked upon the small object. Hands shaking slightly, Laura reached for it. She could practically feel Perry’s stare boring into her—and then she swallowed and held the badge out to show it for what it was: there was no shiny ‘P’ emblazoned upon it. Instead, there was a golden ‘C.’

LaF’s serious expression immediately fell away into cheer, and Perry’s shoulders released their tension.

“I knew it!” LaFontaine beamed. “I knew Danny would pick you to take over! And of course McGonagall approved… Oh, this is great! You’ll get to make the practice schedules, now, and actually put in place all those formations you’ve been doodling on your notes over the years… Oh, we are so going to *crush* the other teams…”

Laura nodded vaguely. Her ears were ringing slightly, her fingers trembling around the metal pin. She was still staring at it, still trying to come to grips with the reality before her.

She didn’t deserve it. No matter what LaF said, or what Danny had told her in the Hospital Wing, there was no one more responsible for Gryffindor losing the Quidditch Cup than she was.

They had fallen miserably, after she was taken off the pitch. Hufflepuff had scored half a dozen times on their back-up—who was really more of a Beater than he was a Keeper—and even with Danny and Potter keeping the points close, it didn’t matter when Kirsch came up with the Snitch. They had lost too much of their lead.

All of this she was told from a hospital bed, the team gathered around in their muddy robes. Laura had been quiet, incapable of words as she replayed the last moments of her memory on the pitch over and over. She had not been thinking about Quidditch, had not been focused on the game.

She had deserved the Bludger, but Gryffindor had not deserved the loss. *Danny* hadn’t deserved the loss.
How could she have still picked her, after all of that? After Laura pulled her aside on the platform and gushed as much of the truth as she could bear?

Danny might have said it did not matter, but Laura had been certain it was a lie.

A second owl swooped into the room, pulling Laura from her thoughts as it landed smoothly on the counter and offered its letter to Perry. She stared at it a long moment, eyes wide. The smile slipped off of LaF’s face.

Perry took an ungodly amount of time to pry the letter open. Laura’s pulse was jumping, her teeth digging into the inside of her lower lip.

Perry pulled the papers free… and no badge tumbled out.

For the briefest moment, Laura’s heart sank, her thoughts flashing forward. She visualized a year of discontent and feuding. Trying desperately to stay friends with the both of them while they hurled insults at one another. Attending Quidditch games without Perry. Studying without LaF. Passing on Perry’s notes to LaF in secret. Getting called out for it. Losing the both of them.

And then Perry reached into the envelope and came out with a shiny badge clutched in her fingers. Laura’s legs melted like jelly. “Yes!” she yelped, bounding forward to throw her arms around the other girl. Perry was stiff, though, and didn’t return the embrace. Over Laura’s shoulder, she was focusing on LaF.

LaF said nothing.

“This is great,” Laura insisted, as if saying it was so would make them share the sentiment. Neither of them looked at her. She cleared her throat, “Come on, guys. You’re both Prefects. See? No problem.”

She was smiling too widely.

“Laura,” LaF said tersely, “If you want to hang out, then you are more than welcome to come over whenever you like.”

With one last glare at Perry, they stormed out the backdoor.

“Well,” Perry sniffed, setting her badge and letter on the counter, “I’m going to go and finish my chores.”

Laura watched her leave, her mouth hanging slightly open, and then she was left standing alone in the middle of the other girl’s kitchen.

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“Didn’t your dad just send a letter yesterday?” Perry asked.

She was straightening the blankets on Laura’s bed in the guest room—a habit Laura had been unable to break her from over the course of the last seven weeks.

Laura shrugged. “Yeah.”

“So why are you waiting for an owl?” Perry asked. She smoothed the wrinkles from the top of the bed, nodded at it approvingly, and then turned to Laura expectantly.
“I’m not.” It was a lie. Laura stood, brushing her hair back self-consciously. “It’s just… nice out.”

“If you want to go over to LaFontaine’s place, no one is stopping you,” Perry said. Her voice was higher than normal. “I thought we might bake some brownies… but I understand that you have duties as Quidditch Captain, and you might need to… plan strategies, or something.”

One of the few bright spots of the summer—and a beacon of hope for the upcoming year—was that Perry seemed to have gained some level of respect for Laura’s Quidditch playing. It was a rapid swing, given that she had spent the beginning of the summer raving about the ‘horrors’ of Laura’s favorite sport.

Now, though, with the Captain’s badge sitting judgingly on Laura’s dresser, Perry’s tune had turned sunny and optimistic. She regularly cited statistics from her reading about the number of successful Ministry officials—and Ministers themselves—who had served as Quidditch Captains during their time at Hogwarts. It was an ‘important leadership experience,’ she insisted, and had tried—more than once—to engage Laura in discussions on how to manage her ‘underlings.’

Laura accepted these conversations as a part of being Perry’s friend, though she found herself nodding along without really listening, these days.

Her dad was the only one that sent letters, so it wasn’t surprising, really, that Perry would make the assumption. Still, there was a part of her that kept hoping a different owl would appear at the window.

She had written three letters, herself. She had sent none of them, tossing them each in the fireplace shortly after they were completed.

There was a line of desperation that she was not willing to cross.

“Brownies sound excellent,” she said.

Mr. and Mrs. Perry were sitting in the living room, when the girls came down the stairs. They were watching the muggle news on their television set, its rabbit ears conspicuously missing and its signal transmitting across some magical frequency that gave them access to international channels. When Laura had first arrived, she had been fascinated—first by the magical enhancements, and then by the very presence of muggle technology in a wizarding household.

LaF, whose household operated similarly, had been quick to explain that Purebloods were the only ones who really shunned muggle technology as a whole. Both of their families were a hodge-podge of muggleborns and wizards who had been dubbed ‘blood-traitors,’ and thus there was a healthy dose of the two worlds.

Mr. LaFontaine, who had grown up in a Pureblood household, had a deep fascination—and respect—for muggle sports. He collected American baseball cards, and watched British football religiously. Mrs. LaFontaine still took muggle photographs with her antique camera, and LaF’s muggle grandparents were a frequent fixture at the cottage.

Meanwhile, Mr. Perry worked at a wizard accounting firm in the muggle currency department, while Mrs. Perry did record-keeping for the Ministry’s Department of Muggleborn Location and Notification. (She had proudly informed Laura that she had been the one to stamp the letter that went out to her, when she turned eleven.)

“Lola, Laura! There you girls are,” Mr. Perry boomed cheerfully, raising his coffee mug. “We were just talking about you. Truman popped in—” he gestured at the fireplace “—and we made plans to...
head into Diagon Alley tomorrow. Figured you kids would all want to do your shopping together.”

Perry’s smiled was prim, and forced. “Oh, perfect. Sounds lovely. We were just going to do some baking—do you mind if we use the kitchen, Mum?”

“Of course not, dear.”

Perry hurried them from the room. In the kitchen, she tossed Laura an apron without a word, tying hers on briskly. She kept her back to Laura as she rifled through the cabinets, extracting ingredients.

“Can you get out the eggs?” she asked, without turning around. She had pulled out five different sized mixing bowls.

Laura paused with her hand hovering over the refrigerator handle. ‘No,’ she wanted to say. ‘No, let’s talk about what the hell is happening with you and LaF.’

“Laura?” Perry hummed.

She opened the fridge, got out the egg carton, and set it next to Perry.

_Coward_, she thought to herself.

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Diagon Alley was bustling with students. All around them, kids young and old were carrying stacks of books and wearing their house colors in muggle t-shirts or in new robes. First years were trailing their parents with looks of wonder (or panic), and those without supervision were stocking up on candy and joke shop products.

By comparison, the moment the adults had left them to their own devices, Perry and LaFontaine had split off without a word, leaving Laura to make an entirely unfair decision.

She had followed LaF, solely because they walked slower.

“I bet Perry is buying textbooks for every class, even the ones she hasn’t somehow crammed into her schedule. Did you know she’s taking Arithmancy? And Muggle Studies? And Ancient Runes? I mean, it’s ridiculous. She can’t possibly use all of that, and who’s she trying to show off for, anyway?”

Laura paused to look in the window of the Quidditch supply shop, eyes roving over the newest Shooting Star model.

“I don’t think she’s trying to ‘show off,’” she said, studying the price tags with a scowl. Even the newest gloves were more than all of her savings combined.

“Well, she’s going to take all of these classes, and then she’s going to be insufferable, studying at all hours, complaining that we aren’t working hard enough. Except we aren’t choosing to make ourselves miserable. We want to have lives!”

“Uh-huh,” Laura muttered. They had traveled past the storefront, now, and were in front of the pet store.

“I’ve always wanted a rat…” LaF muttered.

Laura heaved a heavy sigh. “Let me guess, because it would freak Perry out if you kept it in our dorm?”
LaF made a face, shrugging.

“Can we maybe just… do our shopping and talk about something other than Perry?”

“Karnstein,” LaF declared.

Laura’s ears went pink. “W-what?”

“Karnstein,” LaF repeated more urgently, pointing as they stuck a hand out to stop Laura’s forward progress.

It took a moment for Laura’s breathing to return to normal, as she caught sight of Carmilla across the street, slipping into the secondhand robes store. Her hair was longer, now. It fell in dark curls down her back, cascading in waves that seemed to shimmer in the early morning sunlight. She was wearing muggle clothes—torn jeans and a tight grey tank top with faded, unreadable lettering across the chest.

“Close call,” LaF was saying, starting to head up the street again. They paused, frowning back at Laura when she did not immediately move. She was still staring at the door where Carmilla had disappeared. “You coming?”

She shook herself and nodded, forcing her feet forward.

“The last thing we need is a run-in here,” said LaF, “Who knows what she might try to do.”

They had reached the Apothecary, and LaF led the way inside, digging their tattered, folded copy of the school supplies list from their pocket.

“What do you mean?” Laura asked, her focus more intently upon her friend than on the container of newt eyes, which had all turned to follow their progress through the front of the store.

“I mean after the Hufflepuff match. In the Hospital Wing.”

Laura raised an eyebrow, giving her head a little shake.

LaF paled a little. “Oh, holy shit. You don’t know, do you? I was sure Perry would have told you. She’s been convinced for months that Karnstein was trying to do you in, and then you nearly die on us—”

“I didn’t—” Laura started to argue, but then changed course. “What did Perry think Carm —Karnstein— was trying to do, exactly? I mean, you guys don’t think she had anything to do with the Bludger, right? Everyone agreed that was all Hufflepuff, and even they apologized…”

“Oh, for sure—and I expect you to thrash Warner for it, this year, too—but that wasn’t the thing. It was after the match. They took you off the field, after you fell, and then they went on with the match and all—after Dumbledore announced you weren’t dead, which was a pretty big concern for a minute there—but a handful of us left to follow you to the castle. A lot of the Gryffindors came along. I found Perry in the library, filled her in, and we rushed up to the Hospital Wing.”

They ducked under a rack of bat wings, and Laura followed suit, accepting the proffered bag of spider legs that LaF had measured for her while they were talking.

“You were conscious, by then—Madam Pomfrey had already cast some charms on you and made you drink something nasty—but you were still pretty out of it. Confused and all. Anyway, Karnstein was there, arguing with Madam Pomfrey about some spell. She was trying to get access to you,
which Madam Pomfrey was having none of. Of course, this meant she wouldn’t let us see you, either, but the minute Karnstein spotted us she fled the scene.”

“She wanted… to see me?” Laura said, pronouncing each word slowly, gears turning in her head.

“To use some spell on you,” LaF corrected with a nod. “She had her wand out and everything. Honestly, it looked like she wanted to hex Madam Pomfrey, before she realized she had an audience. Can you imagine?”


Her mind was elsewhere, wondering if Carmilla was still in the secondhand robes shop across the Alley. And was she here alone? She must be.

“Earth to Laura,” LaF said. Laura jumped, turning to find that her friend had shifted several racks down, and was staring at her pointedly. “You okay, Hollis?”

“Fine. Sorry.”

“Hey, it’s cool. I get being freaked out—Karnstein isn’t exactly a stalker that I would want, either. Damn, though, I really thought you knew. I figured you just didn’t want to talk about it.”

This was unsurprising, coming from LaFontaine. Of the three, they were the most reserved when it came to long talks. They would gladly chat Laura or Perry’s ears off about potion-making, and the intricacies of combining antidotes to create complex, unexplored realms of alchemy—but when it came to discussing personal matters? They had always been more of a listener than a confider.

“Right,” Laura agreed. She still felt flustered, and it was not a feeling she enjoyed. “Can we… let’s pay and go get our books.”

“Sure.”

Laura was grateful that it was so easy for LaF to let the topic go. The silence was companionable, rather than oppressing—as it would have been with Perry—as they handed over their silver sickles and made their way out of the shop.

LaF urged them into the secondhand bookstore, rather than continuing up the winding path to Flourish and Blotts. Laura did not take offense to the choice—though it could easily have been a comment on her monetary status, when LaF was more than capable of purchasing new books for themself—because she recognized it for what it was. Perry would no doubt be at the main bookstore, with the big crowds and the wide selection, and she’d be fussing over whether or not the corners of the books had been chafed or any of the pages were bent.

Wordlessly, Laura went down the list of supplies, tugging battered copies of ‘Intermediate Transfiguration’ and ‘Ancient Runes Made Easy,’ off the shelves. Dust clouds billowed up, swirling around her and LaF as though they were in an old speak-easy, thick with smoke.

“Oh,” stammered a voice, right as Laura was in the middle of a bought of coughing. She lifted her head, eyes watering, and immediately burst into another fit.

Carmilla backed away hurriedly, gaze darting from Laura to the ginger at her side. The bell over the door announced her departure, the door bouncing back sharply when it didn’t match up with its frame as it tried to close behind her.

Laura regained her breath, leaning against the nearest shelf.
“Well,” LaF commented with a raised eyebrow. “She just keeps getting weirder.”

Chapter End Notes

Drop me a line on tumblr: jg-firefly
The gang starts their fifth year at Hogwarts a little differently than Laura is used to.

Fall of 1974 (Fifth Year)

Perry and LaF declared an unspoken truce, in the days leading up to their return to Hogwarts. Their politeness was sugary, fake to the point that Laura felt nauseous whenever they were in the same room, but there had not been a single row in the past three days, and so, when they waved farewell on Platform 9¾ and found an empty compartment, Laura was hardly about to complain.

“Hollis!” someone shouted, just as LaF was pulling the compartment door closed.

A wild-haired and bright-eyed James Potter appeared in the gap, pushing his way inside. Sirius towered in behind him and then a wide-eyed, twitchy Pettigrew. Remus trundled in at the back—the only one with the decency to look ashamed of the intrusion.

Laura carefully avoided his gaze, the tips of her ears going warm.

“Relax, we’re not staying,” James promised, as Perry started to make room on the bench beside her. He grinned roguishly, offering his fist to Laura. “Just wanted to greet my new captain!”

Laura raised an eyebrow, but accepted the fist bump.

“Potter, you do know that you’re still going to have to try out, don’t you?”

He waved his hand, “Psh, I’m not worried. And tryouts are exhausting for you, Hollis! I mean, imagine if the whole house showed up to go out for Chaser. You might be inclined to just call it early. It could happen.”

“Potter,” Laura warned, but he was already ducking back out the door, tossing a “Cheers!” over his shoulder.

Laura groaned loudly, flopping back in her seat.

“He’s going to pay the whole house to turn up to tryouts, isn’t he?”

“Yup,” LaF said, grinning widely. “Would you hate me if I joined in?”

“What’s one more?” Laura muttered.

“I can hand out detentions, you know, if they show up with the express purpose of disrupting your process,” Perry offered. “That would be the proper Prefect response to this sort of situation.”

LaF’s expression darkened, and Laura was relieved when their compartment door opened again. This time, it was Lily Evans who slipped inside.

“Oh, thank goodness it’s you three,” she sighed. “Do you mind?”
“Not at all,” Perry beamed, patting the bench beside her. “Is everything all right?”

Laura suspected, from the glow about Perry’s face and her motherly tone, that this was exactly the sort of thing she had been dreaming about during the past four years, waiting patiently for her Prefect badge to arrive.

Lily sat, heaving a sigh. “It’s Severus. We came to the station together—we do every year, living up the street from one another and all. Anyway, everything was fine, and we were talking about our classes…and then he sees Potter.”

“And it’s business as usual,” LaF guessed.

“Precisely! It’s…it’s infuriating. Potter, with his…his stupid hair, stealing stuff from the kitchens and the Quidditch supplies…thinking he’s better than everyone! And I want to just hate him with Sev, but the way Sev acts, it’s like Potter murdered his whole family. And all he really does is play cruel jokes.”

“And flirt with you,” LaF put in.

“Yes,” Lily griped. “And that.”

“Wait, so what did Snape do?” Laura asked.

Lily turned her piercing green stare on her, somehow looking both fierce and sad at the same time. “He jinxed him. On the edge of the platform. Potter fell onto the tracks.”

“Snape what?” Perry squeaked, almost falling out of her seat.

“Jinxed him,” Lily repeated matter-of-factly.

“Well, Potter was just in here,” LaF said. “So he, uh, clearly survived. That’s…good.”

“Yes. Remus pulled him out…while Sirius Black tackled Severus.”

“What?” Perry repeated, her pitch still erratic. “Where were…where were the adults? Didn’t anyone see this?”

“There were about twenty witnesses. Aaand then I hit Black over the head with my broomstick. Actually, I think a few people clapped—’she gave her hair a half-toss, her lip twitching, ‘—and then Remus helped me pull them apart.”

“You hit Sirius? With a broom? Oh, I so would have paid to see that…”

“LaFontaine,” Perry complained. “We cannot condone violence. We are Prefects.”

“Hey, she was breaking up violence. That’s gotta be like…a double negative. All good. Hell, I’d give her some house points if we were at school.”

Perry glowered.

“Aren’t Prefects supposed to meet at the front of the train?” Lily piped up. Her eyes had narrowed as she glanced between them, her hands clasping more tightly in her lap.

“Oh!” Perry gasped, checking her watch and jumping to her feet. “Come on LaFontaine, she’s right. We’re almost going to be late!”
“A crisis, for sure,” LaF muttered to Laura, as they shuffled out of the compartment in Perry’s wake. “We’ll be back,” they added, pausing apologetically, “…I hope.”

The door clicked shut.

“…I feel like I stepped in something, there,” Lily grimaced.

“Nothing I haven’t been treading in all summer,” Laura grumbled, slumping back into her seat. “They’re insufferable. I mean, I love them… but right now I can’t wait to get to the castle and, I dunno, hide in the library or something. Well, maybe not the library. Perry would find me. Just… somewhere.”

“There will be Quidditch,” Lily suggested helpfully. “You’ll have to put up with Potter, of course, but he’s usually too busy showing off for his adoring fans.”

“Right, what do they call themselves? The mariners?”

“Marauders,” Lily corrected, rolling her eyes. “I have a few other ideas for what they could call themselves.”

Laura laughed. “I’m sure.”

“What about you, though?” Lily said, frowning. “Doesn’t Sirius Black harass you on like… a daily basis?”

She shrugged. “It’s usually just around the matches. And he’s doing it more for attention than because he actually wants me to say yes. I mean, it’s not like he’s in love with me.”

She knew at once that it was the wrong thing to say. Lily flushed a dark pink, looking sharply out the window at the rolling English countryside.

“I should go,” she said hesitantly. “My friends…”

Laura was already nodding, getting ready to unleash pleasantries and well-wishes for the schoolyear, when there was a third intrusion into her compartment.

Laura immediately felt her temperature spike, her pulse thumping dully behind her ears.

Carmilla was frozen in the doorway, lips parted as she locked gazes with Lily.

“Oh. I-I thought…”

“I’m just leaving,” Lily said coldly. She glanced pointedly at Laura. “Unless you wanted me to stay..?”

“No, no, it’s fine!” Laura stammered. Her voice sounded foreign, pitching oddly. “I’ll see you at the castle. And if Potter bothers you, just tell Perry. She’d be more than happy to use him as her very first detention assignment.”

Lily smiled, but it was more than a little forced. She brushed past Carmilla gingerly. The raven-haired girl hovered in the open compartment door, not meeting Laura’s eyes.

Through her panicked haze, Laura managed to string together a sentence.

“So, um, are you going to come in, or do you like the draft?”
Carmilla said nothing, but shifted inside and shut the door. She eyed the bench opposite Laura, and then leaned against the door.

“I didn’t see you on the platform,” Laura said, clearing her throat.

There was a long pause before Carmilla murmured, “Were you looking?”

Laura shivered, ever-so-slightly. “No,” she defended, “I just… didn’t see you.”

Carmilla shrugged, but said nothing. The silence hung thickly over them.

“You—you were in Diagon Alley,” Laura finally stammered.

“I was.”

Laura shifted in her seat. “Okay, I’m sorry, but you came in here… and I thought maybe you had something you wanted to say.”

Carmilla crossed her arms. She was all angles—her jawline sharp as glass, her nose cutting a striking profile, her elbows jutting out… When she pursed her lips, they were thin, and ever-so-pale. Laura was glad she was sitting down, because the moment Carmilla glanced up at her, she felt an unpleasant flip somewhere in the region of her stomach, and gripped her knees such that her knuckles went white.

“You’ve been made Captain,” Carmilla said, nodding her chin at the badge on Laura’s chest. She adjusted it self-consciously.

It wasn’t what the other girl had come in here to say, but it was something.

Laura nodded.

She wasn’t brave enough to ask what she really wanted. She went for something slightly less dangerous.

“What did you do to Lily Evans? I’ve never seen her glare at anyone like that. Well… maybe Potter.”

“She thinks I’m a bad influence on Snape,” Carmilla said. Her expression was unreadable, her tone flat.

“Oh.” Laura had almost forgotten that they belonged to the same circles. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she had begun to see Carmilla in a different light. She had seen her—the real her—on the Quidditch pitch. Throwing up her fists and looping into a backflip, hair tossed back, smiling from ear-to-ear… that was Carmilla.

Or she wanted it to be.

“I should go,” Carmilla murmured. “Your friends will be coming back.”

“Right.” Something had punctured in Laura’s chest. “And you wouldn’t want to be seen talking to me, of course.”

Carmilla froze, eyebrows drawing together. “That’s… not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean? I mean, you clearly came in here because you knew they were gone, so you wanted to get me alone. And then, what, you just leave without even saying anything real?”
A muscle jumped in Carmilla’s neck, as she scrunched up her nose. It would have been an adorable face, if Laura were not so concentrated on controlling her breathing as she waited for the reply to her outburst.

“I… wanted to say that I’m glad you’re okay.” She forced the words through her teeth like they hurt, her jaw tight and her eyes hidden in the shadow of her hair.

Laura stared, opening and closing her mouth twice before she managed to get any sound out.

“Is that why you came to the Hospital Wing? To see if I was okay?”

Carmilla’s head jerked up, the door banging as her elbow rammed against it. Her eyes were wide, her pale face drawn with fresh, unexpected emotion.

“Why did you think I was there?”

Laura frowned. “I don’t really know. I didn’t even know you had come at all, until a few days ago.”

The tension poured out of Carmilla’s shoulders with so much force that she visibly slumped. The door creaked on its tracks at the added pressure. She opened her mouth, a new vulnerability taking over her features, but whatever she was going to say was cut off by a sharp cry from the hallway.

“Trolley! Sweets for sale! Trolley!”

They both jumped. Carmilla stepped sharply away from the door, hovering uncertainly in the narrow space between the benches. It put her nearly on top of Laura, their legs almost brushing. There was a flash of something in her eyes that might have resembled fear.

“Did… did you want..?”

“Oh, no,” Laura said, shaking her head. “Honeyduke’s is… I mean, you know the trolley prices…”

“Right,” Carmilla agreed swiftly, nodding with a bit more enthusiasm than was necessary. “I, uh… I never buy anything, either.”

Laura smiled tentatively, and then pointed to the bench. “LaF and Perry will probably be gone for a while longer… you could sit.”

Whatever Carmilla had been about to say before she was interrupted, though, seemed to be lost, now. She edged back towards the door.

“No, I should… I should go. The Ravenclaws…”

“Carmilla,” Laura cut her off, before she could slip from the compartment. She rose halfway out of her seat, and dropped back tentatively onto the edge when Carmilla turned to face her. “Tomorrow night. Seven. On the pitch?”

Slowly, Carmilla gave her one, small nod. And then she was gone.

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The first day of classes took far longer than Laura would have liked. Every time she checked her watch, it seemed like no time had passed. She would have fallen asleep in History of Magic, had it not been for the anxiety that was continuously gnawing on her, and by the time they returned to the Great Hall for lunch, Laura was twitching too visibly to go unnoticed.
“Laura, is everything alright?” Perry asked. LaF looked up, soup dripping off the edges of their spoon as it hovered halfway between the bowl and their mouth.

“What?” Laura said. She had been staring off into space—in a decidedly ‘Ravenclaw-esque’ direction.

“She is kind of pale,” LaF agreed, and Laura glared. Of course, this would be the one thing they would agree with Perry on. “Is your scar hurting?”

“I’m fine.” The scar hadn’t hurt in months—not since the holidays had started. Madam Pomfrey had been displeased that the wound had not properly smoothed over, but had given her a cream to use on it. (Broom tail splinters could do a number, it would seem.) “I’m just distracted. Planning… planning for Quidditch.” She nodded hurriedly, as if that would help back up the lie she had come up with on the spot.

Perry’s eyes narrowed, but LaF was already lit up with the new subject—they had been talking about homework, before Laura tuned out.

“Have you picked a date for tryouts? I was joking, on the train, but now I’m actually thinking I might go out for something. I wouldn’t expect any preference, of course, and everyone else would have to, like, suck pretty hard, but why not?”

Laura hadn’t prepared talking points to go with her lie. “Um. No, I haven’t, uh, decided yet. I was thinking I would… you know, try to keep things fairly similar to how Danny ran the team. If it ain’t broke, y’know?”

When they had finally struggled through the rest of their first day—and heard the same speech, four times, about the upcoming O.W.L.s and how they should ‘expect this year to be far more rigorous than the previous ones’—Laura was feeling drained in more ways than one. Throughout each of these speeches, LaF’s color had gone a little greener, while Perry merely nodded sagely.

“Well,” Laura announced, halfway through dinner, “I think I’m going to head up to the Tower early.”

Perry and LaF both frowned, this time. LaF’s mouth was full of pork chop, and Perry had barely touched her salad.

“Why?” LaF wanted to know. They spewed crumbs, with the question, and Perry wrinkled her nose.

“Just tired,” Laura insisted. She smiled. “I thought I’d read more of my Quidditch book.”

LaF hurried to swallow. “We could sneak down to the pitch!” they suggested, “Get in some real training.”

“Laura is not going to sneak down to the pitch on our first night,” Perry snapped. “She is Captain. And you are certainly not going anywhere. Why do I have to keep reminding you that we are Prefects?”

“You don’t have to remind me. I just don’t happen to think my badge is the same thing as a pair of shackles.”

Laura ducked away, grimacing. They had been doing so well, and she hated to think she had just re-lit the fuse, but she didn’t have time to worry about their sexual tension… and she had her own issues to deal with. It was almost seven.
She changed in the dormitory, pulling on a dark sweater even though it was a warm night, and nearly jumped out of her skin when someone called her name as she dashed back across the abandoned common room.

Remus Lupin stood up from one of the chairs around the fire, smiling apologetically.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

She let her hand fall from where it had clutched at her chest. “No, no, it’s fine. I was just—”

“Rushing off to break some rules?” he asked, quirking an eyebrow. It would have been an accusation, from Perry. From Remus, the suggestion was light, humorous. He smiled.

She shoved a hand through her hair.

Carmilla and Remus jumping away from one another in an abandoned classroom.

“Um. No. Just… needed to grab something. Why aren’t—why aren’t you at dinner?”

The glint in his eye suggested he knew she was deflecting—he had probably dealt with enough mischief from his own friends to know sneaking when he saw it—but he let her get away with it, shrugging as he said, “I had… other things to do.”

“Rule-breaking things?”

He laughed. “Not quite. You know, though, if you’re heading down to the Quidditch Pitch, you should steer clear of the third floor corridor. One of the second years let off a stink bomb, and Filch has been patrolling.”

“Oh. Thanks for the… tip. Not that I need it, of course. Since that’s not—I mean I’m totally not leaving the castle. At all.”

“Of course,” he agreed. “And I wouldn’t need to tell you that our captain serving detention would be damaging to the Gryffindor team, either. Naturally.”

“Nope,” Laura said. She plastered on a smile, and then edged her way out of the porthole.

He’ll be a Prefect for sure, she thought to herself, as she cut her way through the castle. He might be a little more laid-back, but he’s got some Perry in him.

She nodded politely to the students she passed, who were just leaving the Great Hall, and was grateful that none were her own friends, who would have no doubt had some questions. She slipped out the front entrance as carefully as she could, and speed-walked the path down to the Quidditch Pitch, glancing over her shoulder repeatedly and keeping to the shadows.

This was probably the stupidest thing she had done in a long while. The sun was already past the horizon, leaving only faint, pink embers in its wake. It would be full-blown nightfall within the next ten minutes. She didn’t want to imagine the telling-off she would receive if McGonagall caught her—again.

And what if Carmilla didn’t show?

That thought was the most prominent in her mind, as she finally came under the shadow of the stands and slipped through the familiar entryway to the changing rooms. She collected her broom, which she had stashed during her break after Care of Magical Creatures, and kicked off hesitantly.
The last of the sun had been lost. The stars were out, and the shadows cast by the moon fell long and wispy.

A flash of light caught her eye, and she whipped her head around, almost losing her grip on the broom handle. Someone was holding a wand aloft, in the Ravenclaw stands. Her heart quickening, Laura rocketed across the pitch, landing easily on the railing and hopping down.

Carmilla lowered her wand, but left the tip lit. It cast shadows up on her face, like she were a kid at a muggle slumber party, shining a torch and telling spooky ghost stories.

“You came,” Laura said.

“Yes. I was beginning to think you wouldn’t, though.” She was still staring out across the pitch.

“I wouldn’t do that,” she said. The words were quick, and sincere, and entirely the wrong thing to say.

Carmilla’s eyes darkened. She looked down.

“Right. Of course you wouldn’t.”

_Dammit, Laura._

“No, I didn’t mean that like—that wasn’t supposed to be an insult. I just meant I… I wouldn’t.” She laughed nervously. “I was the one that, y’know, invited you?”

At that, Carmilla nodded. Her brow furrowed, and she ducked her head as if to hide her expression before she sighed. “I had a good reason.”

“For what?”

“For not showing up, that night.”

Laura’s breath felt hot, trapped in her chest with the thumping of her heart.

“You did?”

“Yes. But, it’s… not something I can tell you.”

Laura’s lips tightened with disappointment, but she nodded regardless. It was a start.

“Okay.”

Carmilla regarded her for a moment, her head dipped and her stare coming up through her lashes with the faintest hint of surprise—but then she shook herself and dropped onto the nearest bench, kicking her boots up.

Tentatively, Laura joined her. She hesitated several long seconds before leaving an empty spot between them.

Laura tilted her head back, looking up at the vast expanse of stars while she waited to see if Carmilla would speak again. There always seemed to be so much more sky at Hogwarts. Even living in a secluded farming region in the country, there still weren’t _this_ many stars.

She thought it every year, when she got off the train and truly felt like she was a witch—and that the past few years had not been a feverish hallucination—but it seemed especially true right now.
Hogwarts was a magical place, a place that was… other.

Even with the headlines in the Daily Prophet this summer, and the dangers looming over them all, sitting up here, in her favorite part of Hogwarts… it all felt so far away. Like Hogwarts could never be tainted by such things.

There was something to be said for safety.

“I thought you didn’t want to talk to me,” Carmilla murmured thoughtfully.

When Laura turned to look at her, she found that Carmilla, too, was watching the skies. Her eyes were soft, her jaw relaxed. It struck Laura that she had never seen the other girl quite so vulnerable.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Laura finally stammered, when it became evident that Carmilla did not intend to continue the thought.

Carmilla shrugged, her eyebrows twitching together for a second and then relaxing once more. “I know we aren’t friends,” she said. The words were sharp, and they bit at Laura. This time, though, Carmilla carried on without giving her a chance to respond. “I’m not sure why you talk to me at all. And then you took that Bludger…” she shook her head, lips pursing into a thin line. “When I went to see you, it didn't exactly go well. I just… figured that you were choosing to avoid me.”

“But I didn’t even know about it,” Laura re-iterated. Slowly, she was putting together the pieces, playing through yesterday’s conversation for the millionth time and only now connecting all the dots.

She let her breaths fall in and out, counting them until she could work up the courage to ask the thing that had been wearing at her for the last twenty-four hours.

“Carmilla… what were you going to say, on the train?”

The other girl stiffened. “It was nothing.”

It was clearly not nothing. Laura wasn’t sure what possessed her—perhaps it was the odd mixture of emotions that always came with the first day back at Hogwarts, or a tiredness she had yet to acknowledge in the waning hours. Regardless, she found her hand landing on Carmilla’s arm, tugging the other girl’s gaze back to her.

Carmilla sighed. “I was going to say that… that I thought you would write,” she muttered, her voice small. “If you wanted to talk. And then you didn’t.”

Laura almost laughed at the irony, her relief hot and swift. “I thought you would write!”

There was a heavy beat of silence.

“Did—did you want me to?” Carmilla whispered. She had turned, and was facing Laura, now, instead of the stars. Her eyes were very dark. Darker than Laura remembered.

Any thoughts of lying to her were immediately wiped from Laura’s mind.

“I—yeah. I mean, I know that—that, like you said, we aren’t friends, but I had thought…” She trailed off, unsure of her next words.

“Thought what?” Carmilla prompted.

Surely, Laura was imagining her eagerness.
“I don’t know! That… that it was changing? It’s not like we’ve been exactly unfriendly, recently. I mean… we could be friends, right?” Her hand brushed against Carmilla’s arm again with her gesturing, and the contact sent tremors up to her shoulder, worming down to shiver in her stomach. “Would that… would that be so crazy?”

“To everyone else? Yes.”

“Well, who really cares about everyone else?” Laura declared, her hands flying up dramatically. Carmilla’s lip quirked, but then fell back into a thin line. “You do. You care about what your friends think.”

“Well,” she hedged, “Maybe… it’s none of their business. Maybe we just don’t tell them. We meet here, just the two of us, whenever we’re both free. Practice together.”

“Okay,” said Carmilla. There was no hesitation, only a hurried nod.

They had shifted closer, somehow. Laura was convinced she must have scooted herself towards the other girl subconsciously, and the thought made her stomach clench. She carefully edged back, keeping her gaze on anything that was not Carmilla’s lips, or Carmilla’s neck, or any part of Carmilla, because she was entirely too perfect and Laura was certain that if she leaned forward right now, her lips would feel incredible, and—

“We should probably get going,” she stammered, before her wayward thoughts could get any further out of control. “Um, I mean, if we get caught, we’ll be serving detention for the length of the schoolyear. That, and everyone will definitely know we were together.”

“Together?” Carmilla questioned, raising an eyebrow.

Oh sweet Slytherin, save me.

She was very warm.

“Yeah, uh, hanging out. Together. Enemies and… and all that jazz.”

Carmilla nodded. Her expression was impossible to read in the faint glow of moonlight, but her eyes had narrowed with something Laura desperately hoped was not suspicion.

They stood together, making the long trek back to the castle in relative silence. Their shadows cut long streaks across the entrance hall when they finally slipped through the doors, and Laura was practically vibrating with unused energy even as she kept up with Carmilla’s lengthier strides. It was only when they reached their last mutual staircase that they slowed to a halt.

“So… we’ll figure out a time to meet?” Laura whispered. Her trainers squeaked on the clean tile.

“Yes,” Carmilla agreed at once. She ducked as she grinned, her teeth flashing white in the glow from the nearest window.

Laura watched her go—watched the way she sauntered with such surefootedness, the way she lifted in and out of the shadows as if she were one of them—until she was lost around a corner, and then carefully made her own tired steps turn upwards, past the sleeping portraits of long-dead witches and wizards, and into Gryffindor Tower.

Falling into her four poster bed without bothering to change into her pajamas, Laura finally let herself revel in the warm, expanding sensation that had settled in her chest, acknowledging it for what it
was:

Hope.
Fear Itself

Chapter Summary

It's totally normal to hide friendships, right? Totally.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Fall of 1974 (Fifth Year)*

It was only thanks to Perry’s numerous threats that James Potter did not bring the whole of Gryffindor House to Quidditch tryouts. Laura held them on the first Saturday morning of the term, having made exceptionally sparkly posters to hang in the common room for advertisement.

She was more proud of her artwork than she was of her prospects as captain.

“No, no, *no!*” she shouted, blowing her whistle as she soared up to intercept the Quaffle.

Her potential Keeper reserve and her third failed Chaser were both wincing and clutching their faces. How someone managed to hit another player in the head and then break their own nose on their broom handle was beyond her.

“Potter!” she called. “Would you escort Rhodes and Steinholtz to the Hospital Wing?”

“Yes, Captain, my Captain!” Potter called, saluting. His teeth flashed in the morning sun. Like Carter, Pierce, and Johnson, he had breezed through his tryout and earned his spot on the team. If only Danny and Copeland’s empty roles were so easily filled.

“Let’s take a break! And then I’ll get to the rest of you!” Laura called. With some grumbling, the remaining contenders wandered away to find shady spots to sit. Laura cut across the pitch to land in the stands, where LaF and Perry were waiting.

“What. A. Nightmare,” she groaned, flopping down beside them.

“I hate that she’s good, now,” LaFontaine muttered, glowering at the other team. Laura didn’t need to ask to know who they were talking about. She toyed with her hair self-consciously and said nothing.

“Perhaps she’s gotten a private tutor,” Perry suggested.
“Not in the middle of the schoolyear,” argued LaFontaine. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think she’d cast some sort of spell on her broom. Or her gloves. Or, hell, maybe even the Quaffle.”

“It’s impossible to tamper with official Quidditch equipment,” Laura recited. “It’s protected with the highest level of enchantments—that’s why everything is so ungodly expensive.”

“So, you’re saying it would take powerful dark magic to do such a thing.”

Laura made a face. “Fine, yes. Not impossible… for someone like You-Know-Who. We’re talking about fifth year students, though.” She paused for emphasis. “That’s crazy.”

“Maybe not for them,” LaF said, pointing.

Both Laura and Perry turned.

“Oh, screw me,” Laura muttered under her breath. A collection of Slytherins had just strolled onto the pitch, wearing shit-eating-grins and strutting like they owned the place.

Laura shoved herself upright and snatched up her broom.

“Now, Laura, really—” Perry started to complain.

“You want backup?” LaF asked excitedly. They were already halfway out of their seat.

With a shake of her head, Laura launched herself off the edge of the stands, falling into a short dive before she streaked low across the pitch and came up to hover obstructively in the path of her latest audience members.

Theo Straka was hardly an intimidating figure. Alone, she’d be happy to spit insults at him. A year above her, but only a few inches over her head, she could out-duel him with one hand tied behind her back—possibly even without a wand, thanks to seven straight summers of Karate classes.

The unfortunate fact of the matter was that, despite his lack of talent, Straka did not travel alone.

…And that he had been made the newest Slytherin Captain.

“See, this is how you know when a team has fallen to the absolute slums: Lawrence was reduced to picking Hollis as her successor.”

“That’s big talk, considering the way your team played last season,” she scoffed.

He sneered. “How’s Lawrence doing? Gone to hide back in the muggle world, last I heard… Is that where you’re gonna go, when this is over? Poor little mudblood Hollis, with her second-rate broom and her big, big dreams.”

“Where’s your old captain, Straka? Last I heard, he was working for your Daddy’s firm. Odd how he picked you, after such a generous job offer landed in his lap. Almost like you didn’t earn it yourself—almost like you’ve never earned anything for yourself, your whole life.”

Straka whipped out his wand, his cronies quickly following suit.

A series of thumps announced the arrival of back-up that she had not requested. The Gryffindor team—and a selection of tryouts—had just landed behind Laura, outnumbering the Slytherins.

Straka lowered his wand, opening his mouth to snarl some final insult… and only unleashing silence. He moved his lips again, scowling, and then reached up to grasp at his throat, yelling in mime, arms
waving. Not a sound escaped his lips. Laura glanced behind her at the Gryffindors, who were equal parts stunned and amused.

Straka pointed at her threateningly, and then stormed away, his team scurrying to keep up.

In the stands, the Ravenclaws had shuffled to their feet, and were making a hasty retreat. Laura imagined there would be teacher involvement very shortly, and it would be wise for any by-standers to be outside the blast zone. Especially if it were McGonagall.

Laura searched for Carmilla amidst the throng, but only caught one glimpse of curly, raven hair before they had all ducked from sight.

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The first weeks of the term passed slowly. Perry had not been wrong about the emphasis that would be placed on the O.W.L.s this year. Since that first day of lecturing on the importance of the exams, their professors were piling them with more homework than Laura had ever imagined one student could be capable of completing. If Quidditch practice were not going so poorly, she would have found it her only respite.

“That could have been… better,” LaFontaine muttered after their third evening on the pitch as the Gryffindor reserve Beater.

Laura had been angry, at the start, but now she was merely glum. Her hair had grown icicles on the walk back up to the castle, a fashion statement that she was certain had come from a jinx by Potter, rather than the light drizzle they had been flying through.

It would not have been undeserved. Her poor play-calling had forced him into not one, but two collisions with the Beaters. He was sullen when he tossed his broom aside in the changing rooms, and, though she suspected this was largely because Lily Evans had been in the stands, she still felt guilty.

Laura had no idea how to be a captain, a fact that was becoming clearer and clearer with each passing day.

“Please tell me those are for us,” she groaned as she tossed herself into the nearest armchair in the Gryffindor common room, reaching for a steaming mug.

Perry beamed, levitating the mugs into her and LaFontaine’s waiting hands. “I figured you’d be chilly, so I mixed in some pepper-up potion. We have a lot to get through tonight.”

Laura set down the cocoa with a clunk, sloshing the contents onto the table. Perry gave a low whimper of complaint, clearing up the stains as best she could with her wand, but Laura had buried her head in her hands and was not paying attention.

“I can’t feel my fingers, let alone my brain,” she griped.

“Well, you shouldn’t be able to feel your brain, Laur, so that’s probably a good thing,” said LaF. “Cheer up. It looks like Perry’s annotated our notes for us…”

“Yes, they needed some… attention. You are rather remiss with things like bullet points. And Laura —your penmanship is astonishing, truly.”

“Gee, thanks,” Laura muttered through her fingers.
“Hey, at least you’ve got Perry to partner up with. It looks like she’s nearly finished your Herbology research, and I’d bet my life-savings that Karnstein hasn’t even cracked a single textbook for ours…”

Laura’s stomach turned at the reminder.

When they had arrived at the greenhouses their second day back and discovered they were to share the course with Ravenclaw, Laura’s internal reaction had fallen somewhere between ecstatic and terrified. The unnerving sensation had only intensified when Professor Sprout had declared they would be working in partners to care for a collection of Self-Fertilizing Shrubs (“Don’t go trusting the name, now, they are finicky things, with very specific care instructions…”).

Laura had all but lost her footing trying to see Carmilla over the heads of their classmates.

Only, Professor Sprout had picked their partners for them.

Which meant Laura was working with Perry, while LaFontaine had been placed with Carmilla. LaF had complained endlessly in the following weeks about the unfairness of this arrangement, and Perry’s placating reminders that it was ‘better them than Laura’ did little to calm Laura’s turbulent thoughts.

Especially when she caught Carmilla’s eye over their shared work bench, and wondered at the faintest of smiles that sometimes seemed to curve her lips.

They hadn’t had a chance to meet, since that first night out on the pitch.

It was slowly killing her.

Carmilla swam through her thoughts endlessly, her name always seeming to hover dangerously on Laura’s lips, a secret both exhilarating and all-consuming. She had now had three—three—dreams featuring the other girl’s lips pressed firmly against her own.

She woke, each time well before the sun had risen, with frustration snarling in her chest. There was no going back to sleep in the aftermath of something so perfect and so entirely out of reach, and the longing was a dull, panging ache buried deep in her chest. It followed her everywhere, like an unwelcome house guest.

“Earth to Laura.”

“Huh?” She blinked and realized that both of them were staring at her expectantly. She shook her head. “Sorry. What were you saying?”

“Told you she wasn’t listening,” LaF smirked at Perry. “Perr was just trying to warn you that we saw Karnstein trying to mess with your bag in class today, when you were talking to Professor Sprout.”

“What?” Laura asked blankly.

The panic came swift and without warning. She seized her bag from where it was slumped beside the chair, rifling through the mixture of broken quills and parchment scraps that littered the bottom under her textbooks. Was there a note? What if Carmilla had wanted to meet, and now Laura had missed her, and she thought Laura hadn’t come on purpose…

“Relax,” said LaF, waving an arm at her. Laura raised her eyes, still clutching the bag in a death-grip. “She didn’t do anything. We checked. And Perry cast a nice little charm on it so that it won’t let non-Gryffindors come within a few centimeters. They’ll hit like… an invisible wall, if they try. It’s pretty cool.”
“She what?” Laura stammered. She cut her eyes at Perry, who flushed. Laura, in an unreasonable bout of anger, hoped it was in embarrassment and not pride. “Did you say anything to her?” she demanded.

“I didn’t,” said Perry. “But, LaFontaine did warn her to stay away from you. Which I still say was a bad idea. You shouldn’t go about threatening someone like her—either of you.”

“Hey, she had it coming,” LaF declared. “Who knows what she was trying to do; she could have been planning to put something dangerous in there. Or maybe hex it so it like… ate Laura’s arm or something. Snape could have taught her a spell.”

Laura was no longer listening. Her hands had resumed their search of the bag, and she had just found a scrap of parchment caught in the pages of her Transfiguration textbook. It was clearly not hers, as it was faint blue in color and not the pale, aged yellow of her own scrolls. She turned it over between her thumb and index finger, frowning.

It was blank.

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Carmilla was definitely staring at her.

Laura hadn’t been certain in the Great Hall that morning, her eyes continuously drawing to the Ravenclaw table as if magnetized (and finding Carmilla’s head just lowering, each time), but now she was sure.

They still sat across the dungeon from one another in Potions, as far from one another as physically possible. It was a natural migration, one that had been built upon years of being shoved into the dungeon as enemies for these miserable lessons, but Laura had never resented it nearly as much as she did this morning.

If they sat closer, perhaps she could get a message to Carmilla, or whisper a few words.

Maybe she could get an explanation for the seemingly useless scrap of paper Carmilla had risked so much to gift her. She had nearly been caught, after all, and if LaF or Perry found out that they were—well, that they were whatever they were—then it would surely be… bad.

They would ask questions.

They would be weird.

(And Carmilla might figure Laura out. Then she would be weird.)

Besides, she reasoned, Carmilla didn’t want to lose her air of indifference. People would surely look at her differently, if she started making friends with Gryffindors—with girls like Laura.

Professor Slughorn was prattling on about antidotes at the front of the classroom, pacing slowly in front of his desk as he ho-hoed his way through stories about terrible poisons he had encountered in his years as a potion master. LaFontaine was riveted, their face alight and their whole body hunched forward to listen attentively, while Perry looked like she might combust from how frantically her quill was working to keep up with his words.

Laura glanced at the parchment laid out in front of her, on which she had written (as neatly as she could manage): Types of Brewable Antidotes.
The rest of the paper was completely blank, save for the large splotch of violet ink she had accidentally dropped in the corner.

She had barely heard a word of the lecture. Carmilla had put her hair up in a messy bun, today, and curls of silky black hair were teasing loose to brush against the perfect arches of her cheekbones.

Laura wished she could kiss her.

She wished Carmilla liked girls.

More specifically, her.

As she rested her head on her hand, catching the way Carmilla’s lips twitched along with whatever she was scribbling into her notes, the other girl paused and glanced up through her eyelashes.

They blinked at one another, and Laura swore she saw Carmilla stifle a laugh—it was hard to say, because she was always so quick to school her expressions—but she drew a hand up to hide her face, then tucked one of the loose strands of hair behind her ear and raised a pointed eyebrow.

Laura glanced at her friends, and, not wanting to squander the opportunity, pretended to be digging for a new inkwell in her bag. She set it next to her still-very-full inkwell on the desk, and carefully held up the scrap of paper between two fingers, mimicking Carmilla’s raised eyebrow.

Carmilla definitely laughed, now, a silent chuckle that went with a shake of her head. She mouthed something, and Laura felt herself flush.

She was terrible at reading lips. Terrible. She could never make out what the other person was saying, and it always ended with someone—it was usually LaFontaine—rolling their eyes at her and throwing their hands up in defeat. She had once thought she understood, had gone so far as to nod along convincingly, and then failed to show up at the ‘agreed’ classroom that evening. LaFontaine had been Perry’s sole test subject for a new binding spell she had been researching.

Laura had not heard the end of it for weeks.

She was already shaking her head in panic, before Carmilla was even finished with her unintelligible sentence, mouthing desperately: *I can’t read lips*!

Carmilla frowned and then laughed. She mouthed whatever it was again, slower.

Laura grimaced. She was sure she was turning a very obvious red, but she was useless at this, and any second Carmilla was going to give up and they probably wouldn’t even get to talk after class, because of her friends, and then they’d never actually get a chance to be alone together, and—

With another little shake of her head, her smile still firmly in place, Carmilla raised her fingers to ask: *seven?*

Laura nodded without thinking, and then slapped her own forehead as she remembered that she had scheduled practice for that night after dinner. Carmilla was watching her in confusion, forehead wrinkled, leaning forward in her seat and waiting for an explanation. Laura was about to give one—or at least try—when Perry interrupted with a tap on her wrist.

Laura jumped.

Her friend was eyeing her inquisitively, thankfully oblivious to the silent line of communication that had been crossing the dungeon between her and Carmilla.
She tried to motion that she was fine, that Perry should go back to her notes, but Perry had caught sight of Laura’s blank parchment. Her eyes bugged, her lips pressing into a thin line. Laura felt very much like she was being scolded in mime.

There wasn’t anything to do but hurriedly copy down everything that was still on the board, and even then she could feel Perry’s eyes drawing towards her every few moments. Slughorn continued to prattle on about an expedition he’d gone on in Ireland. Every time she dared glance to Carmilla, the other girl was looking away.

It wasn’t until they were packing up their things, the chatter rising in preparation for the lunch break, that Laura managed to get her attention again.

She had written her response on a scrap of parchment—not the one Carmilla had given her; that one she was still keeping safe, in her curiosity—and she held it out under her workbench as Carmilla passed.

The other girl took it without a word.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Laura sighed. The clang of the astronomy tower door had set her on edge, expecting anyone from Filch to Dumbledore himself at this point, as it was nearly nine o’clock, but it was Carmilla who materialized out of the shadows, peering around in amusement.

“You really have an affinity for out-of-bounds spaces, you know that?” she said. She dropped smoothly onto the stone parapet at Laura’s side.

“I’m a Gryffindor,” Laura reminded her, grinning. “We considered rules to be more like… guidelines.”

Carmilla snorted. “Of course you do. In Ravenclaw, we just make our own.”

“And where does the ‘Ravenclaw Rulebook’ stand on sneaking out after hours?”

“It’s actually more of an individual exercise.” She shrugged. “The ‘Carmilla Rulebook’ thinks rule-breaking is perfectly fine, so long as you have a good reason.”

Laura felt a low tingle creep down her spine. She did not ask what Carmilla’s reason was for coming here tonight. She did not dare.

“So, what is this?” she asked instead, holding out the little bit of blue parchment.

Carmilla plucked it easily from between her fingers, setting it down on the stone in front of her crisscrossed legs. She pulled out her wand.

“Aparecium,” she said smoothly. At once, inky words rose from within the parchment as if surfacing from the bottom of a pool. Carmilla’s narrow, looped handwriting spelled out Wednesday at 7?

At once, Laura knew it was obvious, that such a spell should have been her first response to finding the note.

“Oh,” she said dumbly.

Carmilla merely shrugged, though, instead of scoffing or asking why she had been unable to figure it
out. And then she said something Laura found entirely unexpected: “Sorry. I should have realized
the cloak-and-dagger thing was too Ravenclaw.”

“What? No, I should have…” Laura was flushing, and she ducked her head in an attempt to hide it.
“That was obvious. I’m just an idiot.”

“No, you’re not,” Carmilla argued at once. She touched Laura’s shoulder. “You’re not an idiot.”

It took Laura a moment to formulate words.

“Okay,” she stammered, clearing her throat. “Um, thanks.”

Carmilla was still staring at her, a fierceness in her gaze that Laura found impossible to look at
directly without her heart threatening to stop.

“I mean it. You’re more clever than most of the students in our year. Probably the ones above us,
too.”

Now, that just wasn’t true. She thought of every Charms lesson that had left her defeated, every
Transfiguration quiz she had failed.

“I’m way behind you,” she argued. “And LaF, and Perry…”

“Classrooms don’t measure intelligence,” Carmilla recited, as though she had learned the phrase from
somewhere. She said it with the conviction of someone that believed the words. “You see things in a
way that others don’t,” she added, and then she looked away, letting her head fall back so she could
frown up at the stars. “You saw straight through me, on the Quidditch pitch. I wasted years, and you
fixed me in two weeks.”

It was probably the most flattering thing anyone had ever told her. Laura didn’t know what to say.

“Anyway,” Carmilla continued, her voice dropping and catching a faint, bitter undertone. “I
wouldn’t measure by your friends.”

Laura swallowed.

“I know LaFontaine said some things,” she started, biting her lip. “And I—I obviously don’t want
you to ‘stay away from’ me.”

“Well, that’s good, at least.”

The bitterness had slipped a little, but it was still there.

Laura felt a tug of guilt in her stomach, but changed the topic hurriedly.

“You jinxed Straka, didn’t you? When I was holding tryouts?”

Carmilla shifted a little, continuing to stare upwards as something shifted in her expression. The
shadows from the full moon fell starkly across her pale features. “He was being obnoxious.”

Laura’s lip twitched. “That’s his natural state of being. And he was already giving up, when you
cursed him.”

“I know. But, really, I saved him a much worse fate.”

“Oh, really?”
“Mm-hmm.” Her eyes had slipped close, and she crossed her arms loosely over her chest, hugging herself against the chill that had cut across the tower. “If I’d let him finish speaking his mind, he’d have been pummeled by about a dozen Gryffindors. And I happen to know you’re quite talented at a rather nasty boils jinx.”

“Oh.” Laura flushed. “I did use that on you once, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. And in our second year, no less—not that it wasn’t deserved. So, as I was saying, I did him a favor.”

Laura remembered the incident. They had been between classes, the week after Laura’s first match as the Gryffindor Keeper. Carmilla had tripped her in the hall and said she was trying to help her learn how to fly. Someone had thrown the first curse—Laura suspected herself—and she had only landed the lucky blow after several failed shots from both sides. Carmilla had spent the evening in the Hospital Wing, and Laura had spent a week in detention.

“Well, I heard it took Madam Pomfrey two hours to work out a counter-jinx to fully correct his vocal cords.”

“Hm. I heard it was three,” Carmilla smirked.

They sat in companionable silence for a long while, watching as a few meteors streaked low across the sky. Somewhere in the Forbidden Forest, a wolf howled. Laura was sure Carmilla had fallen asleep, her eyes peacefully closed and her shoulders relaxed, when the other girl murmured, “You put together a half-decent team.”

Laura smiled lazily. “Oh? And how would you know that? You left before the trials finished.”

“The rumors make their way around. I mean, you already know who made my team, and the others, don’t you?”

She wasn’t wrong. Laura had indeed heard the names of the newest team members floating around, from the latest second-year Chaser on Hufflepuff to the appointment of each new captain. Jenna Martin, the seventh year Ravenclaw Seeker, had taken over Huxley’s role as captain. That Carmilla had made the team had not surprised anyone, this year, given her rise to glory in the second half of term last season.

“Anyhow, it’s going to be a good year,” Carmilla continued. “I fully intend to take you down.”

Laura laughed. “And I intend to get revenge for Danny. Stand in my way if you dare.”

“I do dare,” said Carmilla. Laura turned to meet her gaze, and found her eyes glinting with mischief. “But… I will gladly help you flatten Hufflepuff.”

There was something behind the words. A sincerity that belied their teasing nature. Laura rolled her bottom lip between her teeth.

“You do know they apologized, don’t you?” she asked. “And Hooch didn’t even give them a foul.”

“Huh. I like how you assume my actions would be on your behalf.”

Laura scoffed, but it was to hide the embarrassment flushing her cheeks. The darkness helped. “Oh, sure, because you have so many reasons to hate Hufflepuff on your own. Like how you totally crushed them last year.”
“My reasons are my own, thank you very much.” There was a beat of silence, and then she muttered, “But there still should have been a foul.”

“Ha!” Laura declared triumphantly.

She spun, a finger already pointed accusingly, and found herself very, very close to Carmilla’s face. The other girl’s eyes widened, and Laura ducked back, her ears hot.

Several burning memories from her recent dreams came to mind.

She cleared her throat. “Um, anyways, Warner wasn’t trying to hit me. I’ve heard the story from every single Gryffindor that was in those stands. He hit the Bludger at Potter. It missed him, hit the boundary, and came back towards Warner. I just happened to be in the middle.”

Carmilla scowled. “Warner’s still a tool.”

Even though Laura laughed, she was shaking her head. “That’s not relevant.”

“I’m pretty sure it is.”

Laura was trying to come up with a clever reply when the clock tower let off its first mournful cry. She glanced down at her watch, the face lit with the pale gleam of the full moon. It was 11 PM.

“It’s getting late,” she said with a frown.

A part of her was hoping Carmilla would shrug and make some comment about how lateness wasn’t a part of the ‘Carmilla Rulebook.’ But the other girl simply nodded and rolled to her feet.

They crept back through the castle, Carmilla murmuring instructions to Laura at each turn. She seemed to have a sixth sense about where Mrs. Norris was, keeping them hidden in dark alcoves until the coast was clear.

She left Laura at the final staircase beneath Gryffindor Tower, and the silence stretched for a beat as they looked at each other in the necessary hush that accompanied sneaking about after hours.

Carmilla gave her a nod as a last farewell.

Thoughts wrapped up in shooting stars and the gleam of Carmilla’s eyes by the light of the full moon, Laura almost didn’t notice anything odd about the portrait of the Fat Lady when she reached it, speaking the password (“Gargoyle Drool”) through a massive yawn.

The painting did not swing forward, and she frowned to find herself facing a painting of an empty armchair. She looked about, scanning the nearby paintings, but the Fat Lady was nowhere to be seen. Most of the portraits were snoring. One, a stern-looking man with a flat nose, opened one eye, scoffed, and promptly went back to sleep.

It had never occurred to Laura, in five years, that the Fat Lady might leave her post. She had always been there, even after the most daring curfew-breaking adventures Laura had been on. Normally, she just offered a few stern looks or a sharp glare, and then swung open to let her pass.

As far as Laura knew, she also never tattled on her students to the likes of McGonagall. Laura had always appreciated that.

With a sigh, she sat down on the hard stone floor of the corridor, put her back against the wall, and closed her eyes. It was going to be a long night… especially if one of the teachers on patrol came by,
or, worse, Peeves. And it wasn’t as if she had somewhere else to go. Carmilla was no doubt safely tucked in bed by now, and she didn’t exactly have access to the Ravenclaw dormitories. In fact, she wasn’t even sure where they were. She’d never had occasion to visit.

The moon had fallen below the horizon line, the sun peeking through the windows of the tower, when Laura startled awake, a figure standing over her, looking just as alarmed to see her as she was to see him.

“Laura?” Remus Lupin stammered.

“What’s this, now?” a voice cried out over their heads. The Fat Lady was back in her portrait. She peered down at the both of them, arms crossed. “Out before breakfast? In all my time…”

“Gargoyle Drool!” Laura proclaimed, scrambling to her feet and carefully avoiding Remus’s eyes. The portrait swung open, and she clambered through the hole that it revealed. The common room was empty.

“What were you doing outside the dormitory?” Remus demanded, hopping down behind her.

“What were you doing?” Laura shot back. He blinked, and said nothing. He was very pale, she noted, with dark circles under his eyes. Wherever he had been, he had not been sleeping.

Voices announced the impending arrival of fellow Gryffindors.

“I didn’t see you, and you didn’t see me,” Laura said quickly.

“Deal,” Remus agreed. He dodged up the stairs to the boys’ dormitory and Laura tossed herself into an armchair, snatching up the nearest abandoned textbook.

“Laura?” Perry asked, not two seconds later. She was already dressed for the day, and she took in the sight of Laura sitting by the fire with the utmost suspicion glinting in her narrowed eyes.

“Good morning,” Laura said. Her smile was very forced.

“Have you been down here… all night?”

“Oh. Um. Yes. I fell asleep by the fire. I actually just… just woke up.”

Perry’s lips went very thin. “Mm,” she hummed. It was a judgmental sound. “We have double Potions today. You should change now and get down to breakfast so we aren’t late.”

The other Gryffindors had begun to flow into the common room, some still rubbing their eyes, others already chattering away. They climbed out of the porthole in a stream.

LaF was just tugging on their robes, when Laura joined them in the otherwise empty dormitory.

“Dude, where have you been?” they asked, eyes wide. “You weren’t in bed this morning, and Perry was muttering—a lot—about how she didn’t want to have to issue detention to her friends, but that she wasn’t above it. You should know she’s on curfew duty the next few days. I’d watch out.”

“You aren’t going to threaten me with detention, then?” asked Laura.

“Ha. No. If I wasn’t a prefect, I’d be asking to come join you. I mean, you were down at the pitch, right? Running plans for training?”

Laura nodded, focusing her attention on tugging on her robes, not wanting to meet LaF’s eyes as she
“I can cover for you, you know,” LaF was continuing. “If you tell me when you’re planning on going, I can make sure you don’t get locked out.” At Laura’s startled look, they added, “I mean, I’m assuming that’s what happened. It’s raining this morning, and you don’t look like a drowned rat.”

Laura sighed in relief. “Oh. Yes. The Fat Lady was gone when I got back. I mean,” she threw her hands up in exasperation, “I didn’t even know she could do that!”

“Apparently it’s pretty common. There’s a portrait of a group of women drinking wine down on the fourth floor, and she visits some nights. I found Potter and his friends out in the corridor last month, when I was on patrol. I swear they’d been out in the Forbidden Forest, from the look of them.”

“I just ran into Remus,” Laura said. She would have felt bad, sharing the secret, but she had no doubt that Potter, Black, and Pettigrew would know about her presence in the corridor, soon enough. There was nothing those boys didn’t share with one another. “He was alone, though.”

“That’s odd. I swear I never see any of those four by themselves—except Potter, and that’s only when he’s chasing after Lily.”

Laura had to agree that it was strange. She was still thinking about it when they reached the dungeons, and her thoughts were only derailed when she caught sight of Carmilla.

Wednesday’s lesson, and last night’s adventure, both abruptly seemed ages ago. She wondered if it would be unreasonable—or suspicious—if she tried to get Carmilla to meet again that night.

She sat down hurriedly when Carmilla smiled in her direction, warmth creeping over her, and fixed her gaze pointedly on the board.

Professor Slughorn had them brewing the Draught of Peace as their first real project of the term. A dull nausea settled in Laura’s stomach as he listed out the dangerous properties of a failed potion.

Perry, of course, had already read extensively on the topic. She set out her ingredients in a precise line across her workstation, her face pale with determination. LaFontaine was the only student who looked remotely at ease. They didn’t need to have read extensively on the subject to have their innate potions ability, and, if anything, they looked excited to begin. Even Carmilla, who was a top-notch student in almost every subject, looked uneasy when Laura made the poor choice to dart her gaze in the other girl’s direction.

Perry’s potion had turned a tangerine sort of orange (the eighth step), by the time Laura began adding her hellebore in slow drops, wondering if it would ever turn the expected turquoise. LaF was already grating their unicorn horn into a powder, ages ahead of them both. When Slughorn made his rounds, he gave a cheery little cry at their cauldron.

“I’m having a little get-together next Thursday evening,” he said with a wink, once he had finished praising their work. “Dinner for just a few of my top-performing students, you know… five o’clock, in my office?”

LaFontaine grinned. “I’ll be there,” they said eagerly.

The Slug Club was hardly the secret that Professor Slughorn liked to make it out to be. Everyone in the school knew about his private soirees for his favorite students. Perry was certainly aware—she talked about the benefits of being included with reverence ("It’s the highest of recommendations, really! A word from Slughorn can get you an internship at the Ministry without so much as an interview!") and did everything in her power to appeal to his interests.
Her efforts had been fruitless, though. He only seemed to extend his invitations to students of at least fifth year, something that had placated Perry until this very moment. Her expression had darkened to a dangerous puce.

The unpleasant sensation in Laura’s gut intensified. It would seem that the lull in their feud was about to come to a crashing end.

She was not wrong. By Thursday, when LaFontaine slipped away before dinner to go down to Slughorn’s office in the dungeons, the air in their dormitory had gone positively brittle. Laura spoke very little, not in the mood to get called out for favoritism, lest she dare mention Quidditch to LaFontaine or studying to Perry while the other was in earshot.

“It’s unbelievable,” she complained bitterly one evening in late October, as she sat with Carmilla up in the clock tower, watching a stream of students on their way down to Hogsmeade Village for the first visit of the year. McGonagall was checking students off on her list as they passed, and the air was thick with the smell of baking pumpkin from the Great Hall.

Something passed over Carmilla’s face, gone in a flash, and then she let the Snitch she was toying with loose from her grasp, dark eyes watching it zip about for a moment before she snapped it up again. Perry had confiscated it from James Potter and instructed Laura to return it to the Quidditch supplies, which she had not done, and Carmilla had nicked it from Laura’s bag without apology. At some point, she knew she would need to get it back.

It was just difficult, she had found, to say no to Carmilla.

“Really it’s shocking that it’s taken them this long,” Carmilla commented blithely. “Besides, they aren’t nearly as bad as that whole Snape-Potter-Evans triangle.”

Laura blinked. She had never thought about other people realizing what was going on with Perry and LaFontaine. It had been obvious to her, of course, for years. That Carmilla could so casually acknowledge the real cause of the tension between her friends was… startling.

It also made her wonder.

She changed the topic. “So, Hufflepuff versus Slytherin next weekend—who do you think will win?”

“Slytherin,” said Carmilla, but she didn’t sound happy about it. “With Kirsch gone, and a new Seeker that can barely fly, they’ll be lucky if they manage to get any points before Slytherin picks up the Snitch. As much as I want to see Hufflepuff trounced, I’d rather not face Slytherin directly off a win.”

There was no reason for Carmilla to want Hufflepuff trounced, outside of what had happened to Laura. She might have said she had her own reasons, in that cryptic way she was so good at, but, try as she might, Laura had been unable to fathom what they could be. She was choosing not to dig deeper into it.

It seemed like there was a growing list of things she was avoiding with Carmilla, these days—the thing with Remus; relationships in general; and, as of this morning, the first trip to Hogsmeade.

The last of the students had wound their way down the path, now, and McGonagall had packed up her list, leaving one of the seventh year prefects in her stead. Though the whole of the school (third years and up) had been talking about the trip all week, the topic had not come up once when Laura and Carmilla spoke. Even when they had agreed to meet up here, neither had acknowledged that it
would be ideal due to the emptiness of the castle, or that they were bailing on their other friends by doing so.

What Laura most wished to do, really, was to go to Hogsmeade with Carmilla. Like the many other things she was too afraid to say, though, she kept this to herself.

Besides, if they went together, someone was sure to see. Was sure to ask questions.

“Want to go to the pitch?”

Carmilla released the Snitch in Laura’s direction, and she caught it easily. “Sure,” the other girl shrugged. “Shouldn’t be anyone there, today.”

There was something in her tone that Laura couldn’t read. She was puzzling over it, trying to work around the jumpiness in her gut that always accompanied the time she spent with Carmilla, when she heard the first scream.

Laura froze, her hand gripping the railing and her breath catching in her throat. She spun to find Carmilla on the step behind her, her eyes just as wide as Laura’s.

There was another shriek, cutting through the thin fall air and echoing eerily. Laura didn’t pause to consider, she simply bounded the rest of the way down the staircase, dodging past the alarmed prefect with Carmilla on her heels.

There was an icy chill to the air that had not been present that morning. It was fall, but the day had been on the warmer side. Laura had not even put on a scarf. Now, she clutched her arms about herself, her breath billowing out in a cloud as they reached the edge of the village. It was quiet, the streets empty. At her side, Carmilla had gone very still.

“We have to go back,” she said, catching Laura by the arm.

Laura’s legs felt stiff under her, her knees foreign and forgotten. They didn’t want to bend, to move.

“Laura,” Carmilla insisted, her voice suddenly shrill, quavering. “I think—I think it’s Dementors.”

“Dementors?” Laura stammered. They had learned about the creatures in several of their classes—History of Magic described them as the guards of Azkaban, while Defense Against the Dark Arts went in depth on their abilities—but Laura had never expected to see one in person. They were creatures of nightmares, and she had certainly had no plans to visit the wizarding prison.

They turned back the way they had come, but there was a fog growing on the path, seeping up ominously from the weeds in the cobblestones.

“Come on.” Carmilla seized her by the hand, tugging her urgently towards the nearest shop, which happened to be Honeyduke’s. The door handle didn’t budge, and Carmilla swore, changing course rapidly and directing them across the street.

In the growing mist, Laura thought she saw a towering shadow. A figure in a dark cloak, taller than any person.

The music shop was also locked. There was no sign of whoever had screamed, nor of anybody at all. The street was abandoned, bags trampled and scarves lost. Carmilla banged furiously upon the door of The Three Broomsticks. “Let us in, assholes!”

“Carmilla,” Laura whispered. Her teeth were chattering, a terrible sense of dread wearing upon her.
She couldn’t feel her fingers, couldn’t tell if her feet were still touching the ground, and her head was starting to feel light, like she’d had too much Firewhisky.

The other girl glanced at her, eyes going wide. The whites shone like slivers of moonlight—and it had gone dark all of a sudden, hadn’t it? Laura had not seen where the darkness had come from, but the cloudy October sky had been lost from view.

“Fuck,” Carmilla hissed.

She shifted abruptly, pinning Laura behind her, so that her back was against the door of the pub, with Carmilla’s head of hair blocking her view of the street.

There was a horrible noise. A sucking, slippery sound, like a cloak dragging over dried leaves, but not quite.

And she was so cold.

“Mum?” she heard her own voice echo. “Mum, what’s wrong?”

Her mother was in the kitchen, knuckles white on the edge of the counter. The apple she had been peeling had tumbled to the floor, its shavings drifting down around it like autumn leaves. They were baking a pie, a surprise for her father’s birthday that weekend. Apple pie was his favorite—with extra cinnamon, and the crust just a little burnt around the edges.

The world stopped. Mum’s hand froze halfway to her head, and Laura saw her fall for what seemed like forever. The bag of flour slipped from her five-year-old hands.

“Mum,” she whispered.

Carmilla’s hand was on her shoulder. “Hey!” Her voice was urgent. The sky was back, the mist gone. “You with me?”

Blinking, Laura nodded on instinct, and then stopped abruptly. She felt like she might throw-up.

“Shit. Stay here,” said Carmilla. She disappeared.

Behind Laura, the door of the pub opened with a creak. Madam Rosmerta peered around, heaved a sigh, and then pushed the door wide. A few nervous students stepped out, looking both ways before rushing off up the street, back towards the castle.

“You alright, there, Miss Hollis?” she jumped. She was surrounded by students, now, pushing and shoving, their faces white with shock. Professor Slughorn was at her side. “Unnerving, that was. Dementors in Hogsmeade… Well, off to the castle, then. All students, back to the castle!” he shouted. “Must be telling Dumbledore about this…” he added to himself. He patted Laura on the shoulder, urging her along and into the crowd.

“Oh, no, I was—”

There was no arguing. The tide of students was flowing up the path, and Slughorn wasn’t the only staff member shepherding them. She caught sight of Hagrid, towering over the crowd down the street, and then passed by Flitwick, who stood atop a barrel at the entrance to the village, offering words of encouragement to everyone that passed.

She hopped on her tiptoes, trying to catch sight of Carmilla over the crowd, but it was no use.
“Laura!” Perry caught her by the arm. “I didn’t think you were coming to Hogsmeade… come on, we need to make sure everyone is up in the Tower. Flitwick told me the Heads of Houses would be making an announcement.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! As always, feel free to share your thoughts below or drop me a line on tumblr: jg-firefly :)

In which Laura thinks extra classwork is a good idea, and she learns more than she bargained for.

Small warning for homophobic slur.

Christmas Holidays, 1974 (Fifth Year)

The weeks leading up to the Christmas holidays were burdened with extra classwork. Professor McGonagall insisted that they all succeed in fully vanishing their mice before the break, as they would be moving on to the complexity of larger mammals in the new term and this would ‘most certainly come up on their O.W.L.s.’ Slughorn, meanwhile, was having them re-brew the Draught of Peace during each Friday’s lesson, and thus far only LaFontaine and Carmilla had succeeded in concocting a mixture he deemed to be of worthwhile quality.

Greenhouse Five was overflowing with the success of their Self-Fertilizing Shrubs (though LaFontaine continued to insist that Carmilla was stunting theirs); Flitwick had moved them on to silencing charms before Laura had fully grasped summoning, something that Perry was still trying to help her remedy with extra practice between classes; History of Magic continued to be mind-numbingly boring, which did not stop Professor Binns from bogging them down with new essays on the Giant Wars every week; and, as always, Professor Durkin continued to drone uselessly about ‘defensive theories’ rather than teaching them any actual wandwork.

It was perhaps because of all of this—without including her extra assignments in Ancient Runes or Care of Magical Creatures—that McGonagall’s eyes narrowed when Laura caught her off-guard with a question after class one day in late November.

“Really, Miss Hollis, do you not already have enough studying to be worrying about?” she asked, peering down over her glasses.

“I do, Professor, of course,” Laura agreed. “But I just… this seems more useful?”

She almost expected a stern reprimand regarding the usefulness of her regular coursework, but she did not get one. Instead, McGonagall sighed. Her expression was not unkind.

“This is an entirely normal reaction to an encounter with a Dementor. I am surprised I did not see you weeks ago, to be quite honest. I had several students in my office, at the time.”

This was reassuring. Her next words were not.

“This is an entirely normal reaction to an encounter with a Dementor. I am surprised I did not see you weeks ago, to be quite honest. I had several students in my office, at the time.”

This was reassuring. Her next words were not.

“Without a Dementor to practice upon, however, a Patronus is nearly impossible to produce.”

Laura swallowed, pushing at that barest piece of hope. “Nearly?”

McGonagall eyed her, and then plucked her glasses off her nose and gave them a brisk cleaning with a handkerchief that she materialized from thin air. “You are determined, aren’t you?” She took her time gathering a quill, and then scrawled a note on a piece of parchment. “Take this to Professor
Durkin. A boggart can mostly recreate the effects. And I can recommend you several books, as well. I warn you, Miss Hollis, this will not be an easy task. It will take rigorous dedication, and a great deal of time.”

Laura nodded hurriedly. “I know.”

“And I would remind you that your regular studies should take priority. There are very few fully fledged witches and wizards who can perform this spell correctly, and it is not something you will be expected to learn for your O.W.L.s.”

“I know, Professor,” she repeated.

“Very well,” McGonagall sighed, “At least involve Miss Perry and Mx. LaFontaine. I’m sure they could benefit as well, and it does no good learning such complex magic alone.”

Laura nodded, clutching the note on her way out of the classroom, but she paused in the doorway.

“Professor?”

“Yes, Miss Hollis?”

She hesitated, rewording the question in her mind once more.

“Is there… any reason why a Dementor wouldn’t attack someone? Something that… could be done to repel them without magic?”

McGonagall stared at her for a very long time—long enough that Laura squirmed in place, wondering if the professor could read minds.

“No,” she said at last. “Though, it is impossible to truly understand the motivations of a Dementor. Now, good evening, Miss Hollis.”

Laura collected the books from the library, after she spoke to Durkin. She was not fond of the man, the latest in a string of rather useless Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers (they never seemed to last more than one year), and she had to repeat herself three times and help him find his glasses before she could get him to read the note from McGonagall. At last, he agreed to set up his classroom boggart so that Laura could access it during study hours for practice. He did not request that she be supervised, as Laura imagined McGonagall would have preferred, for which she was grateful.

She also planned to ignore McGonagall’s advice about including her friends. Laura wasn’t particularly looking forward to practicing, and she most certainly did not want an audience when she did. Not when her last encounter had gone the way it had.

Carmilla had been perfectly fine. The Dementor had just left. And Laura had been reduced to a mess, calling out for a woman who had been dead for ten years.

“Can we not talk about it?” Carmilla had asked, when Laura finally cornered her after dinner one evening, a week after the ordeal. Laura had not even had a chance to ask, and had still very much wanted to press the issue, but there had been something guarded and fragile in Carmilla’s voice. Laura had let it go.

With great reluctance.

“Are you going home for the holidays?” Remus asked, one morning the first week in December. Laura had just joined the Gryffindor table for breakfast, her eyes still bleary from the late night she
and LaFontaine had spent finishing essays for Slughorn. Perry had been refusing to help either of them, these days.

Laura shook her head, shoveling bacon onto her plate.

Wordlessly, he slid a copy of The Daily Prophet towards her. The headline took a moment to sink in, and, the moment it did, she recognized that the atmosphere in the Great Hall was heavy. Subdued. No one was laughing or messing about, and the chatter had been reduced to low whispers. Even the Slytherin table was quiet.

Muggles Slaughtered, the paper said. The picture was striking—a decimated house lay, still smoldering, under a terrible image of a smoky skull with a snake curling from its parted jaws.

Laura had seen it before, in pictures just like this one. The Dark Mark, they had called it. No one knew for certain if that was the name Voldemort’s supporters had concocted, or if it had been a moniker from the press, but that hardly mattered.

The attack had occurred in an entirely muggle village, only an hour-long train ride from her family cottage. Dad’s already in Ireland, she reminded herself, chanting the words like a mantra until her pulse calmed. He has sent word just a few days prior. He’s fine, he’s with Uncle Ted… they’re already working on that new construction project…

“Dear old cousin Bella,” Sirius muttered, stabbing furiously at the scrambled eggs he was barely eating.

The name jumped off the page at her, listed in the first paragraph of the article as one of the top suspects. “She’s… your cousin?” stammered Laura, frowning. Sirius Black was the one of the last people she would considered Death Eater material. Someone may as well have just insinuated that helpless little Pettigrew was secretly palling around with the likes of Severus Snape.

His scowl was dark. “I do my best to disown the lot of them. Of course, they feel the same about me. Imagine, having a Gryffindor in the family… such a travesty to the Black name.”

“What’s that about Lucius Malfoy?” asked LaFontaine, leaning forward in their seat to read over Laura’s arm. “Wasn’t he a Slytherin Prefect?”

“I remember him,” said Laura at once. “He finished at Hogwarts after our second year. He took ten points from me, once, because I told him a Slytherin tripped me. He said I was lying for attention.”

She found the part that LaF had seen: Lucius Malfoy, a long-standing friend of the Ministry and a well-known donor to St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries, spoke Thursday morning in defense of the Ministry, refuting claims that the very core of the administration had been infiltrated by supporters of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. “These claims are coming from those who wish to sow distrust at a time when we need to work together more than ever. Anyone arguing that the Ministry is compromised, is trying to prevent us from winning this war.” When questioned on whether or not he was directing his accusations at Albus Dumbledore, current Headmaster at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Malfoy declined to comment.

“That absolute slug,” LaF declared. “Trying to turn people against Dumbledore of all people.”

“Well, Malfoy is a Death Eater,” Sirius pointed out.

Perry, who looked far more awake than the rest of them, and had been silent thus far, looked up from her plate.
“He is?”

“Of course.” Sirius turned to her. “He’s married to Narcissa—my other lovely cousin, and Bellatrix’s sister. There isn’t a single one of them that isn’t supporting You-Know-Who.”

“So the Ministry really has been infiltrated, then,” Laura said slowly, “And Malfoy is helping pull it off.”

“Probably.”

Laura thought of the headline that had come the morning after the Slytherin versus Hufflepuff match, when Julian Vane and Gabriel Tutwiler had gone missing. Both were Unspeakables in the Department of Mysteries. The news had set off a series of dark rumors, feeding on top of those that were already circulating.

“There was another Dementor sighting, as well,” Potter put in. He reached a long arm across the table to flip through the **Prophet**, tapping a small article on the fifth page. “There, see?”

“Manchester,” Laura read, shaking her head. “And the Ministry’s still claiming they’ve been sent looking for Death Eaters…”

“As if anyone believes that,” LaFontaine scoffed.

None of their teachers believed it, that was for certain. McGonagall had been clear in her speech to the Gryffindors that evening in the Tower. They were to be on the lookout at all times, they were not to leave the castle alone for any reason, and they were to be escorted to-and-from Herbology. Care of Magical Creatures had been moved from the grounds to a first floor classroom, while Quidditch practices were on a restricted schedule, and conducted under Madam Hooch’s supervision.

At the thought, Laura’s eyes darted up, searching the next table and locating Carmilla at once. She looked pale and uneasy, poking at her breakfast rather than eating it. The Ravenclaws around her seemed to feel about the same. Many heads were resting on hands, and those who were not clustered around a copy of the **Prophet** had their heads bowed.

As if sensing her gaze, Carmilla lifted her head and stared back. Laura tried for a smile, and was relieved when the other girl at least attempted one in return. The gesture looked like it pained her.

Laura tilted her head towards the doors to the Entrance Hall, raising a hopeful eyebrow, but the other girl shook her head and turned her attention back to her plate, same as she had every other time Laura had tried to make plans.

Laura’s stomach twisted.

She could tell she was being avoided. She just wished she knew why.

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Gryffindor lost terribly to Slytherin in their first match of the year.

No one spoke to Laura at breakfast, the morning after the crushing defeat, and she suspected it was not entirely due to the storm cloud hovering over her head. She had let down Gryffindor, and they all knew it.

Captain of the Quidditch team. It was a joke, really. A terrible one, that Danny had played on her out of revenge for losing them the Cup, the year before. She wasn’t meant to be a leader. She was barely
meant to be a Keeper, these days. She had let seven Quaffles through. Her new Chasers had barely gotten a single shot, in comparison, and Potter was carrying the team. Even Johnson hadn’t been on his game.

What Laura really wanted, at the moment, was to curse something.

Perry looked up, when Laura stood, but she said nothing and turned back to her porridge.

Carmilla was not at the Ravenclaw table, though several of her teammates were. “Good game, Hollis,” taunted Yeller as she passed. “Hope you put up that same sort of fight in February!”

She ground her teeth and kept walking.

Professor Durkin had stored the boggart in an out-of-use classroom on the third floor. Laura consulted the note she had tucked in the front of one of her many research books to be sure of the room number, meandering down the corridor uncertainly. She had never had a class in this part of the castle before, and none of these rooms were familiar to her. She had just paused to dust off a label on one door when a voice made her jump.

“Ah, Miss Hollis!” declared a portly wizard in the portrait just behind her. His face was red, with round cheeks, and he vaguely resembled an apple. He waved at the door to his right, and the lock clicked audibly.

“Oh… Thank you,” said Laura.

“I will ensure you are not disturbed!” he proclaimed, with a salute and a long draft from his flask.

“…Cool.”

She pushed the door closed behind her, and was couldn’t deny a faint annoyance when she noticed there was a twin portrait on the back wall, and that the portly wizard had followed her. He was none-too-subtly peering around the frame. She rolled her eyes and turned her attention to the trunk sitting in front of the dusty teacher’s desk at the front of the room.

It was ordinary enough—just a brown suitcase with two golden clasps—except that it was rattling slightly.

Laura set her bag on an empty desk, and laid out her books.

“You really should have a spotter,” the portly wizard noted.

“Oh, shut it,” Laura muttered. He gave a loud harrumph and crossed his arms.

She had prepared her happiest memory—it was one of her earliest, from the day she had gone to the fair with both of her parents. She had probably been about four at the time, and as a result the memory was hazy, out-of-focus the way dreams sometimes became in the waking hours that followed. All of Laura’s research suggested that the only requirement was that the memory be happy, not that it be clear.

She thought of the way it had felt to swing between her parents’ arms, licking her mint chocolate ice cream cone, waving from the back of the hay ride wagon, and readied her wand. The latches sprang open at her silent command—and out rose a surprising figure. Not the towering, ghostly shadow of the Dementor she had been bracing for… but the thin figure of a girl.

Carmilla.
Laura’s wand shook, wavering in her grasp.

She had been so ready for a Dementor that she had forgotten this was a boggart. And boggarts were finicky—they chose their form based on someone’s greatest fear, not what that person felt like facing on a given day.

The Carmilla-shaped figure stepped out of the trunk, crossing her arms lazily over her chest, a smirk on her lips. “You were really only interesting when you could play Quidditch,” the boggart said. It didn’t just look like Carmilla—it had her voice as well.

The boggart Laura had faced during third year had been her father, saying he didn’t want a witch for a daughter. She had learned to face that—had learned to turn it on its head, to turn it into the father she knew and loved, who armed her with bear spray to ‘fight that magic stuff.’

This was so much worse.

“And now,” the Carmilla-Boggart continued, “What even are you? You should have heard yourself. Mum, save me,” she mocked, her voice pitching as though trying to do an impression of Laura. “See, I got what I needed from you. Did you really think I liked you? Hm? Did you think I might… what? Want to be with you?” she laughed.

Laura trembled, her face hot, her eyes pricking. It's not real. This is what boggarts do. It's not real.

“With someone as weak as you? Someone who can’t even do basic charms? Someone who’s barely even a witch? And, let’s be real.” She stepped close, hissing her words coldly into Laura’s ear. “Do you seriously think I’m some filthy dyke like you?”

“Shut up!” Laura snarled, the response so instinctive that she couldn’t hold it back. She knew she was arguing with a figment, with something that had no actual power over her, but she couldn’t help it. There were tears pricking, hot and angry, in the corners of her eyes.

She had never been ashamed that she liked girls. Never. Even when it had been a question, when it had been confusing and new and she had recalled the opinions of unpleasant neighbors, she had never wished the feelings away. Dad hadn’t even been surprised. He’d been supportive from day one, and Perry and LaFontaine right along with him.

Somehow, the idea of Carmilla mocking her for her feelings bit at something she had never felt in herself.

“R-Riddikulus!” she cried, but the boggart merely snapped from in front of her to just over her left shoulder, like it had apparated.

“You don’t belong here, you know. And soon, everyone will know what you are, once you take the O.W.L.s: just a tiny, helpless, mudblood.”

“Hey!” snarled a new voice. The boggart spun, and, with a crack it transformed. A shimmering, yellowed orb hung silently in front of her. She frowned. “Riddikulus!” the same voice said.

The boggart fell, a cockroach on its back, wriggling on the ground at her feet. Remus guided it back into the trunk with a flick of his wand, and locked it shut for good measure.

The younger boy turned back to her, his shoulders rising and falling with his breaths and his eyes huge. He stuffed a thick wad of parchment, which looked as if it had been folded many times, hastily into his back pocket.
“How did you get in here?” the wizard in the portrait cried. Both Remus and Laura ignored him.

“How did you get in here?” the wizard in the portrait cried. Both Remus and Laura ignored him.

“Sorry,” said Remus. “I was passing by, and I thought… I didn’t realize it was a boggart.” He gave his head a shake, his eyes still wide and startled. “I probably should have known.”

“It’s fine. It was… nothing. Thanks for trying to help, I guess.”

There were tears in her eyes, and she didn’t want him to see them.

Remus hovered, uncertain. “She doesn’t think of you like that, you know,” he murmured.

Laura paced to the window, more to hide her face than anything else.

“Right,” she managed. Her pulse was still too quick for comfort, as she mulled over his words. And then she frowned for a different reason, glancing back at him. “Wait, she’s… talked about me? To you?”

She could have imagined it, but she thought she saw Remus give a silent laugh.

“Laura, if I didn’t stop her, I’m fairly certain you are all she would talk about. It’s actually somewhat annoying.”

Laura’s cheeks went pink. “Well,” she said carefully, “She’s been avoiding me for over a month.”

“I never said she wasn’t an idiot,” said Remus. He shook his head. “If you ever want help with the boggart, let me know.”

And then he turned, and was gone.

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“How didn’t you tell me?” Perry complained.

The holidays had commenced yesterday, and the castle was almost abandoned. They had no classes, and LaFontaine had gone home to be with their parents, which meant Perry had suddenly become very eager to follow Laura everywhere she went—be it the toilets or even the Quidditch pitch.

Since that first night, Laura had succeeded only at getting the boggart to appear in the shape of a Dementor. Her spell-casting had been a complete failure after that, and Remus had been relegated to helping her contain the creature after each failed attempt. For some reason, he came willingly when she asked, and was very friendly about the whole thing. In exchange, she did not ask him why his greatest fear appeared to be the moon (it had shown up three times, now, when the boggart faced him directly).

He had gone off for Christmas with the others, though, heading to the Potters’ place with Sirius and Peter in tow. With Perry as her own personal shadow, Laura had faced the alternatives of not practicing at all, or practicing with Perry. She had chosen the latter.

“Really, Laura, this is impressive. I mean you set this up yourself? And you have books and everything… I’m so proud.”

“Mm-hmm,” Laura hummed, shifting on her feet. She didn’t want to be asked any further questions about her motives.

“A boggart to practice on as a Dementor… it’s brilliant, really. How far have you gotten?”
“Um, not far at all, honestly? I’ve done, y’know, basic research on the spell and Dementors… but I haven’t been able to actual conjure a Patronus. McGonagall wasn’t wrong about this being difficult magic.”

“I’d be amazed if you had,” Perry agreed. “This sort of magic isn’t even in the curriculum. Seventh years can pick it up, from what I understand, as more of a term project than an actual assignment… and most students leave Hogwarts without knowing how to produce one. They’re not very useful, after all, without Dementors floating about. I suppose that’s… changing… now… So, there’s all the more reason to learn it!”

She went first, though Laura would have been surprised if she hadn’t. Unlike Laura, her boggart did not first transform into something else, but appeared immediately as a Dementor, unfurling like smoke up into the air before them. Laura, biting back a tiny surge of jealousy, stepped clear to give her friend the floor.

“*Expecto Patronum!*” said Perry, enunciating as clearly as if she were using Floo Powder. Nothing happened. The Dementor towered closer as she backed away, giving her wand another flourish.

“*Expecto Patronum!*”

Again, nothing. She had nearly backed into Laura, now, and her face had gone a nasty shade of green.

None of Laura’s previous attempts had worked. She raced through her memories, now, settling on the day she had gone to Diagon Alley with her father, eleven years old and just learning she could do magic. How it had felt like there were endless possibilities lined up in front of her.

“*Expecto Patronum!*” the Dementor swung its great, hooded head in her direction. The tip of her wand glinted silver, and went out, like a failed *Lumos* charm. The creature paused, and with a sickening twist in her gut, Laura recognized its behavior—distinctly boggart-like, and not at all how a Dementor would regard prey.

It was trying to decide if it should shift forms.

“*Riddikulus!*” she cried, switching tactics. It collapsed into an empty cloak, and she tossed it back into the trunk with another flick of her wand.

“That was… horrible,” Perry murmured. She was clutching her chest, her hair slightly frazzled.

“Did you see something?” Laura asked.

Perry frowned and gave her head a little shake. “No, no… I just felt awful. I still do, a little… It was like nothing in the world mattered, like I had just realized all the times I was happy were fake…” She shivered. “Do you see something, Laura?”

Laura sat on the edge of one of the desks, toying with her wand. “I saw my mum. The day she died.”

The color slipped from Perry’s face. “Oh, Laura… I’m so sorry. Does it… is it like that, then, every time?”

“No. Just the first time. In Hogsmeade. It was a real one—not a boggart.”

“Before everyone hid in the shops?” demanded Perry, horrified. “Laura, you never told me you actually faced one of them! I thought you had just sheltered with everyone else!”

She had left off that detail, in her re-telling of the story. It had saved her from explaining it, and
prevented any chance of Carmilla’s presence being brought up.

“Well, no wonder you want to learn to fight them.”

They packed up, neither having the energy for another round—though Laura and Remus had spent most of their sessions going through about three tries apiece.

Perry, who liked to keep a strict schedule, insisted that they reserve their practice for the evenings. She dragged Laura to the library each morning, as cheery as always while she laid out the ‘lesson plan’ for the day. Laura, who kept hearing the Carmilla-Boggart’s taunting voice telling her she was going to fail the O.W.L.s, kept her protests to a minimum.

Mostly, she missed Quidditch. With the castle nearly abandoned and an icy chill over the grounds, there was no way she was going to be allowed out for a solo flight, and no way she was going to find a teacher willing to give up their evening to babysit her. Even McGonagall had limits on how far she would go for Gryffindor.

Laura could always risk it, of course. It wasn’t as if her late-night visits to the pitch had ever been allowed.

Yet, she did not go; not the first day, nor the second. It was the third, two days before Christmas, before Laura glanced out the library window and saw a moving shape, a small, black dot cut out against the pale sky.

Laura checked her watch.

She cleared her throat. “I’m gonna go grab a snack.”

“Uh-huh,” Perry muttered, not looking up from her work. She was labeling a very detailed star map, and there were flecks of red ink on her cheek, like especially vivid chicken pox. Laura didn’t pause to comment. She held her breath until she was through the doors and dashing down the corridor.

The air was crisp with winter, and the ground thick with a new dusting of snow that had fallen that weekend, but Laura didn’t mind. She tucked her scarf tightly up around her chin on her way across the grounds, her eyes locked on the pitch.

There was another reason she had not slipped out to play.

“Carmilla!”

The other girl slowed her flight, dipping low to skim the grass and come to a halt, hovering just in front of Laura. Her eyes were wide, her hair billowing freely over her shoulders.

“Laura? Wh-what are you doing out here?”

She laughed, the sound nervous and sharp. It echoed. “Um, the same thing you are?”

“They told us to stay in the castle,” said Carmilla. She was still frowning.

Laura, an eyebrow raised, kicked off to put herself level with Carmilla. She circled her slowly.

“Again… you’re here, too?”

Carmilla looked down and gave her head a little shake. “Right. I was just…”

“Breaking the rules?” Laura teased. Carmilla said nothing, and Laura’s pulse hummed with fresh uncertainty, thumping behind her ears. She circled closer. “Okay, fine,” she declared, struggling to
keep her voice steady. “I’m just going to ask: what’s wrong? I know we haven’t been able to sneak out recently, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still tell you’re avoiding me. And everything was fine before those Dementors showed up in Hogsmeade, so I can’t help but think it’s something to do with me.”

The other girl’s mouth had been open, preparing to answer, right up until Laura’s last word. She snapped it shut with an audible click, her shoulders stiffening and her eyebrows twitching together.

“With you?” she stammered. “How can you—what do you think you did?”

They had drifted low, now, both of their feet brushing the field.

“I don’t know,” sighed Laura. She couldn’t meet Carmilla’s eyes. “I was just… really messed up. And you—you were completely fine.”

“Laura,” Carmilla said firmly. It took Laura a long moment to lift her head, and when she did, she found the other girl’s dark stare waiting earnestly. She shook her head. “I was not fine.”

“You weren’t?”

Carmilla sucked in a breath, glancing to the side and giving her head another fraction of a shake. “Not at all,” she said, and her voice shuddered. “I told you I didn’t want to talk about it—but that was because of me. Not you.”

“Then… why have you been avoiding me?”

Carmilla reached up to scrub a hand through her untidy hair. “Because I didn’t want to talk about it,” she repeated.

Laura swallowed. “Carm, I wouldn’t have said anything; not after you asked me not to.”

The nickname took them both by surprise. Carmilla’s eyebrows lifted, and Laura blushed.

“But, did you—I mean, you don’t want to talk about it, now, do you?”

Carmilla shook her head.

“Okay. Can we just… go back to normal, then? Please?”

Something crossed Carmilla’s expression like a shadow, her features sharp and pale. “Laura… why did you really come out here, today?”

She tilted her head uncertainly, a shiver cutting through her. There was no way Carmilla knew how she felt. Was there? “I—I wanted to talk to you, and I figured this might be the only chance to get you alone.”

“What did you want to talk about, though?”

“This,” she said. “Us. I mean, y’know, how things weren’t okay.” She was stammering, very aware of the way Carmilla’s stare was piercing through her, searching for… something. “I didn’t like it.”

“That’s all?”

There was definitely a flush rising in her chest. Her ears were hot, and she hoped her hair was hiding them well enough to keep Carmilla’s suspicions down.
“Yeah. We’re—we’re friends, aren’t we?”

Slowly, Carmilla nodded.

“Well, then… I’m allowed to care if things are messed up between us. Because we’re friends. And that’s—that’s what friends do.”

If Carmilla found anything odd about this, she did not call Laura out on it. She nodded, and then leaned back, rising a few meters up into the air. “So. Did you want to… practice?”

Laura’s relief was instantaneous, her smile spreading wide. “Yes. Yes—definitely. But I also, um, I had something for you.”

Carmilla’s eyebrows rose. She dropped back level with Laura, circling her slowly.

“Um, here.”

She dug a small box out of her inner robe pocket, thrusting it out into the air between them. Carmilla had to fly close—very close—to collect it. Their fingers brushed, and Laura’s hand lingered in midair for a lengthy beat after Carmilla had pulled away.

It was poorly wrapped, merely packaged in a page from the *Daily Prophet* rather than in actual gift paper. Laura bit her lip as she watched Carmilla’s fingers nimbly pull apart the spell-o-taped edges.

Carmilla pulled out the necklace by its chain, the pendant dangling as she lifted it in front of her face. She frowned.

“It’s a Quaffle,” she said.

Laura tucked her hair behind her ear. “Yeah. You don’t have to wear it, or anything. I just wanted to get you something. For—for Christmas.”

“I don’t have anything for you.”

“That’s okay; I didn’t expect you to get me anything. I just—I always get something for my friends.”

Carmilla blinked at the pendant again. It swiveled in front of her, suddenly seeming cheap and foolish. Laura didn’t know what she’d been thinking—why she had expected Carmilla to want it.

“If you don’t like it, that’s fine. I picked it up in Hogsmeade, and it wasn’t—I mean you can return it. Or just not wear it… It’s really fine.”

Carmilla shuffled on her broom, adjusting her feet and carefully removing her grip from the handle. With shaking hands, she undid the clasp, tugged her hair over her shoulder, and affixed the chain about her neck.

The pendant fell neatly against her chest.

She met Laura’s nervous gaze, her eyes gleaming.

“I love it.”

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It was the following night that Laura finally found success with the Dementor training.
Perry wasn’t even jealous, she was so in awe of the silvery, shapeless mass that had burst free of Laura’s wand and hit the Dementor full-force.

“What memory did you use?” she asked, as if hoping to pick up tips.

Laura merely shook her head, her smile controlled. She wasn’t about to share. “Oh, it was… nothing specific. Maybe it’s just the holidays, you know. The happy spirit.”

“Well, you did seem cheerful at dinner,” Perry conceded.

She squared off with the trunk and flicked her wand.

The Dementor rose back into the room, giving Perry it’s full attention while Laura leaned against the wall in the back corner, wand held loosely at her side. Perry tried three times, the Dementor advancing ever-nearer, and none of her declarations produced so much as a wisp.

A clawed hand slipped free of the cloak, reaching out towards her face… and Laura jumped in between.

The boggart hesitated too long, pulling up short in its Dementor form, trying to read what would most traumatize her at the moment. She felt a fresh surge of triumph.

“Expecto Patronum,” she snapped, without thinking about much of anything. The silver mist launched itself at the creature without hesitation, and Laura blinked as the boggart tumbled over backwards, tripping on its robes, her focus instead on the Patronus. It had legs, and a head, and a long tail—but it was gone into nothingness before she could recognize the animal.

“We should go back to the tower,” she urged Perry, once she had secured the boggart once more. The other girl was trembling, her cheeks slick with tears. She had entirely missed Laura’s second success, and Laura was not about to brag.

Perry didn’t protest as she was guided through the winding castle corridors, Laura side-eyeing her nervously as the increasing weight of the silence bore on her. She had never see Perry like this—not in the five years she had known her.

The common room was mercifully empty, just as it had been for most of the holidays. Laura hurried to prod the fire with her wand, urging it to a merry crackle. She settled Perry in the squishiest of the armchairs and rifled through her bag, coming up with a half-eaten bar of chocolate, which she handed over at once.

Mechanically, Perry chewed on it, staring at the fire.

Slowly, the color returned to her face. “I don’t even know what we’re fighting about, anymore,” she murmured. “I haven’t got a clue. And the things I’ve done—I yelled at them, over some stupid dinner party… said horrible things.”

Laura didn’t have to ask to know she was speaking about LaFontaine.

“I’ve ruined everything,” whispered Perry. “I thought I was losing them, and I then I went and made it happen, all on my own.”

“Hey, LaF will come around. Maybe if you… if you apologize, they’ll want to talk about it. You’ve both done things you regret. What really matters is that you two… care about each other.”

“And what if how I care about LaFontaine… isn’t the same as the way they care about me?” Perry
challenged. Her voice had gone very small.

Laura sighed. That was the real question, wasn’t it?

“This is good,” sighed Perry, staring at the remains of the chocolate bar. Some of it had melted on her fingers, but she didn’t seem bothered. “Is it from Honeyduke’s?”

“It’s muggle chocolate,” said Laura, smiling faintly.

“It’s impressive. I’d almost think it had magical properties—I do feel much better. That could be the fire, though.”

“Actually,” said Laura, pleasantly surprised to find that she knew something Perry did not, “Chocolate is a natural remedy against Dementors.”

“Fantastic,” said Perry, taking another bite. “Shame it can’t be used to ward them off, like garlic against vampires. Would save us a lot of trouble, really.”

Laura felt a very sudden chill.

“Perry…” she began. Her next words were slow, measured. “Dementors only go after things that have souls, right?”

“Hm?” Perry looked away from the chocolate. “Oh, yes. They can’t really see, after all. Not the way we can.”

“So, how exactly would a Dementor react to someone… without a soul?” Her mouth had gone very dry. “Like, say, a vampire?”

At this, Perry frowned. “That’s an excellent question. I mean, I imagine it would be like coming up on a wall. Though, they may be able to sense that there was a being, there—they can hear sounds well enough—or perhaps they would be natural enemies, it’s hard to be sure with dark creatures. You could always ask Professor Durkin, I bet he’d know.”

She went back to eating the chocolate, and then shuffled off to bed a few minutes later, seeming in much better spirits as she wished Laura a Happy Christmas Eve through a yawn.

Laura muttered a reply, her eyes not leaving the fire.

She had just had a terrible thought.
The More You Know

Chapter Summary

In which Laura muses on her theory... and big decisions are made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Winter of 1975 (Fifth Year)

It snowed heavily, the first week in February. The Hogwarts grounds were coated in more snow than Laura had ever seen, and Herbology lessons were cancelled while pathways were carved and the greenhouse roofs were cleared of their dangerous loads.

Rumors had circulated quickly about Greenhouse Two caving in, with the second years’ mandrakes perishing in the avalanche, but Laura was unable to tell the accuracy of this from merely peering over the parapet outside the Owlery. She did have a fairly decent view of the tunnel Filch was attempting to dig, however. He was surrounded by four-meter tall walls of snow on either side. They kept collapsing behind him, leaving him perpetually stranded and increasingly irate.

“You know, it’s not nice to laugh at others’ misfortunes,” Carmilla commented blithely. She had her back to the grounds, her arms braced out on the stones and her ankles crossed. She smirked at Laura as she pulled back from the overlook.

“It’s Filch,” Laura argued. “He once told me he missed hanging students by their toes, because he had ‘so enjoyed the screams.’ And I was a first year.”

Carmilla chuckled, shaking her head. While Laura had bundled up, her chin tucked into her Gryffindor scarf and her fingers lost in thick, raspberry-pink mittens, Carmilla had barely bothered to throw on a light parka. Her neck was bare—save for her Quaffle necklace—and the whole of her pale profile was hazy against the white backdrop.

“I bet vampires don’t get cold.

“You have a fair point,” Carmilla mused. She turned in place, the pirouette putting her shoulder-to-shoulder with Laura, and glanced down. “I wonder how much faster that would go if McGonagall just went out there and flicked her wand.”

“Hey, now, don’t say that too loud. Wouldn’t want anyone getting ideas. I’m still hoping we’ll get tomorrow off Herbology, too.”

Carmilla scoffed. “I don’t think we’ll ever be that lucky. But hey, if we are, maybe we should use the free time to trek to the nearest muggle village and buy one of those lottery tickets you were telling me about.”

Laura bumped her shoulder into Carmilla’s. “I don’t think they take silver sickles.”

“Hm. Well, we’ll have to improvise, then.” She quirked an eyebrow. “How difficult do you think it would be to swipe a few?”
“You know, Carm, it’s not very nice to steal,” Laura teased.

“We’ll obviously pay them back after we win.”

Laura laughed. “Okay, I think I need to remind you about that whole ‘odds’ part.”

“Oh, no, I remember. But we just determined that, in this scenario, we would be unbelievably lucky. Ergo, we would clearly win. How much do these things pay, anyway?”

“Most likely around one hundred thousand pounds or so.” At Carmilla’s blank look, Laura added, “Like thirty thousand galleons.”

Carmilla’s eyes went wide. “Now you’re talking.”

Laura watched Filch progress another few meters, the walls around him managing to stay upright. He was about halfway to the greenhouses, now, where Hagrid was using an oversized tree branch to swipe snow off the glass.

“What would you buy?” Laura asked curiously. “Y’know. If you had that kind of money?”

Carmilla mused for a minute, resting her elbows on the parapet and stretching out her legs behind her like a cat. “Hm. A little flat in London, over Diagon Alley. Books. Lots of books… and an owl.” She stared longingly at the birds circling the Owlery, and the ones ruffling their feathers in the gaping windows of the tower. “I’ve always wanted an owl.”

She glanced at Laura as if just realizing the very personal nature of this admittance, and then cleared her throat.

“Anyway. What about you?”

“Well, I think I’d give most of it to my Dad. But, I’d like a new broom—I mean, I love mine, and my Dad got it for me, so I’ll probably keep it forever regardless… but what I wouldn’t give for a racing model, like the ones the Harpies ride… Oh! And I would keep enough that I could buy everything on the Trolley. Just… all of it. One time. To know what that was like.”

Carmilla laughed. “You would. And then you’d get a stomach ache trying to eat it all yourself.”

“Hey, now. I’d share. C’mon, what’s your favorite sweet? I’ll make a note—then I can get extras.”

There was a flash of something in Carmilla’s eyes—some emotion that was gone too quickly for Laura to properly label—and then she shrugged, as languid and collected as ever. “Peppermint Toads are okay, I guess.”

“What, no Bertie Bott’s?”

Carmilla’s expression soured, her nose wrinkling. “I’ll have you know I got a dog drool one of those as a kid, and I swore I’d never risk it again. It looked like coconut. It even smelled faintly like coconut.” She shuddered. “It was not coconut.”

Laura had to cover her mouth with her hands to muffle her laughter, her shoulders shaking.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t hurt yourself, there, creampuff,” Carmilla muttered. She was smiling, though.

“I mean I don’t blame you,” Laura managed, her voice still slightly on edge and breathless. “But ‘dog drool’ seems like a very specific flavor to… to recognize. I mean, how would you even..?”
“There was a texture, okay? And a smell that didn’t exactly come until after I had bitten into the—okay, you know what, I take it back, I don’t want you knowing this story.”

Laura had dissolved into another fit of laughter, slumping against the outer wall of the Owlery and clutching at her sides.

“I’m sorry,” she sputtered. “It’s just… your face when you said it, and your expressions... you tell it like a war story. How old were you, anyways?”

Carmilla crossed her arms. “I was five. Maybe six. And we had a cocker spaniel that happened to drool quite a lot.”

That was all it took.

Laura’s laughter pulled up short, like someone had slammed on the brakes. The last of it caught as a hiccup in her throat.

There was a great deal that she knew about Carmilla, these days: How she could name every star in the major constellations without blinking. How she spent her free time engineering a hybrid locator charm for some project Remus and his friends were working on. How frustrated she got when anything did not come innately to her—though almost everything seemed to. How she loved philosophy and could spend hours prattling on about ancient men and theories that Laura did not understand (but she listened anyway, nodding along just to see the way Carmilla smiled).

In all of this, the question of Carmilla’s family had never come up.

Laura had not pushed—had not seen it as her place to drag the details from her.

She knew, all too well, how that felt.

Now, she held her breath, her teeth digging into the inside of her lower lip. She had no idea what to say—there was no question she could ask, no segue she could take—and it was unclear if Carmilla had meant to reveal that detail or not. She was staring out across the grounds with a faraway look in her eyes.

Laura had thought a great deal about Carmilla’s past, in recent weeks. She could not ask, could not be sure, but she suspected that Carmilla being a vampire was tied to the reason she lived in an orphanage. It made Laura’s heart ache, to think of Carmilla facing all of that alone—only talking about it in brief, uncertain spurts, like she were afraid even a mention would drive Laura away.

“It’s not like we’re going on field trips every other week,” she had mumbled, once, when Laura expressed her astonishment that Carmilla had lived in London for years and never been to the Globe.

It left Laura with a thousand questions; none of which she dared voice.

“My mum died when I was five,” Laura blurted. Her horror rose as swiftly as her blush, but it didn’t stop the rest of her thoughts from tumbling free: “I don’t like to talk about it, and I hate it when people ask, so I never—I mean, that’s why I never ask about yours. Your parents. And you… you don’t have to say anything, now. This isn’t me trying to guilt you into talking, or anything. I just—I thought you should know.”

Carmilla had turned to face her in the midst of her babbling, and was now chewing on her lip.

Laura desperately wished she had just stayed quiet.
Carmilla’s eyes shimmered, and she blinked several times in rapid succession. “I—I can’t talk about it.”

“And that’s fine!” Laura rushed, her hand flying out and landing on top of Carmilla’s with a hurried squeeze. The other girl glanced down at the contact, and then back up at Laura. They both froze.

Laura slipped back, letting her hand settle on the stone a respectable distance away. Even inside the mitten, her palm tingled with phantom warmth.

“That’s fine,” she repeated in calmer tones. “You don’t have to say anything. And if you did, of course I would listen, but I just—I know what it’s like, having people pry at your life. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

Carmilla’s fingers twitched, her eyes back on the hand that Laura had grabbed.

“Oh! Laura… hi.”

She jumped and spun in place. Beside her, Carmilla was still, her eyes darting once to the Owlery and then hurriedly to her own shoes.

Davie and Melanie were hovering awkwardly in the archway. Melanie was clutching a letter, and Davie was scrubbing the back of his neck with a gloved hand, obviously flustered.

“We, uh, didn’t think anyone would be up here this early.”

Melanie hit him lightly on the shoulder, jutting her chin out with a meaningful look and tugging him into the Owlery. Laura, her ears tingling, could hear them whispering rapidly to one another. A moment later, an oversized barn owl took off in flurry of feathers.

“Bye!”

“See you at practice, Laura!”

Laura cleared her throat. “Right, yes, bye!” she managed to croak after them. They were already gone by the time her words had reverberated back off the stone.

Beside her, Carmilla kicked at a chunk of ice, her lips pursed.

“We should go,” she muttered, with a shrug. “Before anyone else sees us.”

“Right,” Laura agreed, shoving her hands deep into her pockets. Her breath slipped out hot, billowing into a cloud. “I mean, I don’t think they’re going to go around telling people we’re friends or anything. If you’re worried.” She shrugged, “Davie and Melanie are okay. But, I could… I could talk to them. If you wanted.”

Carmilla hunched her shoulders, traipsing down the stairs. “If it matters to you. They’re your friends, not mine.”

“Oh. Right. I just—I meant, I didn’t know if you were worried about it—getting back to your friends.”

Carmilla stopped, and Laura nearly ran into her back. She turned in the narrow spiral, looking up at Laura with a frown. The angle was new, and unexpected. Their place on the stairs put Laura a head taller than Carmilla—a view she was entirely unfamiliar with.

Her hair looked very soft today.
“My friends?” Carmilla echoed.

Laura cleared her throat, setting one foot back on the stair behind her in a half-hearted attempt to increase the distance between them (and maybe rescue her heart from the cliff’s edge it appeared to be racing towards).

“Um, yeah. You said—we talked about how we didn’t want our friends to think we were cool, now. With your reputation, or whatever, and my friends being so…” she didn’t have a good word. She shrugged helplessly.

“We never had this conversation,” said Carmilla.

“What? Of course we did.” Laura raced back in her memory, to the first night of the school year, “We met at the pitch. I said I didn’t care what my friends thought, and you argued, and we agreed we would just leave everyone out of it.”

“No,” Carmilla insisted, shaking her head, “I said that your friends would care, and you agreed with that, and told me you didn’t want them to find out.”

Laura sputtered. “But you—you definitely didn’t want—I thought you said—” she let out a dramatic huff, stomping in place like a toddler, “You’re not making sense.”

Carmilla clenched her jaw, glaring at a spot on the wall. “Well, it doesn’t matter. Ask your friends to keep their mouths shut. Or don’t. I don’t care.”

“Whoa, whoa, hold on,” Laura snapped, catching hold of Carmilla’s shoulder as the other girl started to descend the stairs. “You can’t just drop that information and then walk away.”

“Why?” the question was a challenge, and it glinted like fire in Carmilla’s eyes as she finally looked back at Laura.

“So?”

“So, I’m tired of pretending not to like you whenever we’re not alone! And sure, it might be easy to lie to LaF and Perry while they’re too busy making out in every corner of the common room, but that doesn’t mean I like it. In fact, it’s awful. And so is not talking to you when we’re literally sharing a workbench in Herbology.”

She leveled her stare on Carmilla, struggling a moment to catch her breath.

“You—you do still consider us friends, right?”

The question seemed to astonish Carmilla. She leaned backwards, gripping the handrail as she raised an eyebrow. She nodded carefully, the way someone might nod if they weren’t quite sure they had heard the question right, but were going on about eighty percent confidence.

Laura blew out a breath, “Then I want you to help me in Potions. Because I’m going to fail.”

Carmilla stared.

“That—that was a very abrupt change of topic,” Carmilla managed. Her voice was uneven, and her left eyebrow seemed to have permanently affixed itself halfway up her forehead.
“Nope. It’s highly relevant. I’m cashing in the favor you owe me.”

“…The favor?”

“For all the free Quidditch lessons,” Laura explained, nodding sagely, “I think I deserve some Potions tutoring.”

Carmilla’s lip twitched. “And for that I am being shackled to your desk in the dungeon, I assume?”

“Yes.”

Carmilla made a little humming noise, and started down the stairs again. Laura followed, her heart still working overtime.

When they reached the bottom, Carmilla nodded towards her path back to Ravenclaw Tower, a soft smirk playing across her features. “So. I guess I’ll see you in class, then,” she said.

With my friends, Laura finished in her head.

She nodded at once. “Yes. Yes, you will.”

It took every fiber of Laura’s being not to sink up against the nearest wall until she was around a corner and safely out of sight.

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The Ravenclaw vs. Gryffindor game arrived before their next Potions lesson, and Laura was almost grateful not to run into Carmilla the morning of the match. She was certain the words ‘good luck’ would have crossed her lips, if she had, and she already felt like a bad enough captain as it was—she didn’t need to add ‘actively hoping for the success of a rival’ to her list of things to feel guilty over.

“We have a lot to make up for,” she said shortly, clasping her hands together in the Gryffindor changing rooms. The team was huddled around, already cloaked in scarlet. Their expressions, like her own, were grim. “We have trained hard,” she said, wishing it didn’t sound like she were trying to convince herself, “And we are better than they are. I want us to show them—and the school—what we’re made of.

“Johnson, don’t hesitate if you see the Snitch. We need a win, right now, more than we need to risk tacking on extra points. We can play that hand against Hufflepuff, but only if we succeed here. Carter, Pearce, remember the plan. Stick to mid-field, and go for the Quaffle. Potter, take point. Chester, Gambol, follow his lead, and watch for Bludgers.

“Let’s do this.”

They broke, though the only one who showed her any kind of support was LaFontaine, who offered a cheery thumbs-up. Laura did not share their excitement.

With good reason.

It took approximately three minutes before Melanie was carried off the field, sporting a broken arm. Dale Perkins shot Laura a cruel grin as he curled past the Gryffindor hoops.

“I can do you next, if you like!” he called, twirling his Beater’s bat.

“Maybe you should guard your own damn players!” Laura snarled back, gesturing furiously up the pitch to where Carmilla had just been forced to dodge both Bludgers.
Pearce and LaFontaine were getting revenge for Carter, and Laura’s blood felt hot with guilt for wanting to call them off.

A whistle blew, and she scrunched up her face in frustration as Madam Hooch ordered the penalty.

Laura fumed at herself. She almost never swore. LaFontaine teased her for it, Perry called it ‘honorable,’ and Carmilla thought it was ‘cute.’ (She had said so. Laura still didn’t know what to make of that.)

In the stands, the Gryffindors booed. Laura wished she thought they were booing the call, rather than her.

When the Quaffle was tossed into Carmilla’s arms for the penalty shot, Laura’s already low spirits plummeted. There wasn’t any good way this could end. Her thoughts were already racing frantically through the potential outcomes—what if Carmilla showed her up and she entirely lost the respect of not only her team but the whole of Gryffindor (and the school)? What if she played well and Carmilla got mad at her, or accused her of being too cocky? She’d practically already made the claim, and it wouldn’t be too much of a leap—

The Quaffle landed in her gloves with a thud. She had dove to the right hoop without thinking, her body taking over where her mind had left off.

Laura’s startled gaze jumped from the ball up to the girl that had thrown it.

Carmilla tipped her head, tapping her forehead with two fingers in a mock salute. Her smirk said this isn’t over in all of the best, most playful ways.

Laura’s heart did what should have been an anatomically impossible summersault in her chest.

“Hollis!” Potter shrieked, almost falling off his broom as he swept by with his arms swinging madly, “Throw the damn Quaffle!”

Right. The match.

She threw him the Quaffle, and he pelted off up the pitch, a gorgeous raven-haired girl in blue on his tail.

Now was definitely not the time to be having this thought… but, then again, when had her intrusive daydreams about Carmilla ever been polite, or timely?

She really wanted to kiss her.

It was helpful for Laura’s wandering mind that Carmilla spent the majority of the game in possession of the Quaffle. It meant that Laura’s attention, across the next two hours, was usually where it was supposed to be. In fact, it wasn’t until the other girl chucked the Quaffle to Darby—the new third-year Chaser—that Ravenclaw managed to put any points on the board.

Laura cursed the miss (internally this time), and scanned the pitch for the Seekers. They were still making their slow laps of the pitch, high over everyone’s heads. There had been no sign of the Snitch, yet.

Gryffindor was up by fifty points, but Laura hardly felt like it mattered. In Danny’s era, they would have had more by this time and everyone would have been flying cohesively. They would have been sticking to the plan—a tangible, well-practiced plan—following Danny with the sort of implicit trust that Laura had never inspired in anyone. The majority of today’s game had been spent shuffling the
Quaffle back and forth uselessly.

Potter’s windswept hair looked less effortless and more haphazard when Ravenclaw called a timeout and both teams dropped to huddle on the snowy field.

“At this rate, we’ll be here until nightfall,” LaFontaine complained, “And you keep almost hitting me! Stay on your own side of the pitch! I told you, Karnstein is mine.”

Davie glared, his mouth twisting into a snarl. Laura cut in before he could spit out an inevitable retort.

“Leave Karnstein alone.” She ignored the aghast look on LaFontaine’s face, “I want you on the goalposts, helping us score. Pearce, get up in Perkins’ business. I don’t want him getting any more shots. Potter, we need more points. You’re favoring your left; switch it up. Johnson… for Merlin’s sake, find the Snitch.”

Another hour ticked past. Potter scored on two fouls they were granted for Bludgers shot directly at Laura (both missed), and by noon it had begun to snow again, just as Gryffindor reached an eighty point lead. Carmilla had gotten her first goal past Laura, solely because Laura had been distracted; the Seekers had gone into a frantic diving match, racing the Snitch. Johnson had nearly had it, but a Bludger from the Ravenclaws had forced him to dodge off course, and the Snitch had been lost in the chaos.

The only good that had come from it was that Martin had berated Perkins in the time-out that followed. He had very nearly taken her out with his stunt, and she was very interested in keeping her limbs intact, from what Laura overheard of her shouts.

She smirked at Perkins, as they rose back into the air to resume play. He glowered, shot another Bludger at her, and earned Gryffindor another ten points. Martin’s face was nearly purple with fury when she swept by.

Laura was about to gloat, about to call something cheery at Perkins about the rulebook, when a gasp swept through the pitch, the sound as distinctive as a cringe.

She caught sight of a plummeting figure just as Hooch’s whistle shrieked.

Carmilla.

Laura was gone from her post before her thoughts had even caught up with what was happening, arriving on the field only moments after Carmilla’s body had rolled to a stop. Her broom was in tatters, the handle ripped messily in half and tail twigs strewn about. They crunched under Laura’s scrambling boots.

“Carm!” Laura gasped. She tossed her own broom aside, dropping to her knees.

Carmilla was splayed in the snow, her limbs askew and her eyes closed. Her lips were parted, and the snow under her head was blotched with red.

Several dull thuds around them indicated the arrival of teammates—her own or Carmilla’s she did not know or care. Hooch pushed her way through the throng just as Carmilla’s eyelashes fluttered.

The world froze. Laura’s heart stuttered back to life.

“Well, that was a kick,” Carmilla muttered, tenderly touching the side of her head, where a large welt was already forming. She grimaced, “Ow. Okay, more than a kick.”
“Carm. Are you okay?”

“Alright, give her some space, everyone back up—back up, I said!”

Hooch had cleared a path for Madam Pomfrey, who joined Laura at Carmilla’s side and began fussing at once.

“Anything broken?” the nurse demanded, her hands quick and demanding as they seized Carmilla’s wrists and searched their way up to her shoulders. She turned Carmilla’s head with a touch to her chin and scowled at the bruise there. A thick trail of blood was working its way down Carmilla’s cheek, smearing in her hair.

She was icy pale. Paler than Laura had ever seen her. Veins stood out black in her neck.

A shudder wracked her slender shoulders.

“Hospital Wing,” Pomfrey barked. Carmilla started to push herself upright, and the nurse’s eyes blazed, “Sit, sit! For heaven’s sake, why do they always try to walk…”

She conjured a stretcher with a quick flourish. Carmilla shot it a dark look… and then turned her head back towards Laura.

Their gazes connected, and Laura was suddenly aware that she was gripping Carmilla’s arm. Her knuckles were white, the desperation tight in her muscles, and it took great effort for her to relinquish the hold as Pomfrey urged the other girl onto the stretcher.

Carmilla kept staring at her.

Laura kept staring back.

She only looked away when Dumbledore himself appeared between them, severing the connection and drawing all of Laura’s attention simultaneously.

“I will accompany you,” he declared in that breathy way of his that no one ever questioned. Madam Pomfrey nodded primly, and it was Dumbledore himself who hovered the stretcher to life and marched them away and out of the pitch.

Laura could hardly breathe.

She had halfway risen, halfway edged herself towards following, when a hand landed on her shoulder.

“You have a game to finish, I believe, Miss Hollis.”

It was Professor McGonagall. Laura had not noticed her arrival, though she supposed she had not noticed much of anything happening around her.

Full awareness of her surroundings returned with a pop, like the adjusting of eardrums at changing altitudes. Everything was, all at once, exceptionally loud and bright.

And, she realized, there were a lot of eyes on her. LaFontaine, Carter, Potter—they were all standing by, uncertain and gaping. The Ravenclaws watched with narrowed eyes, a few of them muttering to one another.

McGonagall’s grip on her shoulder squeezed. “She’ll be fine,” she promised, and her voice had a tenderness to it that Laura had never heard.
With a shaky nod, Laura stepped towards her fallen broom. The crowd rolled back like a tide to let her through.

“Um, Laura?” LaFontaine began hesitantly.

“Carter’s back in,” Laura said stiffly. She couldn’t look at her friend, their Beater’s bat still dangling in their grip. “Let’s finish the match.”

No one questioned the order. Melanie, her arm healed and her energy restored, hopped on her broom and soared up with the rest of the starters.

LaFontaine traipsed to the sidelines alone.

Carmilla’s back-up was a poor replacement. He could barely keep hold of the Quaffle long enough to make it to the hoops, leaving Yeller and Darby to take most of the shots. It didn’t matter, though; Laura’s raging pulse made her reflexes quicker, rather than pulling them off-course. She batted the Quaffle away with ease, her eyes still blazing and her shoulders tense.

She could feel the threat of tears in the back of her throat, but they did not rise any further, and, after twenty score-free minutes, Johnson caught the Snitch.

Laura had never cared less about a victory.

She did not change with the team. She tossed her broom into its storage slot and breezed straight through and onto the grounds, ignoring the nervous looks that followed her.

The crowd was cheery, on the way back up to the castle. The Gryffindors were waving their banners and chanting the final score (260-20), and none of them seemed the least bit concerned about the Ravenclaw Chaser that had been mowed down to make way for the victory. Even the Ravenclaws did not seem as affected as Laura thought they should be—every snippet of conversation that Laura overheard was a lament over the loss, rather than concern for the health of their best player.

By the time she arrived at the Entrance Hall, her fury had tripled, throbbing in her chest like a caged animal. Her ribs felt tight, constricting, and her pulse was pounding in her ears, drowning out everything else.

She didn’t hear someone calling her name until a hand had caught her by the wrist and drawn her to a startled halt.

“Laura,” said Remus.

She was one turn away from the Hospital Wing, her breaths coming in furious pants, and she glared as she jerked her arm free of his grasp.

“You can’t see her,” he warned, as she started forward once more.

She did not stop, but she did slow her pace, allowing him to match her stride up the corridor.

“Like hell,” she muttered.

He shook his head, “Dumbledore’s orders. They aren’t going to let you in.”

They rounded the corner. The Hospital Wing doors were closed—a sight Laura had never witnessed—and she froze in place, ice creeping down her spine.

“Why not?” she bit out, spinning on Remus with venom that she knew, somewhere, in the back of
her mind, that he did not deserve.

“Dumbledore’s orders,” he repeated.

There was a cave-in, in her chest. Her eyes darting back and forth between Remus and the doors. “She’s—she’s okay, right? She was fine on the pitch—she was talking and everything, she can’t be __”

“She’s going to be fine,” he assured. His eyes, usually sharp in their paleness, were cloudy. He was pale in a sickly, weak sort of way.

“And how do you know that?” she challenged. “Did they let you in?”

He hesitated, not meeting her eyes, “Dumbledore told me, on his way back to his office.”

Laura let this sink in, for a lengthy beat, and then stormed forward and threw her fist repeatedly against the locked mahogany doors.

If there was one authority figure she trusted implicitly, it was Dumbledore. Even his word, though, could not take away her desperation to see Carmilla with her own two eyes. She doubted there was anything that could do that.

It was a long moment before the door creaked open, and even then it was only just enough for Madam Pomfrey to peer down her nose at Laura. Laura could not see past her, though she tried.

“I want to see Carmilla,” she demanded, her arms crossed and her expression grim with defiance. She was aware that she was being petulant, that she looked the very picture of the child that had told her father she would not eat asparagus no matter how he dressed it.

She did not care.

“Miss Karnstein is not accepting visitors.”

Laura scowled, “Well, when will you let me see her?”

“You may see her once she is released,” Pomfrey snipped back, her glare never faltering.

“And when will that be?”

She was wearing on Pomfrey’s patience, and she knew it. The woman sniffed, “I’m afraid that is none of your business. Now, off you go, Miss Hollis. And you, Mr. Lupin.”

She shut the door smartly in Laura’s face. For a long moment, all she could do was stare. She did not step back, though the wood was mere inches from her nose.

“C’mon,” said Remus, tugging at her elbow.

Laura almost caved. Almost trailed after him back up to Gryffindor Tower.

But they would be celebrating, there; they would be drinking Firewhisky and chanting her name and raving about their chances of taking home the Cup this year.

Everyone would be happy.

And Laura was not happy.
She felt like there was a pit opening in her gut.

“No,” she muttered. She pressed her back into the wall beside the great, closed doors and let herself slide down onto the floor.

Remus raised an eyebrow, “What are you doing?”

“Waiting,” Laura declared. She folded her arms.

Remus regarded her for a long moment, and then he heaved a deep sigh that made his narrow shoulders rise and fall.

“You should really tell her,” he said.

And then he walked away.

///

Evening fell, the shadows running long in the corridor, and Laura let her eyes slip shut again. She had been napping on-and-off for the past several hours, ignoring the chill of the stone against her back.

Her anger, and subsequent panic, had both dulled into a nagging ache in the back of her skull. They had not gone, not by a longshot, but they had become bearable. She no longer felt a desire to punch something, for instance, and the insane desire to injure herself so that Madam Pomfrey would be forced to admit her had abated.

She was just drifting back into an uneasy sleep when the clicking of heels snapped her eyes open.

She had hoped for Dumbledore, or perhaps McGonagall—anyone that had the authority to grant her access to Carmilla—and thus she felt a sinking stone of disappointment in her stomach when she recognized the approaching figure as Perry.

“Laura,” she greeted, twisting her fingers anxiously as she came to a halt. Laura didn’t meet her eyes.

“I, uh, thought I might find you here. Can I—?” she gestured at the floor beside Laura.

Laura shrugged.

Perry sat, crossing her legs, and then she cleared her throat and stammered, “Is there, um, anything you would like to discuss?”

Like why you’re sitting outside the Hospital Wing? Laura filled in the rest of the question. She scowled.

“No.”

“Well…” Perry teetered. She spun a bracelet around her wrist. Laura had never seen it before; it was probably a new gift from LaFontaine. “You seem to be having a… well, a strong reaction to today’s match, and I thought—well, actually, LaFontaine thought—”

“What?” Laura snapped. “What did LaF think?”

Perry shrunk, but recovered quickly. She straightened her shoulders and leveled Laura with a hard look, “You know, you could have told us,” she declared hotly. “We are your friends. You could have mentioned that you liked her.”
“I don’t,” Laura argued, her cheeks heating.

“Laura.” Her name was almost condescending off of Perry’s lips, pitying in its disbelief.

She huffed out a sigh and stared down at her own lap, “We’re just friends.”

It was true. They were just friends.

That was probably all they’d ever be.


All Laura could manage was another shrug.

“Laura?” she waited until Laura had lifted her eyes before she followed up with her question:

“Exactly how long have you two been… friends?”

“I don’t know,” she muttered. “Like… a year… ish.”

Perry drew in a breath, “A year?” Her voice rose with the words, making them an accusation. As Laura’s shoulders hunched, though, she cleared her throat and dropped the volume, “Okay. A year. That’s—okay. So you’re friends with Karnstein. Carmilla. That—I mean, she’s… nice? To you?”

Laura’s whole face was burning. Her ears rang, the tips tingling as painfully as if she had stayed out too long in the cold.

“She’s my friend, Perry.”

“Yes. Yes, you said… that. Right.”

Laura tugged at the sleeves of the Quidditch robes she was still wearing. There was mud spattered on the cuffs, dry and cracking. “I was going to tell you guys.”

“When?” Perry asked, and had the decency to look abashed, as though she had not meant to let the question escape.

“Well… I sort of asked her to start helping me out in Potions,” Laura admitted weakly. She crossed her arms and sighed, “This really wasn’t how I wanted you to find out.”

“To find out that you were friends with Karnstein,” Perry said.

Laura shot her a look.

“Yes.”

“Just clarifying,” said Perry, raising a hand in defense, “I did want to warn you, though, that, well—LaFontaine is less sure how they feel about this than I am? I mean I’m all for giving… Carmilla a chance. If you like her—that is, if you’re friends with her, now—” she huffed out a breath. “Well, then I want to get to know her.”

Laura’s eyes flashed at the implication. “And LaFontaine doesn’t?”

“Well…”

“They just nearly killed her! They owe her an apology.”
Perry swallowed, holding her hands out in front of her in an attempt to be placating, “LaFontaine needs a little more time to understand—”

“To understand that they can’t just shoot Bludgers at people who don’t even have the Quaffle just because they don’t like them? I had just told them not to go after her!”

Perry cringed. “Okay, yes, that’s very fair. I just think with a little time—”

Laura didn’t get to hear what Perry thought ‘a little time’ would do for their situation. The doors to the Hospital Wing opened without warning.

Carmilla took two steps into the corridor and froze, reeling a pace backwards and almost hitting the door as it swung shut behind her.

“Laura?”

Her eyes darted from Laura to Perry and back again, her cheeks oddly, unfamiliarly pink.

Laura scrambled to her feet. “Carm! Are you okay? They wouldn’t let me see you.”

“You… have you been out here this whole time?” Carmilla stammered. She glanced at Perry again, who had just stood and dusted herself off behind Laura.

“Yes,” said Laura impatiently, “But are you okay?”

Carmilla blinked at her, a frown settling across her brow, “I—yeah. I’m fine.”

Perry cleared her throat. “Well then,” she said carefully, “I’ll be going. Laura, I’ll see you back at the Tower. Carmilla, I’m glad to see that you are… doing better.”

She breezed past, shooting Laura a knowing look as she went. Laura bit her lip and willed herself not to flush.

“That was… friendly,” Carmilla managed, after an extended, awkward silence. “So. She knows, then? About… about us?”

Laura’s heart leapt at the word, even if Carmilla didn’t mean it the way Laura wished she did.

“Yes. They, uh, they both know.” She cleared her throat, “Everyone probably knows.”

Now she did flush. Perry would not be the only one to make guesses about Laura’s feelings, and she knew it. She was horribly, embarrassingly obvious.

Even Carmilla probably knew.

She tried not to think about that.

“This school is quite the rumor mill,” Carmilla commented. Her tone was calm, but her posture was shifty. Nervous. “You’re… okay with this?”

“Of course,” Laura insisted, “I don’t care what people think.”

“And what about your friends?”

Laura couldn’t help the wince that followed, “Well. Perry’s cool.”
“And the other one isn’t.” It was a statement—not a question.

She nodded, chewing her lip, “I’m really sorry.”

“For what?”

With an angry creak, the Hospital Wing doors opened once more. Madam Pomfrey paused in the opening, her lips pursing into a dangerously thin, white line that would have rivaled even Professor McGonagall’s strictest glare. “Does this look like a social lounge to the two of you?” she barked, making shooing gestures with her hands.

Glancing at Carmilla, Laura felt a bite of fear jump in her throat. She half expected the other girl to make some comment about returning to their respective dormitories—saying she needed to rest, or that Laura needed to be with her team.

Something, anything that could pull them apart before she was ready.

Before she was satisfied that the Carmilla in front of her was solid, and real, and safe.

Instead, Carmilla caught Laura’s wrist and gave it a careful tug. Laura fell in line at the other girl’s side as easily as chasing the lazy arc of a Quaffle. And, as they made their way down the corridor, cutting through one of the hidden tapestry passageways and up several flights of stairs, Carmilla’s grip slid lower, tracing across Laura’s palm until their fingers were twined together.

She squeezed.

They came up into the open air of the Owlery Tower, padding across the snow-washed stone to the parapet. They rested their linked hands together on the low wall, neither loosening their hold on the other.

Laura shivered as she worked to contain her breathing.

This didn’t mean anything. She couldn’t get her hopes up just because they were holding hands—friends held hands all the time, didn’t they? This wasn’t even the first time she and Carmilla had done this… it was just the longest they had maintained the contact.

Laura stared out at the grounds, unsure if she could control herself if they met each other’s eyes.

“What are you thinking, right now?” Carmilla asked. She ran her thumb over Laura’s.

That was not a question Laura could answer honestly.

She shook her head.

“Well, what were you going to say?” Carmilla tried, instead, “Before Pomfrey interrupted us?”

“Oh.” Laura sighed, “I was trying to apologize. What happened during the match—” her voice buckled, a flicker of anger shivering back to life in her chest.

She saw Carmilla’s shattered broom again, her still body lying prone on the icy field.

“It was just Quidditch,” Carmilla insisted, tugging her carefully back to the present, “I’d be more upset if you went easy on me.”

“I told LaFontaine to leave you alone,” Laura muttered. “And it wasn’t entirely strategic—but it mostly was! And they didn’t listen to me because they didn’t know we were friends, because I still
hadn’t told them, and they were being petty. Which is why you almost died!”

Well, not really, she corrected internally.

Laura’s research suggested that vampires required specific means to actually die. A wooden stake to the heart, beheading—even a fire could do it, were it not extinguished quickly enough. There had been a great number of illustrations in the books Laura had read through. Her heart had ached with fear at each new story of persecution, torture, and execution, because, with each picture, she envisioned Carmilla in the vampire’s place.

She dared to glance at the other girl, now, her heart still thudding too quickly for her own good. She found Carmilla’s head bowed and her eyes closed.

“You shouldn’t worry about me,” she mumbled.

“But I do,” Laura insisted. She was thinking of more than just Quidditch—not that she could explain that to Carmilla. She couldn’t bring herself to confirm what she knew in her heart.

What if Carmilla were upset that she knew?

“I’m still sorry,” she added, her voice low with seriousness, “And your broom…”

“It was a school broom.” She regarded Laura carefully, her eyes narrowing ever-so-slightly, and took a long breath, “Laura? Did you really sit outside the Hospital Wing that whole time?”

They were still holding hands, and the warmth of the connection stretched up her arm and through her chest, like a flickering flame. Like a physical manifestation of courage.

“I might have.”

Carmilla hesitated, her hair falling over her eyes.

“Why?”

The guarded edge of the single word made Laura’s throat tighten.

“Because you were hurt. And they wouldn’t let me see you.”

Laura traced her eyes carefully over Carmilla for the first time since they’d left the Hospital Wing corridor. The bump on the side of her head had healed, and the skin was as smooth and unblemished as ever. The pink of her cheeks had not been an illusion of the light, either—it was still visible out here in the open, wintery air.

At once, Laura understood. To heal, Carmilla needed fresh blood. That was why Laura had not been permitted into the Hospital Wing. And, of course, all of the staff were aware of her situation. She felt a fresh surge of respect—and warmth—towards Madam Pomfrey. Her irritability with Laura had merely been tied into her desire to protect Carmilla’s secret.

Laura caught the movement, as Carmilla reached up to the touch her Quaffle pendant. She had not realized the other girl was wearing it, but there it was, twisting tentatively between Carmilla’s thumb and forefinger.

“You know you didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course I did,” Laura scoffed, her hand instinctively squeezing Carmilla’s. Both of their gazes dropped down to their intertwined fingers. “I care about you.”
Carmilla shifted, drawing in a breath that Laura knew was unnecessary. The air between them seemed heavy, where a moment ago there had been a chill.

Resolve shivered in Carmilla’s eyes, flickering in and out. A candle in a storm.

“Laura?”

Her breath caught in her throat, her shoulders tensing, “Yeah?”

“There’s something—” Carmilla bit her lip, a terrible vulnerability carving across her features, deeper than ever before. The blush in her cheeks was dark, startling, and there was a shudder in her eyelashes as she blinked.

Laura saw the moment the candle blew out.

Carmilla tugged her fingers free of Laura’s as she whispered, “Never mind.”

The loss of contact panged in her chest like a distant drum, her fingers chasing but falling short.

“Carm?” Laura asked. She reached up and touched Carmilla’s chin. She barely had to push for cooperation—Carmilla turned easily, facing her with shimmering eyes.

_Gryffindors are brave_, Laura told herself. She blew out a breath.

And pushed up onto her toes.

Pressed her lips to Carmilla’s.

Everything was soft, and wonderful, and warmth burst in her fingertips like fireworks but she didn’t dare move her hands from where they were frozen at her sides, her eyes shut and her heart pounding in her throat.

Carmilla’s lips moved under hers. One heartbeat. Two heartbeats.

And then everything went horribly still.

Laura pulled back, her arms wrapping about herself instinctively, hugging tight. There was a black hole expanding out of her chest, aching and cold at the edges, because Carmilla’s eyes were still closed, her lips pressed tight together and her jaw stiff.

_Please, no._

“Laura… I can’t.”

_No, no, no._

“I’m sorry,” Laura sputtered, “I shouldn’t have—I didn’t ask, and I don’t know what I was thinking—”

Carmilla curled away like an ember leaping from the fire, the life in her cheeks snuffed out as quickly as it had arrived. She was ghostly pale, now, radiating discomfort the way an ice sculpture expelled cold.

“—I won’t do it again, I promise. I can’t—I don’t want you to think that I—I mean, we’re friends, and y-you don’t even have to say anything, or do anything. Or, or if you don’t want—I mean, I can just go, if I made this weird—”
“Please, stop,” Carmilla whispered. Her voice was taut, a string on the verge of snapping.

Laura fell silent, tears pricking in her eyes.

The physical distance between them was barely anything. Laura could have easily reached out and touched the loose curls of her hair, and the memory of thinking that very same thing their first real night on the pitch haunted at the edges of her memory.

She couldn’t reach out, though—not any more than she could have done that night.

The silence spoke of a chasm between them, greater than any touch could breach.

“Are you mad?” she whispered.

Carmilla’s head lifted from where it had fallen. “No,” she said, the shake of her head almost imperceptible. All Laura heard was ‘yes,’ wrapped in a lie that she had to bite through her teeth.

She nodded dumbly, her head bobbing like a buoy at the mercy of the sea.

“I’m sorry,” Carmilla added half-heartedly. Her jaw was tense.

Everything hurt.

“Can we still be friends?” she pleaded helplessly into the growing silence. Her voice had crumbled. It was a croak, unfamiliar even to her own ears. Before Carmilla could answer, she was forcing out the rest, desperation bubbling unhindered to the surface, “We can pretend this never happened! Please, Carm. Please.”

Carmilla’s hand twitched, her shoulder tugging back as though she had halfway considered reaching out, but thought better. Of course. That would be everything, now. Second-thoughts on every word, every movement.

But.

“Okay,” said Carmilla. Her eyes were locked on her feet, but her nod was solid, this time. Tangible in two slow rises and falls, “This... never happened.”

The relief was a warm blanket, stepping in from the cold. A mug of hot chocolate in shivering fingers.

Laura could only nod. She was out of words, and there was a sob itching at her that she did not dare let escape.

Without another word, without so much as a parting glance, Carmilla stepped away from the parapet, slipped down the stairs, and was gone.

The hole in her chest ever-expanding, Laura let her go.

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Carmilla paused in the corridor outside the Ravenclaw common room, pressing her back into the chilly stone wall and reaching a trembling hand up to brush at her lips.

If she knew, she thought brokenly, If she ever knew the truth of you…

The sob rose hard and fast in her throat, and she did not fight back. Head in her hands, she slid down
to the floor and gasped raggedly into her clutched hands, the tears falling without restraint.

*She deserves so much more than you.*

Chapter End Notes

I know the month-long waits between updates are slow, but I promise I will someday be on a quicker schedule. Life has just been rather chaotic recently.

If you want to pop by with questions (or motivational speeches) feel free: *jg-firefly*
Sky's Still Blue

Chapter Summary

Laura has regrets, but life keeps moving forward.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from the Andrew Belle song of the same name.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spring of 1975 (Fifth Year)

“That’s the best one, yet,” Carmilla commented, peering into the cauldron at the edge of their workbench. Laura’s potion was a murky white, more of a silver than the creamy brew in the other girl’s cauldron, but Carmilla was right. It was the closest she had come to the correct finished product.

“Thanks,” said Laura. There was no enthusiasm in the word.

This was the third time Carmilla had sat with her in the dungeon classroom. That did not mean that things had been normal.

She was not even sure what normal was, these days, unless normal was LaFontaine glaring at the two of them, or Perry being overly-cheerful, or Carmilla maintaining a controlled distance between them.

Where it would have once been normal for them to sit together with their shoulders brushing, or their hands touching, Carmilla kept her stool well apart from Laura’s. She held her hand out to ask for ingredients or tools, rather than plucking them away herself…and she was stiffer, her smiles as forced as Laura’s own.

Laura couldn’t bring herself to ask Carmilla if she wanted to be free of her. She suspected that this—the two of them working together—was an obligation rather than a friendly gesture.

What if she gave Carmilla that last out, and she took it?

After all, they no longer met alone for late nights on the Quidditch pitch or the Astronomy Tower or the Owlery; there was already so little left to cling to. Laura knew she was being desperate, but there was an aching chasm in her chest and she just didn’t care.

She should never have kissed her.

There had been those frozen seconds, that blissful pause when Carmilla’s lips had responded to the pressure, had shifted under her touch and kissed back. The memory felt like a teasing lie, like she had made it up in a dream. Laura had to keep reminding herself that the reality she lived in was the one in which Carmilla froze in horror, mumbling that they could still be friends.
“Very nice,” Professor Slughorn commented, when he passed their table, and Laura couldn’t bring herself to be offended by the surprise in his voice as he appraised the cauldron.

He moved on to LaFontaine and Perry.

“How is that extra credit project coming, then?” he asked cheerfully.

Having mastered the Draught of Peace weeks ago, Slughorn had allowed the both of them to pick a project of their own to fill the time before exams.

“We’ve settled on Amortentia,” Perry declared brightly. Her attempt to garner Slughorn’s attention succeeded for a fleeting moment before his gaze flicked back to his favorite student.

“Ah, yes, a challenging brew, but I’m sure you’re up for it, eh? Is this your first go?”

LaF nodded, scowling. “It’s trickier than I was expecting.”

From across the table, Laura could smell the distinct, acrid scent of burnt hair. There was something else, too, like spoiled milk. Carmilla, who had lifted her head to listen to the conversation, wrinkled her nose.

Laura looked away quickly, her gut doing the exact opposite of the pleasant swoosh she’d come to associate with Carmilla. This was more like the unexpected jolt of car brakes slamming.

“No bother,” Slughorn assured them with a wink. “A few more tries and you’ll have it!” He glanced back to Carmilla as he added, “And of course you’ll both be attending my little Easter soiree?”

LaF nodded at once, their hand drifting to land on top of Perry’s. “And I can still bring a guest, right, Professor?”

“Oh, yes, of course,” he said, his eyes twinkling. He nodded to Perry, first, and then Laura as well—with only a little hesitation.

Laura’s fictional car crashed into a tree.

As if Carmilla would ever invite her.

A small, foolish part of her, though? The part that still jumped when Carmilla entered a room, the part that still spent far too long watching her across the Great Hall during dinner?

It hoped.

“We’re going to study in the library,” Perry announced, as class drew to a close and they cleared their cauldrons. “You are welcome to join us, of course.”

The offer was for Carmilla, Perry’s expression neutral but her eyes brimming with concern. Laura focused on her bag, pretending to struggle with one of the straps so that she did not have to look at any of them.

“Oh. Um. I have plans, actually,” Carmilla mumbled.

Laura said nothing, keeping her head down as they left the dungeons and Carmilla drifted off on her own path. She was left to trail LaF and Perry to the library, her stomach roiling.

“So, what is this Easter party?” Perry asked, once they had settled around their usual table. Her smile was too bright, too eager, and the way she opened her book (with a loud slam) suggested she was
not as thrilled about the situation as she’d have them believe.

At least she’s going, Laura thought irritably.

“It’ll probably be just like the New Year’s party I took you to. Lots of food, people trying too hard to network, and Slughorn bragging about all the famous students he’s taught.”

“Hm. Yes, the food was quite good last time,” Perry acknowledged. “And it will be so nice to have you along, this time, Laura!” she added.

“Who said I was going?” she scowled over the top of her History of Magic notes.

Perry shot LaFontaine a nervous look, but LaFontaine’s shoulders had gone stiff, and they were studiously ignoring the both of them.

“I just mean you’ll be going with Carmilla,” Perry offered. She twitched ever so slightly, “That was what was… implied.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think she’ll be inviting me,” Laura muttered, “But please, go ahead and bring me some leftovers.”

She heard the anger, the bitterness, in her own voice. She had not even tried to bury her frustration. What was the point?

It was the truth.

Perry primly set down her quill. “Laura… did something happen between you two?”

Laura’s face flushed against her will.

“Wait, did she hurt you?” LaFontaine demanded, and their sudden interruption made both Laura and Perry jump. LaF was clutching their quill so tightly that it was a wonder it had not snapped. Their eyes were narrowed.

“No,” Laura muttered. She tucked her hair back behind her ears, “She just—she doesn’t like me.”

She heard, rather than saw, as Perry gave a quiet little cough. Her eyes were too busy digging a hole in the table.

“And by like you, you mean—”

“Yes, Perry,” Laura ground out, sighing so loudly that several heads turned at nearby tables, “You know exactly what I mean.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” LaFontaine scoffed.

Laura’s face burned hotter, “Maybe I don’t want your input,” she snapped, her eyes finally lifting to shoot daggers at them, “You’ve already made your opinions on Carmilla clear.”

They had. LaFontaine had refused to apologize to Laura over the Bludger they’d shot at Carmilla, and had been giving her an icy shoulder whenever the other girl was so much as mentioned. It had been setting Laura’s teeth on edge for the past two weeks.

LaFontaine looked affronted. “Fine, I don’t like her—but this is why! She’s messing with your emotions. She’s trouble.”
“She’s not messing with my emotions,” Laura argued. Something cracked hollowly in her chest, “She’s been… very clear.”

“Did she tell you that she doesn’t like you?” Perry asked. Her tone was gentler than LaF’s, almost coddling, and it somehow managed to press Laura closer to the precipice of her self-control.

“No! I tried to—it doesn’t matter. She doesn’t want me. End of story.”

“But, Laura, the way she looks at you—”

“I don’t want to talk about it!” Laura exploded. This time the whole library seemed to go still, all eyes locking on their table.

Laura’s face felt like it was going to be permanently red. She stood up in a flurry of lost study papers and tumbling textbooks, intent on getting as far away as possible, as quickly as possible. If anyone at the school was unaware of her feelings, they were living under one of the Walking Stones in Hagrid’s garden, and she did not feel like providing any more fodder for their curiosity.

Madam Pince was already swooping across the room like a hungry vulture, so she gathered the remainder of her things with a wave of her wand—the imperfect spell managing to rip the spine of a book and spill several blotches of red ink onto the floor—and fled out the doors before she could have her neck wrung by the furious librarian.

She would normally have felt guilty, abandoning her friends to face the impending wrath, but right now she could not find it in her heart to care—not about them, not about anything.

Laura did not even notice where her footfalls were taking her until she found herself traipsing across the Entrance Hall in a beeline for the doors.

For the first time in over a year, she was relieved to find the pitch abandoned when she stepped out onto the field.

She did not go to the goal posts, or even collect one of the Quaffles. Instead, she set herself on a breakneck race around the perimeter, pressing herself low to her Cleansweep as she took the corners hard. She pretended the moisture in her eyes, leaking down her cheeks, had come from the wind.

Carmilla did not like her.

This wasn’t a surprise, or it shouldn’t have been. Had she not been telling herself, for months, that this was a dangerous crush? That she should keep her expectations low?

The boggart had warned her that Carmilla could never be interested.

And what was Laura, after all?

She was barely a witch. She needed extra help in nearly every subject. All of her charms were clumsy, half of them more dangerous than they were helpful. She was useless in Transfiguration, where she was the last remaining student unable to vanish their kitten. She was only going to pass Potions because she had three pairs of eyes looking over her shoulder to make sure she didn’t blow anything up. There were only a handful of defense spells she knew, and she relied on them too heavily, making her ‘predictable,’ according to every competent teacher they’d had thus far in the subject.

She was a terrible captain. Gryffindor had only won their last match because of Carmilla’s injury, which was hardly the honorable way to go about anything, and hardly a strategy for the future. She
was unfocused, and uninspiring. The team didn’t want to follow her—they fought amongst themselves, argued over the calls, outright yelled at her when they disagreed with her methods.

She was failing as a friend. Perry was walking on eggshells around her, and Laura couldn’t seem to contain her temper. LaFontaine was barely speaking to her, and everything they said had Laura flaring up only to spend hours afterwards questioning every word that had left her mouth. And Carmilla—

Laura had kissed her.

Without her permission.

Everything—everything—was falling apart.

She nearly crashed into the Hufflepuff stands when someone’s shout swerved her out of her arc. She could barely see for the tears flooding her vision.

“Laura!”

Of all the people Laura would have expected, LaFontaine was low on the list. They were also not alone. They had seemingly brought the whole of the Gryffindor team with them.

“Wh-what is this?” Laura asked, not quite settling onto the field. She hovered just over the ground, her toes hanging down to brush at the grass.

“Practice,” said Potter with a flippant toss of his hair, “LaF said you needed us.”

Laura let her eyes shift to her friend, who was biting the inside of their lip and hunching their shoulders.

“They did?”

The ten students, starters and back-ups alike, all nodded as one.

Laura scrubbed quickly at the dried moisture on her cheeks, and clapped her hands. “Okay. Yes. Cool. Let’s… run some drills.”

As they rose up into the pitch, Laura met her friend’s eyes, and gave the faintest of nods. LaFontaine, their lip quirking in a hesitant smile, nodded back.

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“I just know they’re up to something no good,” Perry muttered. She was watching, with narrowed eyes, as Potter and his friends dug through a massive stack of books in a dusty corner of the library.

Remus looked more at ease than Laura had seen him in weeks, though there was a long, thin scar across his face that had not been there a week before. She was sure Perry had noted this, as well.

“Maybe they’re just studying,” LaFontaine suggested hopefully. They looked panicked at the mere suggestion of Perry wanting them to help interfere; the last time Perry had forced them into Prefect duties, they had wound up with detention themselves.

They didn’t like to talk about it.

Perry sniffed. “Those four don’t study. And it’s not as if they have O.W.L.s… No, they’re plotting something.”
“You could always ask them,” Laura offered. At Perry’s raised eyebrow, she elaborated, “Carmilla once told me that Potter was so arrogant he’d confess right to McGonagall’s face just to see if she’d believe him.”

“How well does Carmilla know Potter?”

They were trying. They really were. Laura still shot them a withering look.

“I think she got it from Remus.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Perry put in with a nod, “I always forget those two are friends. Has she ever told you how they know each other?”

Laura pictured an abandoned classroom. Carmilla and Remus leaping apart, red-faced.

“No,” she said, forcing her shoulders into as carefree of a shrug as she could manage.

Across the library, Peter Pettigrew gave a sputtering choke, hacking up what looked like the remains of a salad. Perry glared at the unsavory display, her eagle-eyes sweeping about in search of Madam Pince, but the librarian was, for once, not in earshot.

The three other boys burst into muffled fits of laughter. Sirius nearly fell off his chair.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Perry muttered. She tossed down her quill and got to her feet. As she breezed through the sea of students, their noses all buried in books or pressed to essays, Laura caught a glimpse of a girl standing uncertainly in the open doorway.

Catching her eye, Carmilla gave a small nod of greeting and then drifted through the tables, her hips swaying as she dodged around the hodge-podge of uneven seating. She dropped into the free chair without asking, earning a jump and a glare from LaFontaine. Neither of them spoke to the other.

When Perry returned it was with a dramatic huff. Her hair flounced as she dropped unceremoniously into her chair.

“Well, that was useless,” she declared.

“Why? What did they say?” demanded LaFontaine.

“They said they were getting ‘hands-on experience’ with animagi transformations. Absurd. I told them they weren’t to be eating in the library, and they laughed at me.” She adjusted her sleeves with a little harrumph. “Oh. Hello Carmilla.”

Carmilla made a little grunt of acknowledgment, flicking through a book.

“Did you give them detention?” Laura asked Perry. She glanced back across the room, watching as the boys merrily huddled over one particularly thick spellbook. They didn’t look any worse-for-wear from Perry’s scolding. Potter was grinning, his hair as tousled as ever.

“No, because they’d already cleaned up the mess and for all-intents-and-purposes they really are just studying. They’ve got more books on that table than I think I’ve ever taken out.”

The admittance sounded like it hurt her.

“What are they studying, anyway?”

Perry glowered at the papers stacked in front of her. “Animagi,” she admitted.
Perry, in the last week of February, began devising color-coded study schedules. These were terrifying, but also marvelously useful, and both Laura and LaFontaine were careful not to complain when she presented them with their personalized copies.

They had been cleverly bewitched (“Extra practice!” Perry proclaimed) such that they highlighted the more important bits in flashing ink. Laura’s, for instance, had a large section set aside for Potions, with arrows directed at it and changing text. It alternated between berating her lack of knowledge on the properties of unicorn tail, and proclaiming that she needed at least an ‘Exceeds Expectations’ if she expected to go into any sort of profitable field.

LaFontaine, while Perry was distracted by a group of First Years attempting to smuggle contraband Firewhisky up to their dormitory, scoffed and showed theirs to Laura. The block for Charms reminded them ‘you can’t brew up a cleaning spell!’

The Exam schedules were posted the first week in March. McGonagall frightened them all with a class-long lecture on the many ways to be caught cheating, while Slughorn prattled on about the variety of potions they might be asked to brew, and reminded them about the necessity for proper maintenance of their cauldrons and equipment. (“Don’t want to find a hole in the bottom of your pewter during an exam, oh-ho no!”). Flitwick provided an exceptionally long list of charms they might be asked to perform in their practical section. Of all their teachers, only Binns seemed unfazed by the impending O.W.L.s. He continued to drone on about goblin wars as though it were any other time of year.

They no longer had time to practice the Patronus Charm—or anything else that would not be on the exams. Laura barely had time to set aside for Quidditch practice, which now felt more like a hassle than an escape.

“Come on, hurry up,” Perry complained, one day in mid-March, as they were packing up their books after Transfiguration, “We’re going over the basic household spells tonight, and they are critical. These tests are weighted, you realize, and if you can’t even handle the basic questions, you’ll never make it through. That’s why we’re starting on these first.”

Laura was almost startled when Carmilla fell into step beside her as they left the classroom. She blinked at her, clutching her bag just a little tighter at her side.

“Are you… going to study with us?” she asked.

She regretted the question at once, the moment it echoed back to her own ears. Carmilla rarely joined them, and when she did it was hardly ever because she planned to actually study. She usually propped up her feet on a nearby table and buried her nose in a book, seeming so casual, so disaffected, that it hurt to focus on her for too long.

Laura almost preferred when she stayed away—both because it was less of an ache on her heart and because it made things calmer between her and LaFontaine.

(It still did not stop Laura from missing her when she was not around.)

Carmilla merely shrugged. She burrowed in the front pocket of her bag, extracting what looked suspiciously like Laura’s own study schedule. On closer inspection, it had ‘Carmilla Karnstein’ printed in Perry’s perfectly neat script across the top.

Carmilla smiled sardonically, “Your friend is deeply persistent.”
Laura glanced ahead, to where Perry and LaFontaine were leading the way, lost in their own conversation. LaFontaine was waving their hands with whatever speech they were giving, and Perry was looking on with sparkling eyes and a small, enraptured smile.

“She made you a whole schedule?” Laura asked, incredulous even though the evidence was staring straight at her.

Carmilla nodded. “I was a little alarmed, actually, that she knew all of my classes. But then I figured she probably just asked you.”

“Oh.” Perry had never directly asked, but Laura supposed she had talked about Carmilla enough for the other girl to get the gist.

That was embarrassing.

They reached the library, and Carmilla claimed a chair next to her at their table as if it were the simplest thing in the world. Laura didn’t miss the way she shifted herself back, though, the moment their elbows accidentally rubbed while unloading their bags. Carmilla leaned decidedly away, pushing her chair back and crossing her legs so that an ankle rested on the opposite knee.

For once, she didn’t open a random philosophy book or collection of poetry. Instead, she unraveled a scroll of her own neatly written notes and began to pore over them.

Laura, consulting her own study guide, scowled at the list of basic charms that Perry had decided she most needed to work on. It seemed to contain all of the charms she had ever learned. A bitter taste in the back of her throat, Laura stood and made her way into the stacks, looking for the Standard Book of Spells collection for years one through four.

When she returned to the table, Perry and Carmilla were engaged in hushed conversation. They fell silent the moment she appeared, with Perry smoothing down her robes and crisply flipping to the next page in her book. Carmilla maintained a perplexed furrow in her brow, while LaFontaine continued to glare determinedly at the book open in front of them.

Laura caught Carmilla staring, as she settled into her seat and opened the first of her books. The other girl looked away quickly.

Great, she thought. They had been talking about her.

And, if Carmilla’s uncertain expression was any indication, it had not been positive.

With this thought in mind, it was almost impossible to focus her energy on studying. Perry wanted her to list out all the charm definitions and uses, with wandwork specifications and inventors, but she found her thoughts drifting after every few words that she managed to scrawl out, wandering back to play through the horrible timeline that had brought her to this moment.

Carmilla being here, sitting at her side and studying at the same table as her friends, was supposed to be a good thing. Laura had thought it would be happy—that her biggest concern would be getting LaFontaine and Perry on board with the whole Carmilla-is-not-actually-evil line of understanding.

Certainly, Perry had jumped straight into the deep end on that one. She was practically to the brownie baking level, if the personalized schedule was any indication. And LaF was less bitter comments and more extended silences these days.

Really, it was Carmilla herself that was the real problem.
Or Laura.

She wanted back the casual nights on the pitch, or the stolen evenings hiding together at the top of one of the many towers. When it had just been them, Laura had felt so certain. She had looked at Carmilla and believed that maybe this beautiful girl could want her back.

All of those things—all of the conversations and the hand touches and the quiet stares—they had been simple in a way Laura had not appreciated.

And now everything was complicated, and weighted with the memory of her worst decision ever.

Laura made it through the list, though it took her far longer than necessary and certainly caused her greater pain than she would have liked. Perry would have called her dramatic, but her head was pounding in a very real way when she finally set down her quill.

The action startled the others, who were, by now, engrossed in their own studies. Any conversation between LaFontaine and Perry had lulled across the hours, and it wasn’t as if Carmilla had parted her lips to so much as cough since Laura had rejoined the table.

Around them, the library was packed to the brim with fifth and seventh years, their expressions a mixture of grim determination and outright panic. A tall blonde girl in the corner was sniffling to herself, and a boy Laura recognized from a few of her classes was squinting at a dark red Remembrall, his jaw clenched.

Carmilla had stiffened at Laura’s sudden movement, eyeing her warily over the top of her book—for she was reading now, and it looked to be for pleasure rather than for studies, though Perry had said nothing to scold this behavior (either because she did not feel comfortable or because she respected anyone that would willingly read ‘Notable Wizarding Influences on Early Muggle Philosophy’ in their spare time).

She packed quickly.

“I think I’m going to go work on some of the practical stuff,” she said. She wasn’t sure yet if it was a lie, knowing only that she wanted to get out of the library and away from the heavy air that always settled over her whenever Carmilla was nearby. She felt watched, like her every move was a dangerous indicator of her unreciprocated feelings. Like they were never going to get back to just being friends because she had ruined that, too.

She ruined everything she touched.

Carmilla frowned, “Do you want help?”

_It’s just pity, it’s just pity…_

“No,” she said, and, when she hurried away, no one followed her.

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It was breakfast, two days later, when Carmilla dropped smoothly into the empty spot beside her at the Gryffindor table. Laura froze, oatmeal slipping off her spoon and back into the bowl.

“What are you doing?”

“Joining you,” Carmilla answered briskly. She even smiled, greeting Perry as she dumped brown sugar onto her oatmeal.
“Why?” Laura asked, before she could stop herself.

Perry made a little sound in the back of her throat, clattering her silverware loudly and pretending to need something in her bag. Laura just stared at Carmilla blankly, waiting for an answer.

Carmilla frowned, that same uncertainty from the other day returning. It was a shadow in the cool brown depths of her eyes. She bit her lip.

“I mean, I can go. I just thought—”

“No,” said Laura, barely stopping her reaching hand before it grabbed Carmilla by the sleeve. She dropped it limply into her lap, swallowing. “It’s fine. Stay.”

Carmilla, eyes searching, let herself rotate carefully so she was facing the table, feet flat on the floor.

“You’ve been really… quiet, recently,” she mumbled.

Laura swallowed her bite of egg unceremoniously, nearly choking as her throat tightened.

She managed a shrug, not daring to risk a glance at Carmilla.

Perry, in what was a hideously poor attempt to be subtle, swung her feet over the bench and dashed away, leaving her plate still half-full. Without her unwelcome ears listening, Carmilla took an audible, rattling breath.

“Laura.”

Forcing her face into a neutral expression, Laura turned to face her.

The first night of the schoolyear, Laura had stared at Carmilla on the edge of the Quidditch stands, hands gripping the railing and Carmilla’s gaze soft and sad as she watched the stars. She had whispered, then, about not understanding why Laura even talked to her. About fearing that Laura were upset with her, fearing that they were not friends.

Laura shivered with the memories. Carmilla’s gaze was just the same, now, brimming with emotion and vulnerability. Her pale lips were parted, and there were vertical lines drawn painfully, like cuts into Laura’s chest, between her brows.

She was gone, the moment she met that stare.

“Your friend said something, the other day.”

“LaF?” Laura asked at once. Her eyes were still searching, an unconscious scoping of Carmilla’s expression, as if looking for the source of her distress even if it were not going to be drawn so obviously there among her features.

Carmilla shook her head. “The other one. Perry.” She turned, as if to ensure that Perry were indeed gone, and then took another breath before plowing forward, “She asked me who I was taking to the stupid Slug Club party, and she implied, rather heavily, that you thought I wouldn’t want you to come with me. Which I thought was ridiculous, but she seemed very intent and you aren’t—you haven’t been talking much, and I know things are different, now, but—”

Another breath. This was the most Laura had ever heard her speak at once, and the closest she had ever come to Laura’s own levels of babbling. It had stunned Laura into silence.

“If I were going at all, of course I’d want you there. I mean the things are a nightmare, really, and the
only benefit is the champagne because Slughorn doesn’t really give a shit about the legality of giving minors high-quality alcohol.”

She shifted her jaw nervously, her teeth clicking a little, and raised an eyebrow at Laura.

Whose words were still burrowed somewhere at the lower recesses of her lungs.

Carmilla dropped her head, her fingers playing with the end of her Ravenclaw tie, and Laura realized she had shifted so that she was almost fully sideways on the bench, her knee nearly brushing Laura’s hip.

“You’re sort of my best friend, Laura.”

This was a different sort of ache. It was not hollow, was not the scooped out innards of a Jack-o-Lantern that Laura had grown to associate herself with.

This burned like a candle trying to stay lit, like the gasp for oxygen just before things went dark.

“Hey,” she said, the word strangled and uncertain. It lifted Carmilla’s eyes back to her face, “You know you’re mine, too.”

Slowly, Carmilla’s expression shifted from fear into outright disbelief.

“But, the gingers…”

“Have each other,” Laura finished firmly. She wanted more than anything to grab Carmilla’s hand, give it a reassuring squeeze like she would have had no qualms doing a few months prior. Now wasn’t the time for those sorts of thoughts, though. “Carr, I’m always going to be here, okay? I know that things—I know what I did was wrong. And that things have been… awkward. But that doesn’t mean I’m not still here.” She dropped her head seriously, peering up at Carmilla and squaring her shoulders, “You’ll always be my best friend.”

Even if that’s all we’ll ever be.

Carmilla’s smile was warm, bright in its relief, but there was still a shadow in her eye when she turned away, like there was something else she had left unsaid.

Laura let her keep it, like all of the things she was keeping, herself.

“So,” she asked, mustering as much casual energy as she could manage, “Are we going to this Slug Club thing, then?”

Carmilla raised an eyebrow, “I mentioned how horrible it’s going to be, right?”

“Yes, but you also said something about champagne. And I know for a fact that Slughorn dishes out for the best food, too—not your standard Hogwarts-kitchen-fare.”

“There will probably be forced small talk. And dancing.”

Laura grinned, “Who said I didn’t like dancing?”

With a groan and a hearty roll of her eyes, Carmilla muttered, “Oh, alright.”

When Laura dared to bump her shoulder with a giddy laugh of excitement, she caught the way Carmilla’s lip twitched into a smile.
Alright, so this was all they would have.

Laura could live with that.

Chapter End Notes

It’s been one crazy month, creampuffs. Sorry this was later than usual.

Drop me a line: jg-firefly
Career Advice

Chapter Summary

Slughorn throws a party, Laura contemplates the future, and Remus knows what’s up.

Chapter Notes

Thanks go to the ever-helpful V for making me a better writer, one edit at a time

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spring of 1975 (Fifth Year)

None of the fifth years went home for the Easter holidays. Instead, they settled into study hibernation. Perry had reached a point where she did not want to be around other people (“I love you guys, but you ruin my focus!”), and after spending two begrudging days in the library with Laura and Carmilla, LaFontaine developed a need to study by themselves as well.

And so, as the end of break loomed (and the Slug Club party with it), Laura arrived at the library alone to claim her usual seat at Carmilla’s side.

“Where’s the gingersnap?”

“LaF’s holed up in the dormitory. Something about needing less distractions.”

“Ah. So, we’re distracting, then? I can see that. You are very loud.”

“Hey!” Laura huffed. The single word drew glances, and she scowled, dropping her voice to a whisper, “That doesn’t prove anything.”

Carmilla smirked, turning her gaze back to the open book in her grasp (1000 Magical Herbs and Fungi), “Mhm. Whatever you say.”

Laura hid her blush under the pretense of digging through her bag. Instead of removing her books, though, she pulled out a pile of pamphlets, spreading them on the table in front of her.

The night before, a notice had appeared on the board in the Gryffindor common room. Fifth year students were to receive career counseling from their Head of House in the week following the holidays. LaFontaine had claimed copies of the Potioneer and Healer pamphlets, while Perry had selected all of the Ministry related ones she could get her hands on, reading through them late into the night.

Laura had taken one of each, a growing pit of dread setting up shop in her stomach.

She was halfway through the first one: “So You Think You’d Like To Work With Muggles?” when she felt Carmilla stiffen beside her. When she looked up, the other girl was staring resolutely at her book. Her eyes were fixated, though, not darting across the pages with their usual, effortless speed.
“My appointment with McGonagall is on Tuesday,” said Laura. She grimaced at the leaflet, “None of these sound appealing.”

Carmilla said nothing, nodding curtly.

“What—what do you think you’d like to do?” Laura asked into the silence. A new, tense air had risen between them, for reasons she couldn’t begin to fathom. They had never talked about careers, but it hardly seemed the sort of topic that would be forbidden. It was not like she had dragged them into the murky waters of politics or religion.

She may as well have, from the way Carmilla’s expression darkened.

“I don’t know,” said Carmilla, but there was a bite to the words, rather than the calm, flippant air Laura was accustomed to hearing from her.

Laura tried to smile, a nervous laugh bubbling in her throat, “Well, you could do anything, with your grades, but I’m sure you’ll wind up doing something with books, right? Hey, actually, you know what? You’d make a great professor.”

Carmilla stared, the hard edge of her scowl fading. She regarded Laura the way one might regard a ‘free samples’ sign at a ritzy restaurant; there was suspicion behind her intrigue. “Maybe,” she hedged.

“No, seriously. Here,” Laura insisted. She flipped through the pamphlets and shoved one under Carmilla’s nose.

“The Rewards of a Teaching Profession,” Carmilla read off drily.

“Take it,” Laura insisted, “Most of these are really silly, but they have a lot of information mixed in. Not that it’s helped me, much.”

She frowned at the pile. All of the possibilities seemed either too dull or too far out of reach. Anything that had drawn even a modicum of interest listed grades far beyond her capabilities, or expected great things she could not envision herself doing. Things like Auror or Code-breaker were supposed to be in her wheel-house—hadn’t the Sorting Hat told her it saw a spark in her, courage and stubbornness just right to brew up a Gryffindor?

She had been proud of that, once.

Now, she just felt beaten-down. Stubbornness was not the sort of quality any employer would want—especially not when it was paired with a witch whose most confident spell-casting barely reached ‘Lumos.’

“Well,” Carmilla said, the word delicate and precarious, her teeth worrying her lower lip. She set the teaching pamphlet down gingerly. “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it.” It was true. Beyond her impossible dreams of Quidditch stardom, Laura had only ever seen herself returning to her father’s cottage after she left Hogwarts. “And it’s not… I mean, I don’t have some great talent or anything.”

Whatever shadow had crossed Carmilla’s face at the start of the conversation, it fell away starkly, now. She was left pale but clear-eyed, and she leaned forward with an electric sort of urgency.

“What? Of course you do.”
Laura scoffed. “No, I don’t.”

“Did someone tell you that?” asked Carmilla, an edge of anger working into her voice.

“No. I just—nothing comes to me naturally. I know how things are supposed to work, but… every spell I try doesn’t go right, and it takes me twice as long to learn just… just anything.” She lifted her head, locking her gaze earnestly with Carmilla’s. “You make it all look so easy. You have this grace when you move your wand, did you know that? And then Perry’s all formulaic and memorizing her textbooks, and LaF doesn’t even consult anything, especially in Potions, they just know this stuff. I don’t know. Maybe it’s because I’m not—maybe it’s because I didn’t grow up like you guys. Maybe it’s because I’m muggleborn. Maybe I should find a muggle career.”

Carmilla sat back heavily, her shoulders falling.

“It was me.”

Laura blinked. “What was you?”

“I’m the one that—I used to say that shit to you, Laura. That was me.” She took a shuddering breath, and suddenly she was twitching in her seat, fingers drumming unsteadily and leg bouncing, “I mean, for Merlin’s sake, Laura, have I even—did I ever apologize?”

“Carm, hey, take it easy,” Laura urged. Her hand landed close beside Carmilla’s, itching, but not touching, “You don’t need to apologize for anything.”

“I was horrible to you,” said Carmilla, as though she had not heard Laura’s reassurance at all, “For absolutely no reason. You didn’t deserve any of that, and I made you think—”

“Hey,” Laura cut in sharply. “You didn’t deserve the things I did to you, either. Did you know I spread a rumor in third year that you liked Snape? I don’t think anyone believed it, but it drove Snape crazy and I think it sort of made Sirius idolize me—which was a whole other issue.”

It was Carmilla’s turn to stare.

“Oh, and there was that time I put you in the Hospital Wing, covered in boils, remember that? And, once, because I suggested it, LaF added a few drops of rat bile to your potion in class so it would spoil—I remember Slughorn being very disappointed.” She shook her head, “The point is, we’ve both done things we regret. And said things we regret. But that was years ago.”

Carmilla was still staring. “You told people that I liked Severus?”

Laura flushed, “Yes. And it wasn’t that many people, but—yes. It was highly immature.”

“Well,” Carmilla managed, “That definitely explains why he got so weird that year.”

“Well, can’t we just move on?” Laura suggested. “It’s not like it did any good.”

“Yeah, um, that’s probably why.” There was a heavy beat of silence, and then she offered a hesitant, grimace of a smile, “I’m sorry, too.”

Carmilla nodded, though she was frowning, again.

“Laura?” she asked. Laura hummed in response, eyebrow raising expectantly. “You haven’t—there weren’t any other rumors about me, were there? Not started by you, specifically, but just… things you might have heard?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure LaF started a rumor that you bewitched your broom to play Quidditch better.
But I also don’t think anyone believes that.”

Carmilla did not laugh, though Laura had been trying to lighten the mood. Her eyes were dark. Serious. She looked almost frightened, and Laura softened at once.

“What sort of rumor, Carm?”

The flash of fear in Carmilla’s eyes answered the question for her.

A vampire rumor.

The words danced across her mind at once, and she had to fight the urge to ram the heel of her hand into her forehead. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“Nothing,” Carmilla said sharply, “I was just—it was only a question.”

“Okay,” Laura agreed with a frantic bob of her head. “Okay, cool.”

So stupid.

“But, um. Carm, you can—you can tell me anything, you know that, right?” She managed a smile that actually reached her eyes, and dared tap Carmilla’s thumb with her forefinger. The other girl looked down at the contact, and then swiftly back up into Laura’s eyes. “That’s what best friends are for.”

For one lingering, heavy beat, Laura thought maybe Carmilla would tell her. Her tongue darted out to run over her lower lip, and her eyes bulged a little before she shut them soundly and collected a rattling breath.

“Okay,” was all she said.

Heart hammering in her chest, unsaid words prickling on her tongue, Laura resigned herself to her reading.

///

“You’re sure this is okay?” Laura demanded. She spun once more in front of the mirror, scowling at her reflection as the dress swished just over her knees. It was blue, and flowy, and she felt just as uncertain about it now as she had when Perry had pushed her to buy it the summer before.

And what if Carmilla didn’t show up in muggle clothing? What if she had dress robes? Why had Laura not thought to ask about this in advance?

“You look perfect,” Perry said, peering at her own reflection as she dabbed on pale lipstick. “I’m sure Carmilla will love it.”

Laura flushed. “I’m not—that wasn’t what I asked!”

“Sure it was,” LaFontaine interrupted. They shifted around Laura and Perry, adjusting their jacket and running a quick hand through their coif of ginger hair. “Though I still don’t get what you’re worried about, L. She’s an idiot if she doesn’t want to date you—shiny dress or not.”

Laura said nothing.

She had still not told either of them about the kiss—the horrible, ill-advised, friendship-threatening kiss—and, as a result, was left trying her best to accept the positive affirmations they kept offering.
LaFontaine, to their credit, was trying to be supportive of the whole ‘Carmilla thing,’ (or at least all the open glaring and dramatic huffing had ceased) and Laura strongly suspected that this would change if she admitted just how soundly she had already been rejected.

Besides, she could hardly blame Carmilla for not wanting her; Laura wasn’t about to make things worse by turning her friends against her.

“We’re not staying the whole time, right?” Perry asked, finally pulling away from the mirror to lace an arm around LaFontaine. They beamed.

“Nope. We’ll make ourselves known, stuff our faces, and then get back to the dormitory with plenty of time for you to finish your star charts.”

“You’re the best,” said Perry, pressing a peck of a kiss to their lips.

“I try.”

“Alright, I’m ready,” said Laura, with one last brush of her hair. The volume wasn’t something she was used to—normally she kept it smooth, straight, and either tucked behind her ears or up in a simple ponytail. Now, it puffed up in curls and smelled distinctly of hairspray.

It wasn’t just the dress putting Laura out of her element.

They left the Prefect bathroom in single file, with Perry and LaFontaine giggling about something one had said while Laura was out of earshot, and the walk through the corridors was filled with the unfamiliar echo of their heels.

It was already late (fashionably so, according to LaFontaine), and this meant that the castle felt off-limits in an exhilarating, rule-breaking sort of way. Which was probably why Laura jumped at the sudden call of voices ahead.

“Fuck off,” someone was snarling.

“Ooh-hoo, out of bed, you are!” cackled Peeves’ merry tones in reply. “Out of bed and foul-mouthed.”

“I’ll show you a foul mouth.”

It was Carmilla. They rounded the corner, their paces picking up slightly despite themselves, and found her at the top of the main staircase, hands on her hips. Peeves hovered upside-down before her, blocking her downward progress. His face was split in a wicked grin.

“Out of bed, out of bed,” he chanted.

“I have a pass, you fuckwad! Now shut up.”

Peeves saw them before Carmilla did. He lifted his round little head and then threw out an arm to point accusingly.

“Ah-ha! Prefects! Prefects here to take you awaaaay.”

Carmilla spun, and her expression was dark and sour for one blink of a moment before her eyes locked with Laura’s in recognition. At once, her shoulders relaxed, her gaze darting to LaF and Perry before it returned to sweep over Laura, taking in her outfit.

Laura flushed. Carmilla smiled.
“Yes, Peeves, I’m in deep trouble,” she taunted.

“Carmilla,” greeted Perry. “You look very nice this evening.”

And she did.

She was in a flowy black dress, cut just a hint shorter than Laura’s own. The sleeves were long, with lacy cuffs, and, most importantly, it clung just off of her shoulders, exposing an expanse of creamy, smooth skin that Laura had never seen before.

Carmilla stepped closer, offering simple greetings of her own for Laura’s friends, and Laura worked hard to keep her jaw shut, swallowing hard.

Carmilla hadn’t done much with her hair, but it wasn’t as if any changes were really necessary. She already had perfect, flowing locks that curled naturally in all the right ways. They framed her face darkly, now, a curtain of contrast, and the only real difference was that she had pinned back her bangs.

She looked younger. More vibrant. And—as Laura surveyed her—oddly nervous.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” Laura echoed awkwardly. The gap between them was built on uncertainty, and they ducked in for a hurried hug, neither of them looking at each other afterwards.

“Alright then,” Perry said brightly, as though this were entirely normal and Peeves were not still very much hovering over their heads. “Shall we go?”

Peeves blew a raspberry after them as they trotted down the stairs, but vanished without further intrusion; presumably to find better, easier targets.

They heard the Slug Club party before they saw it, the music drifting strangely out of the dungeons, echoing in all the wrong ways on the wet stone. It was better, once they rounded the corner and fell headfirst into the fray. The band was some popular witches group that made Perry declare “oh yes, I’ve heard them on the wireless!” and the velvet-cloaked room was warm and loud in a way that was not entirely unpleasant.

They were swarmed with servers almost at once, as though they had given off a vibe of fresh blood, and Laura found herself eating a number of things out of her hands without entirely knowing what they were. Everything was delicious, if not slightly odd. She would not have thought to pair onion with chocolate—or perhaps that had been two separate hors-devours that were not meant to go together. It was so hard to tell.

Carmilla stuck to her side, their arms touching but not their hands, and together they navigated through the center of the crowd and found reprieve on the sidelines, next to a brim-full bowl of aquamarine punch.

LaFontaine accepted a glass, but the others politely declined. The bowl was letting off what looked like wisps of smoke, and after LaF had drank a hearty sip (despite Perry’s stammered protests) their ears blew out hearty streams of the stuff.

They grinned, red-nosed, “Wicked.”

Laura eyed the bowl warily, “How does it… taste?”
“Oh, dreadful,” LaF said with a wave of their hand, “But that’s not the point.”

She was sure LaFontaine was ready to rattle off whatever the point was—and it was undoubtedly some clever mix of alcohol, syrup, and charm-work—but Laura was saved from hearing the details by the arrival of several familiar faces.

“Laura, LaF, Perry!” Lily rattled off, hugging each of them in turn. She ignored Carmilla entirely. “I’m so glad you came. I think Slughorn is already drunk, and the last time that happened…”

“Right, someone should keep an eye on the salamander cages,” LaFontaine filled in, “Come on, Perr, let’s see if we can find him before he’s too far gone to remember that we showed up.”

They ducked off, hand-in-hand, and Laura felt the room shrink in on her as the four of them were left to their own devices.

And there were four, because Lily was not alone: Severus Snape was with her, looking as sullen as ever. He and Carmilla eyed each other, neither of their expressions particularly readable.

“So,” said Lily, addressing Laura directly, “Did you just get here?”

“Oh, um, yeah. We were running a little late.”

“Well, trust me when I say you didn’t miss anything. These are more bearable than the club meetings, sure, but still not exactly my cup of tea.”

Laura hadn’t realized there were any fourth years in the Slug Club, but she supposed it would make sense that Lily would be an exception to that rule. Remus had mentioned a number of times that she was brilliant—it was one of the many reasons she was so wildly outside of Potter’s league.

“You know Severus, don’t you?”

She glanced at Snape, who had gone stiff at the mention of his name.

“We’ve met,” Laura said slowly. She wasn’t even sure that was true—had they ever actually met, or had they always been distant not-quite-enemies, aware of each other but never interacting directly?

Lily’s attention shifted to Carmilla for the barest of seconds, and then she forced a thin smile, “Laura, can I speak with you for a moment? Privately?”

“Um,” said Laura, glancing self-consciously at Carmilla. Carmilla was not giving any sort of cues, though. She was leaning casually against the punch table, legs crossed and gaze distant. “Okay?”

Lily ushered her away, and she couldn’t help but glance over her shoulder to watch as Snape gravitated closer and began murmuring low, urgent words at Carmilla. She looked almost angry with him, as she bit something back. He shook his head, started on a fresh string of words that Laura was too far away to catch, and too incompetent to read off his lips—

“Laura.”

She turned to Lily, who was waiting with crossed arms and a raised eyebrow.

“Oh. Yeah. Um, what’s wrong?”

“Are you dating Carmilla Karnstein?”

The question was like a bucket of ice dumping over her shoulders. Laura went rigid.
“What?”

“Are you dating her?” Lily repeated, arms still crossed and expression still haughty.

“No.”

“It looks like you are.”

Laura had always liked Lily. She was bright, and friendly, and it wasn’t uncommon to find her helping first years with their homework in the common room. The way she stood up to Potter’s presumptuous male overtures had long been a source of inspiration as much as it was a form of entertainment for the rest of Gryffindor.

She was startled to find her so accusing, now.

“What, are you homophobic or something?” Laura stammered out, barely thinking over the words. She didn’t believe it—of anyone at the school, Lily would be low on her list for being unaccepting, and, besides, it wasn’t as if this were the muggle world. Wizards had been welcoming gay marriage since the 1400s.

“No,” Lily scoffed, “I’m worried about you.”

Laura was fairly certain she should be insulted, right about now.

“I can take care of myself, thanks.”

She went to turn away—eager to get back to Carmilla before the other girl was pulled away by more interesting company—but Lily caught her by the arm, holding her firmly in place. She was surprisingly strong.

“You don’t understand. She’s dangerous, Laura. You need to listen to me.”

Laura froze, her thoughts racing ahead.

“What do you know?” she demanded, her own hand flying up to seize Lily’s arm. She gripped back with twice the force Lily had used on her, hardly aware of the action under the weight of her panic.

Lily fell back a step, her hard gaze faltering.

“What does that mean?” the red-haired girl asked, frowning.

“Laura!” Carmilla had materialized beside her, dark eyes cloudy with concern. Laura released her hold on Lily at once, jumping back. Lily looked sharply away. “Are you okay?” Carmilla asked.

“Fine,” said Laura, but the word came out tight and off-pitch. Carmilla’s eyes narrowed.

“Come on, your friends found the regular punch bowl over there. We should get back to them.”

Laura’s heart hammered as Carmilla led her away, and for once it was not because of the way Carmilla’s fingers fell lightly around her wrist.

Lily knew; she was almost certain of it. And, if she knew, then it meant Carmilla was in danger. Surely Lily wouldn’t run around telling people, would she? Was this what Carmilla had been worried about, the other day, when she asked about rumors?

She had half a mind to warn Carmilla right here, but she remembered herself before they had reached
the other side of the room—remembered why that would be a terrible, insane sort of idea. It helped
that LaFontaine and Perry were upon them at once, pressing punch glasses into their hands and
raving about the puff pastries.

“What did Snape want with you?” asked LaFontaine.

The question nearly made Carmilla choke on her punch, the purple juice jumping back into the glass
as she sputtered. She shot a look at Laura, her lips tight.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Aren’t the two of you friends?” LaF pressed. Laura wanted to hit their arm, or step on their shoe, or
do something, but the question had already been asked and Carmilla was already shifting anxiously
on her feet. Perry was frozen, mid-bite on a mini quiche of some sort.

“We were,” Carmilla forced out. She cleared her throat, “We don’t see eye-to-eye on… a lot of
things.”

“You aren’t friends anymore?” Laura asked, before she could help herself. This was news.

Now that she thought about it, though, when was the last time she had seen Carmilla with her old
Slytherin crowd? Laura spent most of her time, these days, scanning the corridors for a glimpse of
the other girl; every time she found her, it seemed she was either alone or with her Ravenclaw
teammates. Even the eager fans had drifted away, somewhat, since her rise to glory.

Carmilla took a long drink from her punch, draining nearly half the glass.

“Not exactly, no,” she muttered, at long last. She eyed the remainder of the drink, shrugging, “It’s
not a big loss, trust me.”

Laura did trust her. She nodded quickly, and touched Carmilla’s arm without thinking about it. The
action had the intended effect: Carmilla lifted her stare to meet Laura’s eyes, and she smiled
encouragingly. Slowly, Carmilla smiled back.

LaF was distracted, on the receiving end of a whispered conversation with Perry (no doubt in regards
to their pushy questioning) and Carmilla shifted her stance so that her back was to the both of them.

“Did Evans—what did she want you for?” There was a pleading in Carmilla’s eyes, a fear that she
was holding back. It trembled in the fingers that were worrying the sleeves of her dress. She looked
small in it, now, her bare shoulders prickling with goosebumps.

Laura couldn’t tell her. Not when the idea of her knowing had that wide-eyed, desperate fear eating
away at Carmilla’s light.

The warning could wait for another day.

Laura could talk to Lily. She could sort this out, herself, and save Carmilla having to worry about
anything.

She didn’t deserve that. Not on top of everything else Laura had put her through.

“It was nothing,” Laura promised.

The song changed, the witches on the stage hammering out the chords of an upbeat, pulse-pumping
song. People shifted around them, and Laura caught Carmilla by the hands before she could ask any
more questions.

“Come on,” she urged. “I believe you told me there would be dancing.”

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The night before she was due to speak with McGonagall, Laura had only managed to discard half of the career pamphlets. None of the remaining options seemed particularly appealing, even if they weren’t outright ‘no’s.

Perry kept insisting that she was perfectly suited for the Ministry, outlining the different departments and promising that she would never have to mess with Potions or Herbology. While this was tempting, Laura was still hardly proficient at Charms, which seemed a little too relevant to ignore.

“You don’t have to perform complex spells all the time, you know,” Perry said as she packed up her things for the night. “A lot of Ministry work is very procedural. You would get to help make important decisions. What about the Department of Magical Games and Sports? You could help organize international Quidditch diplomacy.”

“Maybe,” Laura said. She could not help thinking that she would really prefer to be playing Quidditch. She knew that McGonagall would not be impressed with her, though, if she walked into the meeting and said she wanted to be a sports star.

She could already hear the response: “Yes, Miss Hollis, you and everyone else. Now, what are your realistic goals?”

She had made no further progress, by the time her advising session rolled around on Tuesday afternoon. Laura waited in the hall, clutching her small stack of pamphlets and trying to get better control over her breathing. When Eugene Goff opened the door to McGonagall’s office, he looked slightly pale. He didn’t acknowledge her as he trooped past, muttering about how he was never going to get an ‘Exceeds Expectations’ in Potions.

“Miss Hollis,” McGonagall greeted with a tip of her head. She gestured to the open seat. Laura took it, trying not to think of the number of times she had been in this very spot to be punished, and how she might have preferred a detention over this.

“Well, this meeting, as you well know, is to discuss any career ideas you might have,” began McGonagall briskly. “This will help determine which subjects you will need to carry on with throughout the rest of your time here at Hogwarts. Your O.W.L. grades will determine your ability to continue lessons, of course, and then your N.E.W.T.s will determine your career path upon completing your Hogwarts education. Have you given much thought to what you’d like to do when you leave Hogwarts?”

Laura swallowed. Her mouth felt very dry.

“Um. Well I know I don’t want to do anything with potions.”

McGonagall flipped open a file, and Laura got the nervous sensation that her entire life was summed up within the pages. She wondered if she should be concerned that it seemed rather thick. What sort of information did her teachers take down? Were all of her detention records and lost house points tracked in there?

“That is a wise choice. I see here that Potions is not your strong-suit. Professor Slughorn has marked you at ‘Acceptable’ bordering on ‘Poor’ over the last four years. Now, you’ve done decent work in my class—‘Exceeds Expectations’ third year, ‘Acceptable’ for the rest, and similarly in Charms and
“Herbology. Several ‘Exceeds Expectations’ and an ‘Outstanding’ in History of Magic—have you considered any fields, there?”

“What?” Laura asked dumbly. *History of Magic?* She almost wanted to ask McGonagall if she could see that paper for herself, but she suspected that would be crossing a boundary.

“Your essays have been consistently awarded high marks—Professor Binns is rather proud of your prose, too, from his comments on your performance…”

Binns was proud of her? Laura was certain she had plunged into an alternate dimension. She had been unaware Binns knew any of their names, let alone paid attention to their progress over the years.

“Your essays have been of high quality in my class as well,” McGonagall was saying. “A little… opinionated, at times, but well-written. There are a number of possibilities you could consider—” she dug out a few leaflets, thicker and less gimmicky than the crumpled pamphlets in Laura’s lap. “I advise you to consider a career as a Scholar, or perhaps even as a Professor. You do have a way of getting through to people… even the difficult ones. There are, as well, a number of publications you could work for. Wizarding Journals are becoming popular again, and magazines—though you could find something a little more substantial than the likes of the *Quibbler* or *Witch Weekly*—and there’s always the *Daily Prophet.*”

“The *Daily Prophet?*” Laura repeated, dumbstruck.

“Yes, Miss Hollis. Does that not interest you?”

“I—no, of course it does.”

“Very well. You’ll be wanting to know about your courses, I expect—if this is a path you wish to follow, you’ll need to achieve at least three N.E.W.T.s. Charms will be a must, of course, and History of Magic… I should warn you, if you wish to continue with Transfiguration, that I do not accept students who do not achieve an ‘Exceeds Expectations’ in their Ordinary Wizarding Levels into my N.E.W.T. course. I see you’ve done well in Muggle Studies, so you’ll want to carry on with that. Were there any other courses you had questions on, Miss Hollis?”

Laura, still dumbstruck, stammered, “So… I wouldn’t need Potions?”

McGonagall quirked her lip in a faint smile. “No, Miss Hollis. You would not need Potions.”

A warm feeling settled in her stomach, chasing out the cold for the first time in days. “What about Herbology?”

“Well, you’ve been receiving ‘Acceptable’ marks, and it’s a good skillset to have. That choice would be yours to make. As for your other classes—Care of Magical Creatures, Ancient Runes, Defense Against the Dark Arts—”

“I’ll want to keep that one,” Laura said hurriedly. “Is there—will there be a requirement to get into the N.E.W.T. level?”

“Well, as Professor Durkin will not be with us next year, that is not something I can say for certain. I can say, however, that past Professors have all required at least an ‘Exceeds Expectations.’ If you wish to continue into the N.E.W.T. level, you’ll need to do a bit of work.”

“I do want to continue,” Laura said. It would never have mattered, if Defense Against the Dark Arts wasn’t relevant to her career. There was something she had said years ago, to LaF and Perry, and it
still held true: it was the most important class they were taking—for all of them.

“Very well. Did you have any other questions?”

As if breaking out of a trance, Laura shook her head, and stood to leave.

“Miss Hollis?” Laura turned back. “I had wondered—did you make any progress with that boggart?”

She had nearly forgotten that it had been McGonagall who had arranged the extra practice for her, months and months ago. With Quidditch and the O.W.L.s, she hadn’t had time to think about the Patronus Charm.

“Oh. Not—not really. I got something to appear, but it was just the once.”

McGonagall nodded. “It is very advanced magic. I had only meant to tell you that such a thing might earn you extra points in your exams. Please send in LaFontaine on your way out.”

Neither Perry nor LaFontaine had been surprised at McGonagall’s suggestion that Laura go into journalism. Perry insisted she should have thought of it herself, and gifted Laura her stack of recent *Witch Weekly’s*. LaF pointed out that she could go into Quidditch reporting, and offered Laura a much more appealing pile of dog-eared sports magazines, which she took to reading between classes.

As they had every day for the past week, though, all thoughts of careers shifted from her mind as she entered the familiar, empty classroom on the third floor and set her bag on a desk.

Laura clutched her wand at her side, pushed her hair back behind her ears, and took a steadying breath. The boggart’s trunk rattled. She pointed at the lock, and felt a familiar thrill of success as it sprung open for her nonverbal command.

Her triumph was short lived. The Dementor rose mountainously before her, letting out loud, sucking breaths. It’s cloak billowed.

“*Expecto Patronum!*” she cried, aiming her wand directly at the great, dark figure. A faint puff of silver emanated from the end of her wand, and dissipated like smoke. “*Expecto Patronum!*” she said again. She pictured her mother smiling at her, but the Dementor was distorting the memory—her mother was gasping, her face going slack, she was falling—Laura stepped back, shaking her head.

She tried to picture the day she found out she was a witch, the day Dad took her to Diagon Alley for the first time, meeting LaFontaine and Perry—but there was Carmilla, sneering in the compartment door…

“*Expecto Patronum!*”

The Dementor paused, as if considering that last memory.

She replaced it at once with Carmilla sitting beside her at the Gryffindor table, as she had taken to doing every morning, like clockwork. Carmilla, on the Quidditch pitch. Carmilla, smiling that perfect, soft smile at her, eyes shimmering under the pale, colored lights of Slughorn’s party. Carmilla, one hand in hers, the other at her waist, twirling her about in a perfect waltz that Laura never would have imagined she knew—

“*Expecto Patronum!*”
The Dementor fell back, knocked to the ground by the powerful leap of a silvery, ghostly form—four legs and a lithe body—it burst into smoke with the boggart, leaving glittering wisps in its place, which faded with the slow grace of falling embers.

A torn cloak was all that remained, and Laura tossed it into the trunk with a flick of her wand, shutting and locking the thing firmly. It only took a moment for the thing to begin rattling once more, the boggart revitalized and as irritable as ever in its prison.

“So, it’s a cat,” said a voice.

Laura spun, her hair frazzled and her breaths still quick, and found Remus Lupin hovering in the doorway. He smiled a small, crooked smile of apology.

“Sorry. LaFontaine told me you were practicing, and I thought I’d join. Didn’t mean to spy.”

Laura shook her head. “It’s fine. That was—well, let’s say I’d rather you have seen that than yesterday’s performance.”

He nodded at the trunk. “How long have you been able to do that?”

“Today,” Laura answered, the word bubbling over a short laugh of disbelief. “That was the first time it actually, fully worked.” She paused a moment, letting the reality of her victory sink in. “You think it was a cat? I didn’t get a very good look. It was awfully… big.”

“I’d wager it was more like a panther,” said Remus. For some reason, his eyes glittered with humor at the words. “You know, they say that a Patronus is a representation of a person’s soul.”

“I’ve read that,” Laura agreed slowly. “Is that… a good thing? That mine is some sort of… big, wild cat?”

She had never thought of herself as anything wild, or vicious, or even graceful. Wasn’t that what panthers were? Maybe it was a Gryffindor thing? Some sort of manifestation of the ‘courage and stubbornness’ the Sorting Hat had told her about?

Remus gave his head a little shake, still smiling. “They also say that Patronuses are reflections of our greatest hopes and desires. The things we live for. The things we love.”

Unbidden, Laura’s memories drew themselves back to full height—all of her peaceful moments with Carmilla, all of the ones that made her heart swell in ways that hurt and soothed at the same time. Her cat-like grace, the slow blink of her eyes when she was relaxed, or curious.

“Oh,” she said quietly. She looked away.

“Don’t give up on her,” said Remus. He had opened the door to leave, his shaggy hair falling low over his eyes. “Sometimes she’s an idiot… but don’t give up, okay?”

Lips parting in surprise, Laura nodded. “I won’t.”

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to share your thoughts below or drop me a line on tumblr: jg-firefly
Stay awesome, friends :)


The Ordinary Wizarding Levels

Chapter Summary

Tests are taken. Decisions are made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Spring of 1975 (Fifth Year)

“You’re doing it again,” LaFontaine commented mildly. They had barely looked up from their notes to make the observation, and Laura flushed.

She had been staring across the library to the back corner, where Carmilla was lounging on a window ledge with her nose buried in a Transfiguration book.

The O.W.L.s were set to begin the following morning, and Laura had never felt such a strong mixture of anticipation and dread. She longed for the testing to be over—for the horrible, endless weeks of studying to be closed out so that she could lounge on the Quidditch pitch or play Wizard’s Chess in the Great Hall during breaks.

It felt almost as if the younger students; the unburdened first, second, third, and fourth years; were mocking them with their laughter and good humor. (Laura could not begrudge the sixth years, who vacillated between studying for their own end-of-term exams and helping their fifth and seventh year friends prepare for their far more serious testing.)

LaFontaine had become so tense in recent days that they had begun issuing detentions to anyone that made so much as a peep in the common room during study hours—an event that should have earned some level of either reproach or praise from Perry, but received neither thanks to Perry’s zombie-like state of the past month.

To say Perry was not coping well with the threat of O.W.L.s would be an understatement. Laura had not seen her in two days, not even in their dormitory in the gloomy post-midnight hours that had become Laura’s regular bedtime. When she dared to ask LaFontaine where their girlfriend had gone, they merely shrugged, their eyes glazed and their lips twitching with muttered repetitions of historical facts.

Carmilla glanced up from her book, as if sensing Laura’s continuous stare, and quirked her lips into a smile. She hopped down from the window ledge with all the grace of a cat, and Laura flushed as Remus’s words came back to mind.

She tampered them down as Carmilla wound her way through the tables.

“How long have you been here?” she asked, cocking her hip and resting a hand on the table ledge. LaFontaine glared as if the contact were a personal affront, pushing their chair back and pressing their book practically to their nose.

“An hour or two,” Laura answered, careful to keep her voice hushed. Carmilla’s movement had drawn a collection of raised heads and sleepy glares. She nodded to the book Carmilla had clutched
at her side. “Have you almost finished reading the whole library?”

“Ah, though my efforts are valiant, I’m not sure I’ll make it through the restricted section by morning.” LaFontaine coughed loudly, but the sound only made Carmilla smirk and lean closer, a conspiratorial gleam in her eyes. “You look like you need a break. We could go to the pitch.”

The temptation was strong. They had resumed their evening practices—keeping them within the curfew-restricted hours to avoid detentions, now—but had not had the time in weeks. Laura wavered, her fingers drumming on the edge of her Charms textbook.

“I shouldn’t,” she sighed. “I still have to get through the section on Cheering Charms, and I wanted to use any extra time to practice Vanishing Spells for Tuesday. I’m not sure how much energy I’ll have tomorrow night, and Wednesday I’ve got both Herbology and Muggle Studies…”

Carmilla frowned. “I thought you had Vanishing Spells set? We spent almost five hours on those this weekend.”

“Well, yeah, but I just… I want to make sure I get it right. McGonagall said she only accepts ‘Exceeds Expectations’ students for N.E.W.T.s, and even if I’m just going to be a writer I need as many credits as I can if I’m going to get on the staff somewhere good—somewhere like the Prophet.”

Carmilla’s frown had not faded. “You’re not going to be just a writer,” she insisted, her voice uncharacteristically soft. It had that same edge that it always had when Carmilla heard Laura say something detrimental about herself. It made Laura flush.

Of anyone, Carmilla had shown the most support following Laura’s career advising session. She insisted on reading through some of Laura’s essays, agreeing eagerly with Binns and McGonagall and even doing research on publications where she could get a solid start.

LaFontaine’s head lifted briefly at Carmilla’s comment, but, with a roll of their eyes, dropped back to their reading.

(Their gradually-improving opinion of Carmilla did not extend to study hours.)

The interruption was enough to remind Carmilla that they were not alone. She flushed, too, a brief darkening of her pale skin that told Laura she had fed recently. She thought. The other girl had looked drawn and weak recently, and Laura had worried she was not getting enough… sustenance.

She cleared her throat, lowering her voice in a way that made it rasp unintentionally, sending shivers down Laura’s spine. “You’ll do great tomorrow,” she promised.

Laura wasn’t sure if she believed her, but that did not stop the hours from passing far too quickly, and the sun from rising on the first day of the O.W.L.s.

When Laura saw Perry in the Great Hall, as fifth and seventh years from every house pressed their way through the doors to find the room filled with rows upon rows of individual desks instead of the four house tables, the other girl looked more sickly than even Remus Lupin. She did not acknowledge her friends, though LaFontaine placed a hand briefly on her shoulder.

They claimed three desks together, in the section denoted for O.W.L.s (the seventh years shuffled into the back, looking vaguely ill). Laura fidgeted as she set her quill and inkwell down beside the awaiting test papers, which were turned upside down to prevent an early start. She could see text faintly through the back sheet of parchment—a lot of text.
Laura did one cursory glance of the room before the ministry wizard cleared his throat, finding Carmilla near the space that would usually be occupied with the Ravenclaw table, with her hair pulled up into a lazy ponytail.

“You may begin!” came the cry from the front of the room. A massive hourglass, which Laura now noticed resting upon the table where their professors normally dined, lifted into the air and turned over, landing with a decisive thud.

The room filled with the sound of ruffling pages, and Laura hurried to flip over her packet, which was discouragingly thick. ‘ORDINARY WIZARDING LEVELS – CHARMS 1975’ was printed in large font across the top of the page, followed by a series of short answer questions.

Laura took a deep breath, and dove in.

The exam schedule they had been issued a week prior had assigned them one subject per day (except for the Wednesdays, for those with electives.) The morning of each was to be focused upon the written portion of their testing—a collection of short answers, essays, and multiple choice responses —while the afternoon was devoted to practical examinations, during which they would be expected to show off their ability to perform complex magic in front of a judge.

Laura was not looking forward to either. Charms, however, was at least a safer place to start than many of her other subjects. Most of the questions were easy enough (“Describe the spell used to levitate objects, including origin, wandwork, and at least three references of historical usage” and “Describe the Cheering Charm, including duration, side effects, and counter-charm usage” and “If trying to wash, dry, fold, and properly store laundry, describe the required charms, in order or use”) meaning she left the exam room feeling at least a fraction lighter than she had when walking in.

“That wasn’t terrible,” LaFontaine commented, as everyone drifted out into the fresh air before lunch. They sounded as surprised as Laura felt.

“Carmilla!” Perry called, her voice bright and eager in a way it had not been for weeks. Laura raised her eyebrows as her friend waved, drawing Carmilla’s attention. The other girl drifted towards them, her bag slung over one shoulder and her exam paper folded neatly in her hand.

“What did you think of question eight?” Perry demanded, the moment Carmilla was within earshot. “I was fairly certain it was asking about the specific side effects of a correct revealing charm, as opposed to the potential ways in which it could be incorrectly cast, but the wording wasn’t clear. I tried to get that Ministry official to clarify—what’s his name, Tofty?—but he wouldn’t even hear my question! Said he wasn’t allowed to answer anything at all. Absurd.”

“Oh,” stammered Carmilla. She cast a significant, startled look at Laura, as if to ask what in Merlin’s name she was supposed to do with the frantic creature in front of her. “I, uh, did the same thing as you. Side effects.”

Perry seemed appeased, but was already searching through her exam paper for what would likely be another interrogation. Over her hunched head, Carmilla gave Laura a wide-eyed look and shook her head. Laura hid her laughter with an abrupt bout of coughing.

“You’re not sick, are you?” demanded Perry. She shifted automatically away, eyes narrowing.

“No, nope, not sick. Just some, uh, pollen in my throat, I think. All better.”

Carmilla hid her smirk behind her hand, and politely answered the remainder of Perry’s questions until they were allowed back into the Great Hall (restored to its normal, four table format) for lunch.
She ducked away with the excuse of having promised to meet up with her Ravenclaw friends, but Laura knew this to be a lie, as well.

She didn’t mind. Carmilla’s eyes were bright when she shot Laura a parting smile.

The practical portion of their exams passed quickly. They were called into the Great Hall in small groups, alphabetically by last name, which meant Laura did not have a long wait.

Professor Marchbanks asked her to summon several objects across a short distance, unlock a jewelry box, and have a pair of scissors complete a short dance.

Her summoning was sub-par, with one of the eggs giving up halfway to her and falling with a *splat* onto the floor, but her nonverbal *Alohomora* earned her a series of eager claps, and her dance, though short, was passable.

Carmilla was in the process of being examined two stations over, as Laura made her way out of the hall, and she swore she caught a glimpse of sewing shears performing a waltz.

Transfiguration, the following day, went similarly. Laura was fairly certain she had failed to answer the question on animagi registration with enough detail, and she had entirely forgotten the wandwork necessary for turning a mouse into a snuffbox, but she was able to vanish all of her turtle except for a bit of its tail, which she considered a great success.

Herbology, which she had been dreading (her Self-Fertilizing Shrubs had only survived the year because of Perry’s diligence), turned out to be fairly simple. The majority of the exam was multiple choice, and the lone essay was on mandrakes, which Laura had spent a great deal of the night before reading about. In the practical portion they were expected to keep a Flying Fruit Bush alive (and intact) for one hour. Laura’s made it only three-quarters of the way, which was still better than LaFontaine, whose bush had split in half and begun to rot at the twenty minute marker.

They were rather testy afterwards, snapping at Perry when she wanted to go over notes for Defense Against the Dark Arts, which left Laura with the unfortunate task of running through Perry’s list of hexes—a hands-on task if there ever was one. She only escaped because she needed to sit her Muggle Studies exam late that evening (by far the easiest exam she would be taking, and lacking a practical portion entirely.)

There were benefits to Perry’s extra-zealous efforts, though. Laura had no trouble on her exam the following morning when she was asked about the effects of the Knee-Reversal, Horn-Growing, and Sardine hexes. She paused at the last of the essay questions, however, her head lifting on instinct and searching for Carmilla’s dark hair in the sea of students around her.

*Describe the effects of vampirism, including causes, previously-attempted cures, identifying traits, and ways in which a vampire may be warded off and/or killed.*

Her racing pulse made her quill stutter as she tried to force words onto the page. It all felt very cruel, very clinical and *speciesist*, as she listed out how vampires were created by venom from a bite, and how one had to die with this venom in their system in order to rise from the dead. How vampires were pale, and quiet, adverse to the sun but not allergic as muggles said in their stories. How a bite of garlic could send them into a painful seizure with effects similar to the Cruciatius Curse. How they could only be killed by a stake to the heart, beheading, or complete bodily destruction through fire.

And, the whole time, her mind was racing with *Carmilla, Carmilla, Carmilla*, so much so that she had to keep back-tracking to make sure she had not accidentally included the name within her work.
She was nearly ill by the time she finished, scribbling her last sentence just before Professor Marchbanks told them to set down their quills.

“You okay, L? You look kind of... green?” LaFontaine asked, as the room filled with the sound of squealing chairs and folding papers.

Laura merely shook her head, ducking away up the stairs the moment they were in the Entrance Hall. She dove into the first girls’ toilet she came across and fell to the floor in a stall, pressing her back against the door. The nausea came and went, tossing her about but not quite hitting the point where she felt she needed to make use of the U-bend waiting pristinely in front of her.

Carmilla had just been forced to answer that question. Carmilla had just had to write an entire essay that blatantly painted her as a dark creature, as a monster. She had just had to describe the ways in which she could be murdered—the ways in which many people in their society wanted to have her done away with.

And Laura could do nothing to comfort her, could not ask if she were alright—and how could she be, after that?

Laura certainly was not alright, and she was not the one in Carmilla’s shoes. The only reason Laura cared this much was because she—

But she could not finish the thought. And she certainly could not do anything about this now, in the middle of the O.W.L.s.

She should have told Carmilla ages ago, just like she should have confronted Lily about what she did or did not know. She had done neither, though. Because she was a coward.

When she returned to the Great Hall, lunch was in its final stages. Carmilla was sitting with the Ravenclaws, but she spotted Laura the moment she stepped through the doors, as though she had been watching for her. She gestured at the empty spot beside her, and Laura’s thoughts rushed with excuses and lies, ways to avoid seeing her for at least the rest of the day, until she could be sure she would not blurt something she should not...

But she was weak, when it came to Carmilla. She always would be.

“Hey,” she said, claiming the spot she had been offered.

Carmilla frowned. “Are you okay? You sort of took off.”

Of course Carmilla was asking her that question, when it should have been the other way around. Laura swallowed around the lump in her throat.

“Fine,” she said. She scooped macaroni onto her plate, but barely picked at it.

“Was it the exam?” Carmilla pushed, “I mean, you—you studied a lot for it. I thought I saw you reading the section on dark creatures last week. Y’know;” her voice dropped, “Um, vampires?”

She had said the word. Laura set her fork down altogether, her mouth dry. Carmilla was looking at her with expectation swimming in her eyes, her hands clenched in her lap.

“Right,” said Laura. She licked her lips hurriedly, her voice cracking, “I—I did. I’ll probably lose some points, though. I was a little... opinionated.”

Carmilla’s shoulders tensed, even as her voice murmured a calm: “How so?”
Maybe she could be helpful, after all. Maybe she could do something to show Carmilla, to make her see—

“Well. The question didn’t really ask directly for information on protective legislation, but I included it anyways. There—there aren’t enough laws to prevent discrimination on any part-human species. Our textbooks portrayed the trial of Calista Aires as some sort of triumph, when really there was no jury of her peers, and no real proof of wrong-doing except the words of that one villager, and he was totally biased!”

Carmilla’s eyes had gone soft. Laura rushed on, desperate to make her point before the opportunity was lost.

“And for the ‘identification’ portion, we were supposed to write out the characteristics someone could use to pick out a vampire in a crowd, but there’s such risk of stereotyping when you do that, and the registration system is barbaric and set up to prevent the welcoming of vampires and werewolves into society. The idea that anyone needs to be protected from them is just—it’s wrong, on so many levels.” She took a steadying breath, meeting Carmilla’s dark gaze. “No one should be judged based on something they can’t control.”

The other girl was silent for a long moment. Laura raced back over the words that had spilled off her tongue, wondering if she had gone too far, if she had said something that was offensive—

“Do you really believe that?”

She did not hesitate, “Of course. And—and when I’m a journalist, I’m going to show other people that they should believe it, too.”

Carmilla’s gaze darted across her features, the tiniest of frowns marring her brow, “That’s risky, don’t you think?”

With a shrug, Laura picked up her fork again. Her appetite had returned. “I don’t care. Everyone deserves to have their story heard.”

Carmilla’s smile, when she turned back to her plate, was brighter than Laura had ever seen it. She felt all the anxiety, the nausea from only moments before, fall away.

For the practical that afternoon, Laura was directed to Professor Tofty’s station. There was a dummy set up, on which she was to perform a series of attacks. These went fairly well, if the examiner’s encouraging smile was anything to go by, and she was able to undo the hexes which were put on her with little difficulty (Jelly Legs gave her less trouble than Ever-Growing Hair).

And then she was to take her turn with the boggart chest in the corner, and Laura forgot herself. The chest opened, the dark cloaked head of the Dementor emerging, and Laura was back in the familiar third floor classroom. She squared her shoulders, raised her wand, and acted on instinct.

“Expecto Patronum!”

From the end of her wand burst the same shining creature she had seen first only two months ago. She had practiced again in recent days, but had produced only mist. Still, the Dementor-boggart was always defeated. There had been no more unwelcome visits of her worst memory.

The creature that pounced upon the Dementor now, streaking across the Great Hall in a great, wide lap, was very obviously a panther. It was lithe and graceful, sinewy muscles propelling it along, though its paws never touched the ground.
The boggart splayed on the ground, tangled in its robes comically, and Laura realized too late that she was not being tested on the Patronus Charm.

“Oh, no! Riddikulus!”

The battered figure burst into smoke.

She turned, sputtering, to Professor Tofty, ready to apologize and ask if she was going to be docked points, but he was beaming, his hands clasped in front of him.

“A fully corporeal Patronus!” he cried.

The other examiners had stopped their work to watch, the students before them gaping just as openly. And, at the entrance to the hall, just being called into her exam, Carmilla stared. The panther curled past her, tail flicking in a friendly sort of way, and then its shape curled away into mist.

“Fantastic. Utterly fantastic,” Tofty sighed, “I do believe that’s all I need from you, Miss Hollis!”

In a daze, Laura followed the now-familiar path through the exit at the back of the hall.

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“Just remember to take your time,” said Carmilla, as Laura fidgeted in the line leading down into the dungeons. The practical portion of their Potions exam was to take place in the classroom, where all of the necessary tools and ingredients were housed.

“And write out the instructions all the way before you start,” added LaFontaine, “Better to half-make a perfect potion than to turn in something dreadful.”

“I’m not even sure why I’m bothering to take this. It’s not like I’m going on to N.E.W.T.s in this stupid class.”

LaFontaine seemed to choke at the insult to their favorite subject, but Carmilla laughed, “The more O.W.L.s the better,” she reminded Laura in a mocking tone, bumping their shoulders together as she smirked. “Didn’t you say that to me last month?’’

Laura made a face. “That’s beside the point.”

The dungeon doors opened, and the line began to shuffle forward. Laura tightened her grip on her bag, pulse quickening. She was not going to miss this part of the castle. Not even slightly.

“We’re over halfway through,” Carmilla reminded her, as they set their things down side-by-side at a workbench. “And then we’ll have two weeks of peace and quiet before the holidays. We can go down to the pitch every day.”

Again, she leaned close to give Laura’s shoulder a nudge.

There was a nervous, eager energy in her eyes, when she sought out Laura’s gaze. It had been there all weekend, as they put in yet more mind-numbing hours of studying. Laura wasn’t sure what to make of it, but she wasn’t complaining. There had been a great deal of hand-brushing, as well, and quiet jokes shared between just the two of them. At one point, Perry had banished them from the library for giggling too loudly, and they had settled down by the lake, quizzing each other on obscure facts for History of Magic.

It had been nice. Familiar in a way that they had not been, even before, and Carmilla’s eyes had been
alight with awe when she asked how long Laura had been casting a full Patronus.

At first, Laura had thought she was merely impressed. But, then she wondered, her thoughts drifting back to Remus’s words.

Now, the only thing she was certain of was that she liked it when Carmilla smiled as much as she had in the past few days. She wanted that to stick around.

There was an elaborate collection of ingredients on the table before them, and identical pewter cauldrons sat waiting. Once a hush had fallen over the room, each student seated and attentive, the plump witch who was running their exam waved her wand to reveal the words ‘PEPPER-UP POTION’ written in neat, cursive scrawl.

With a sigh, Laura tugged her parchment close and began to scribble out the ingredients and instructions that she had memorized during her studying, hoping that she had not mixed up which type of insect wings they were supposed to use.

Overall, the second week of exams was far less stressful than the first. With the majority of difficult subjects out of the way, and with Laura not taking Divination or Arithmancy, Thursday approached rapidly.

She was not confident in her Potions score, nor her Astronomy, but she was pleased with her performance in Care of Magical Creatures (they had been asked to locate a Bowtruckle in a small tree, and successfully offer it food from its regular diet). As she set down her quill for the final time, the end of History of Magic having just been called out, she felt fairly solid about her chances for an ‘Exceeds Expectations’ in the subject.

The fifth and seventh years poured out onto the castle lawns in the mid-afternoon light, raucous with pent-up energy and beaming with relief.

“Freedom!” whooped LaFontaine, throwing their fist up into the air. Carmilla shocked them with a loud wolf-whistle, which drew laughter from the crowd around them.

“There’s a party tonight, in Gryffindor Tower,” Laura told her, as they tossed themselves down on the bank of the lake. The water rippled pleasantly under the lightest of spring breezes. “We might have lost the House Cup… and the Quidditch Cup… but that doesn’t mean we don’t know how to have a good time.”

“Was that an invitation?” asked Carmilla, raising an eyebrow.

“Obviously. Unless you have a Ravenclaw celebration you need to be at… what with winning both of those things I just mentioned…”

Carmilla chuckled, “Oh, I’m sure there will be some sort of event. But… I wouldn’t miss a chance to see how you Gryffindors live.”

“You’re in for an experience. I hope you like Firewhisky.”

“After the past two weeks? I would happily subside on only Firewhisky.”

Laura laughed, “Oh c’mon, Carm, you breezed through all of those exams. I saw you doodling on the desk halfway through Ancient Runes. You’re brilliant.”

If Carmilla was preparing a retort, she did not get the chance to offer it.
“That reminds me, Carmilla, I’ve been meaning to ask,” said Perry, finally setting aside her exam paper (much to the relief of LaFontaine), “I remember you once telling us that you expected to be in Slytherin. Yet, you’re obviously far more intelligent than the lot of them.”

“I’m not sure I heard a question in there,” said Carmilla. She had stiffened ever-so-slightly, and Laura pressed their shoulders together, their hips nudging. Carmilla glanced down at her lap and sighed. “I always wanted to be in Ravenclaw. I just… didn’t think I deserved it. Guess the Sorting Hat thought differently.”

There was a pause.

“Well,” Perry declared briskly, “I’ve never met anyone more befitting of Ravenclaw. I’ll be surprised if you don’t get more ‘Outstanding’s than me.”

“Damn. Karnstein, I hope you know what a compliment that is,” LaFontaine put in, their eyes wide.

From the way Carmilla was eyeing Perry with open astonishment, Laura guessed that she did. Even with the distinct lack of conversation during their studying hours over the past few months, Perry’s competitive academic personality was hard to miss.

There was something to be said for the bonding that came with mutual suffering; in moments like these, Laura almost forgot that things had ever been different. Now, Carmilla was expected in their conversations, rather than awkwardly tacked on (or coldly ignored).

“You know, she’s actually not that bad,” LaFontaine had confided, once. “She’s got some genius ideas about flavor-splicing herbs with Preservation Potions…”

“Am I expected to bring something to this party?” Carmilla asked, lying back on the grass and draping an arm over her eyes to shield them from the sun.

“Just yourself!” said Laura, gladly sprawling out beside her.

“Freedom!” LaFontaine declared once more, just because they could. There were hearty cheers of agreement from around the lake.

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James Potter and Sirius Black smuggled armfuls of treats up from the kitchens after dinner, gleefully spreading their haul on the tables by the fire, which had, at long last, been cleared of textbooks and parchment.

Someone set up their wireless, blasting the latest of Celestina Warbeck’s hits (a rather warbling song about finding love down Knockturn Alley), while a group of seventh years handed out generous glasses of Firewhisky, champagne, and Butterbeer.

Laura accepted two cups of the former, holding them over her head as she wound her way back to Carmilla.

“Cheers!” she said, tapping the rims together as gently as possible. It didn’t stop a stream of amber liquid from gushing down the side and soaking her hand. She distracted herself with a hearty gulp.

“Don’t hurt yourself, cupcake,” Carmilla snorted, as Laura hissed from the burn.

“I didn’t want to spill any more of it!”
“You’re not going to have taste buds for the next two weeks. And I’m going to have to hear about it every morning—‘I can’t taste the jam, Carmilla! This is horrible, Carmilla!’”

Laura thwacked her lightly on the arm, “I don’t sound like that!”

“I thought it was a pretty decent impression.” Remus had joined them, grinning cheerfully over a brimming mug of Butterbeer. "Good to see you two back in the land of the living."

“Well, mostly,” Carmilla corrected, a humorous glint in her eyes. She took a swig from her cup, barely flinching as the liquor hit her throat.

Laura raised an eyebrow. *Does she mean..?*

Remus seemed just as astonished. He cast a sidelong look at Laura, as if to confirm that she were indeed still present, and then gave his head a small shake, his lip quirking.

“You’re in an oddly good mood.”

Carmilla shrugged, “I suppose.” She downed another third of her drink as though it were nothing and turned to Laura with a brightness in her gaze the likes of which Laura had never seen. “I want to talk to you about something,” she said.

Laura found herself nodding, “Okay. Sure. Shoot.”

Hand snaking down to find Laura’s, Carmilla tugged her away and through the party, leaving Remus looking rather Confunded in their wake.

She led them to the windows, a hard look driving away the group of third year girls that had chosen it as their primary gossip spot. Laying her palms flat on the windowsill, she peered through the glass and across the vast expanse of the Hogwart’s grounds to the Forbidden Forest.

Laura’s pulse was buzzing numbly in her ears.

“Carm?”

Carmilla turned to face her, a sad smile playing through her features. It cast new shadows across her face in the dim lights, drawing her eyebrows in dark angles and toying with the hues of brown in her stare.

“You know, Gryffindor was never even on my radar. I told you I had always wanted to be in Ravenclaw, and I thought surely I’d be sorted with the Slytherins despite that… but I never even contemplated being here.” She gestured back towards the party, where someone was blowing up Exploding Balloons. The room popped with the sizzling of mini, colorful fireworks.

“I’m not brave like you, Laura,” she murmured.

Laura blinked. “I’m *hardly* brave, Carm—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course you are.” Carmilla shook her head, her smile turning incredulous, “You’re so many things that I’m not, Laura. I can’t even count all of them.”

It wasn’t just Laura’s pulse that was working overtime, now. A flush was steadily working its way up her chest and into her neck. She could feel it pricking in the tips of her ears, and she knew it was not from the Firewhisky.

Carmilla took a long, steadying breath, dipping her head and consciously stepping back. The space
between them felt like the cool breeze of thrown back sheets. Laura sucked in a breath, as well, as Carmilla glanced up at her through her lashes. Her hands clenched and unclenched at her sides.

“I really just—I trust you, Laura, okay?”

Numbly, her throat tight, Laura nodded.

“And it’s—it’s okay if this—it’s okay however you take this.”

_Oh god._

“Hey. You can tell me anything,” Laura whispered. It was the same promise she had shared months prior, and the seriousness with which she said the words had not changed.

Carmilla bit her lip, “Laura—”

A bright red balloon hit Carmilla in the side of the head, rebounding barely a meter before it burst, coating the both of them in a thick shower of glitter.

Laura dropped her cup, the amber liquid tossing itself entirely on Carmilla’s shoes.

“Fuck!” Carmilla yelped.

There were a number of apologies called from across the room, though none of them seemed sincere, what with all the laughter mixed in. Perry, however, appeared within seconds, wand already out, and wasted no time clearing the worst of the disaster from around their eyes.

Laura spit out a mouthful of the stuff, her nose wrinkled in distaste. Carmilla was silent, eyes downcast, as Perry finished with her.

“Honestly,” the ginger huffed, “There’s a point at which shenanigans go too far, and I’m fairly certain tricks like these are on the banned list—or they should be. I’ll have to have a word with Professor McGonagall tomorrow… oh, Carmilla, you’re drenched. Come on, I’ll let you borrow some of my socks.”

Dumbstruck, her pulse still racing and her eyes still wide with shock, Laura could do nothing as Carmilla was dragged away to be attended to.

Whatever she was going to say—the secret Laura suspected she was finally about to spill—was lost.

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The final two weeks of the term were somehow more stressful than the week leading up to the O.W.L.s—at least for Laura. A suspicious LaFontaine kept asking why she was so jumpy, to which she repeated the same lie about being nervous about her scores.

“We have until _July_,” LaFontaine insisted, on each of these occasions. “Honestly, L, you’re looking more frazzled than Perry, these days.”

She had tried to get Carmilla alone, again, in the days following the party, but the circumstances failed her each and every time. Someone else would interrupt—Perry would insist on coming to Hogsmeade with them because she needed a new quill, or LaFontaine would overhear their plans to visit the pitch and tag along. Once, Laura had accidentally instigated a party in Ravenclaw Tower by showing up with a bottle of Firewhisky under her arm.

The day before the Hogwarts Express was set to return them to London, Laura settled herself in the
Great Hall the moment the doors opened for breakfast, her eyes locked on the Ravenclaw table.

Carmilla had to know before they left. Laura couldn’t let her go the summer worrying about her reaction—not after she had seen the fear in Carmilla’s eyes as she prepared to tell her the truth. She had never cared less that her best friend was a vampire.

It didn’t change how she felt about her.

(In fact, she was certain she still felt a little more than she was supposed to.

Which was another issue entirely.)

The moment Carmilla appeared at the doors, Laura was on her feet. She caught the other girl by the arm, tugging her back into the Entrance Hall and straight through the front doors of the castle.

Eyes still thick with sleep, Carmilla stumbled after her. “Ow. Good morning to you, too,” she muttered, her words laced with sarcasm, “I guess we’re skipping the whole ‘breakfast is the most important meal of the day’ thing?”

“Nope. I stuffed like ten pastries in my bag.”

“Resourceful, aren’t you?”

Laura did not know how to start the conversation—how does one explain that they know someone’s most guarded secret?—and so she settled for grabbing their brooms and a Quaffle, urging Carmilla up into the air after an offering of coffee from her thermos and three of the aforementioned pastries.

No interruptions, she thought firmly at whatever part of the universe might be listening. She gave the sky a meaningful glare, for good measure. The day had dawned clear, without even a wisp of a cloud in sight, but the sun was still low on the horizon.

They fell into a familiar rhythm, with Carmilla dodging around the hoops and Laura successfully blocking the majority of her shots. She still had the upper hand on the other girl, though there was no denying Carmilla was talented. She always had been, no matter what she said otherwise—it was just that she had lacked the planning needed to make her moves work, before.

She took each failed shot well in stride, taunting Laura and celebrating elaborately when she did manage to get the Quaffle past her.

Laura tried not to think about how this was the last time they would get to do this. There was an entire summer stretching before them, and even with the tempting leisure of homework-free days, and the plans she had to spend the first half of the holidays in Paris with her Dad (he had landed an excellent construction project helping out an old buddy) she felt a sting of melancholy at the idea of being without Carmilla for all of those days.

That they would write was not even a question, at this point, but it wouldn’t be the same.

There was a second reason she had needed to meet with Carmilla before the break.

“You know how I’m going away with my Dad?” she asked, holding onto the Quaffle instead of tossing it back into Carmilla’s waiting grasp.

Carmilla nodded.

“Well, we’ll be back in August. And we’ll be coming through London.”
“And you want to do our school shopping together?” Carmilla guessed, smiling teasingly, “That’s a risk, y’know. You’re betting on the Hogwarts letter system being on time.”

“Well, I mean, we could go shopping. But, that’s not really what I had in mind. I was hoping that, maybe… you might want to spend the rest of the summer at my house.”

Had Carmilla been the one holding the Quaffle, Laura was certain she would have dropped it. She lost altitude, her grip tighten on her broom and her eyebrows flying up towards her hairline.

“What?”

“You don’t have to say yes, if you don’t want to. I promise my Dad is cool—well, he’s a little dorky, and a little overprotective, but he’s really sweet and he doesn’t mind house-guests. I haven’t asked yet, but I know he’d be thrilled, what with how I’ve spent a lot of time with Perry and LaF over the holidays and he hasn’t gotten to play host with anyone… I’m rambling. Sorry. It’s fine if you’re not interested.”

“No, no, Laura I—I’d love to.” Laura beamed. “It’s just. There’s something you need to know, first.”

The words _I already know_ were forming on her lips, overly eager from weeks of waiting in the back of her throat, but Carmilla was drifting out of earshot, urging her towards the stands. Laura followed at once.

Finally, _finally_ she was going to tell her.

Carmilla had said she trusted Laura, and Laura had made her opinions on the subject known—there would be no more dancing around the topic. No more pretending she did not know, no more worried looks from Carmilla or nervous silences.

_{Best friends, she thought to herself. Carmilla trusted her to be her best friend._

Carmilla had gotten past her ill-advised kiss. It was about time she showed Carmilla she could handle anything from her, as well.

She had been planning to be the one to tell Carmilla. There had been a whole speech plotted out—an apology for keeping her knowledge a secret, a reassurance that it had not changed how she saw the other girl, and a promise that she would never share the secret with another living soul.

Laura was busy re-writing in her head—guessing at how Carmilla would phrase things, wondering if she should cut in and save her friend the stress of spitting out the words herself—and, wrapped up in this new rush of thoughts, she stumbled as she landed on the railing.

It was something she had done dozens of times. Her trainers were normally sure-footed as she hopped over and shouldered her broom.

Today, she mistimed her dismount. Her foot swung over before she had pulled the turn far enough about. Her ankle cracked as she went over shoulder-first, slamming into the creaking wood with her broom still gripped firmly between her hands.

The handle flew up as she instinctively went to shield her face, and she felt a terrible crunch as stars flew across her vision, the world going simultaneously very dark and very light.

Her face was hot, her hands dropping her broom and going up to clutch at her nose.
Which was definitely broken.

“Laura!”

Carmilla had already landed securely. She fell to Laura’s side, now, reaching first for her bent ankle, and then froze. Her head snapped up, her nostrils flaring, and, as Laura’s hands slipped down from her nose, they both saw the blood at the same time.

Everything happened at once.

Carmilla threw herself backwards, a horrible hiss of a snarl the likes of which Laura had never heard tearing from her throat. There were fangs where her incisors should have been: long, animal-like prongs that glistened in her open mouth. For the barest of seconds—though the moment seemed to slow and stretch unnaturally—her eyes were not her own.

Laura startled backwards, eyes wide and darting, a split-second surge of fear catching a gasp in her throat. She yelped as her ankle jolted against the railing, pain spasming up her leg.

The sound was like breaking glass.

At once, Carmilla’s eyes became her own. The moment they locked on Laura, her expression shattered.

Still on her back, Carmilla scooted further away, scrambling to her feet and gripping the railing. A trembling hand had come up to cover her mouth, tears flooding her eyes.

“Carm,” Laura tried, her voice thick with the blood running down her throat. Just speaking her name hurt in more ways than one, but not nearly as much as the terrified expression on her best friend’s face.

Her head shaking frantically back and forth, shoulders beginning to quake, Carmilla threw herself onto her broom and was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to yell at me below, or over on tumblr: jg-firefly
August of 1970 (Pre-First Year)

Professor Dumbledore stood in the doorway, everything about him a stark contrast to his surroundings. The orphanage was drab and grey, the furnishings outdated and the walls coated in years of grime. His purple cloak, long beard, and twinkling eyes made him look more like a hallucination than an actual, human visitor.

“May I come in?” he inquired politely, his voice a soft rasp. He smiled kindly, but she shrank deeper into her spot on the edge of the mattress, regardless.

“Okay,” she muttered.

He strolled past the rows of empty beds and, with a bit of a raised eyebrow, dusted down the one beside hers before he settled on top of the comforter. It huffed up a cloud of dirt, despite his efforts, but he did not seem the least bit phased.

“Carmilla,” he greeted pleasantly. “Would you like some tea?”

This was not what she had been expecting. He took her gaping silence as acquiescence, sliding a slender wand from his cloak and conjuring up a little silver serving cart, loaded with a kettle, mismatched cups, and a small plate of scones. The tea began pouring itself.

“Sugar?”

Staring, she nodded.

Dumbledore stirred two lumps into her cup, and then pressed it into her cold hands, sipping serenely from his own chipped teacup. He seemed entirely unperturbed by her silence, merely surveying their surroundings with a calm, curious stare. From the careful way he let his eyes rove about, he found the bare walls as interesting as the artwork in a museum.

Carmilla couldn’t understand it.

“Sir?” she managed, at long last.

“Yes, Carmilla?”
“What exactly—I mean, why did you come here? To—to me?”

“I am the Hogwarts Headmaster,” he said simply, as though this should be enough of an answer. His smile was as placating as ever, but there was a new glimmer in his eyes. He adjusted his glasses.

“Er, right. But I’m not—I mean I said in my letter that I wasn’t—that I couldn’t—”

“That you did not plan to attend this autumn,” he supplied helpfully. He took another long, slow sip of his tea, sighing in satisfaction. “Yes, I received your response. I do not often get rejections, you should know.”

“And that—that’s why you’re here, then? Sir?”

“Naturally. It would be a grave shame if a talented young witch did not receive her education.”

Carmilla stared down at her ratty t-shirt, two sizes too large and littered with holes. “I’m not a witch,” she whispered.

“Of course you are,” said Dumbledore. “I have quite a list of sources to prove that very thing.”

She took a shuddering breath. “I-I was a witch. But, now—”

“Now, you are a witch, and also a vampire.”

Carmilla’s head shot up, her eyes going wide. Dumbledore set down his teacup and met her gaze levelly, folding his hands on his lap.

“One thing does not cancel out the other. You are as much of a witch today as you were the day you were born. My research indicates that you have already shown great talent—childhood magic rarely manifests so strongly, did you know that? I, myself, rendered a mob speechless quite by accident, and that was considered odd. You—”

She looked away, and he made a soft tutting noise with his tongue.

“Protecting your family is no shame, Carmilla.”

“They’re dead,” she stated bitterly.

“Yes. And you can rest assured that they knew how fiercely you loved them. How you will continue to love them—for love is not a thing that fades. It is a stronger magic than many will ever know.”

Carmilla did not have a response for that.

“I cannot force you to attend my school,” he said.

“I thought that was why you were here?” she mumbled. She dared glance up at him, fiddling with one of the rips in her jeans.

“Oh, certainly I am here to request your enrollment. The choice, however, is still very much your own.”

That was unexpected.

“Then I’m not going.”

“Ah. If you don’t mind my asking, why is it that you feel so strongly against the idea? We have
established that you are, indeed, a witch, have we not?”

“Yes, but… I’m still not… I won’t be like the other kids. I’ll be dangerous. They won’t—no one will want me there.”

“You think so? I’ve heard quite the opposite from my staff… there was overwhelming support for your presence in their classrooms.”

Carmilla opened her mouth, shut it again, and swallowed hard. “The other students. Their parents…”

“Oh, yes. You have hit the nail on the head, as it were. However, you might be surprised to learn that the same witches and wizards that would oppose your attendance also hold rather strong opinions on my role as Headmaster.” He smiled pleasantly. “They would quite prefer if I were to befall a deadly accident, I think. That does not stop me from doing my duties with the same interests as ever.”

“But… won’t they—won’t someone stop you? If I were to… go?”

His eyes twinkled with victory. “Those who do not know that there is something to oppose, cannot oppose it.”

It took her a moment to riddle that one out.

“You want to… keep it a secret? I won’t have to—nobody will know?”

Dumbledore tilted his head to the side, blinking serenely at her.

She toyed with the concept, studying him as he poured himself a fresh cup of tea and stirred in at least three lumps of sugar. His expression was as calm as ever.

“What if I hurt someone?” she asked, her voice small.

“Have you hurt any of the children, here?”

Carmilla shook her head. “The, um, the blood…”

“Your blood supply will be just the same within the walls of Hogwarts,” he assured. “My arrangements will not change—they will merely gain a new delivery address.”

“You’ve been—you’re the one who’s been sending me—”

Dumbledore smiled.

She should have known.

“Isn’t this… risky?” she asked. “For—for you, I mean, Professor?”

He stood, straightening his robes. “Life is hardly enjoyable without a little risk, Carmilla.” He pulled an envelope from within his sleeve, and placed it onto the bed at her side. “The Hogwarts Express departs from Platform 9¾ at King’s Cross on September 1st at exactly eleven o’clock. You’ll find your ticket and a list of necessary supplies in there—and you should also have access to a small fund at Gringotts. Ask for Vault 713.”

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Dumbledore was disappointed. Carmilla could feel it in the air of his office, weighted and unnatural, as she fidgeted in the oversized armchair before his desk. He had his fingers tented together before him, his eyes closed.

The excuses piled on top of one another, shoving their way to the front, begging to cross her lips: *Severus only said it was for ‘enemies’ and do you know how difficult it was to extract that counter-curse from him? and she could have killed me with that fire—even if she didn’t know it.*

Carmilla said none of these aloud.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she whispered.

His eyes popped open at the words, his brow creasing into a vast collection of wrinkles.

“And for what, exactly, are you apologizing, Carmilla?”

She crossed and uncrossed her legs, and shoved down the indignant, arguing voice that was still yelling from the back of her mind. “I started it,” she admitted. “I shouldn’t have said what I did—done what I did—and I-I know it was wrong. I know I risked everything that you’ve done for me—”

“I did not push for your attendance so that you could feel indebted to me.”

She fell silent at the words, head bowed.

“Everyone must make their own path in life, Carmilla. I merely opened the gate. Let me ask… do you regret your actions because you feel you have disappointed me, or because you have disappointed yourself?”

Carmilla swallowed, her throat tight. “Both.”

At last, there was a sliver of his old smile. “That is good news. You should know I will not intrude on your quarrels with your classmates unless they cross a line that I would not accept from any student. Today, as it were, is one of those times.”

He studied her for a long moment. If her heart were not dead in her chest, she was sure her pulse would be pounding.

“It might interest you to know, however, that Miss Hollis was very adamant about her injury being sustained through an accident.”

Carmilla lifted her head, eyes wide. “She was?”

She had been certain the other girl had given her up. It would have been well-deserved—Carmilla had felt ill from the moment the curse had crossed her lips, and not just because the scent of Laura’s blood had tugged at something deep and horrifying within her.

(She had caused that. *She* had put someone in actual, life-threatening danger.)

“Indeed. I imagine, were I to ask her myself, she would maintain her story. Gryffindors, of course, have always been a stubborn bunch—myself among them, naturally.” He let his fingers thread together, and leaned back in his chair. “I know things have not been easy for you. And I have seen you work to, ah… *fit in?*”
At this, she tensed, a glum anxiety drawing her shoulders down. He was referring to the few friends she had managed to gain over the years. Dumbledore was true to his word, when he said he would not interfere with her classmates—he had never said spoken against her choice of companions, letting her teachers dole out punishment when she was caught time and again with Rosier and his mates.

All of those times, Carmilla had been the tagalong, nodding along with their viewpoints, thrilling at the way they took her advice on magical matters.

It was always Hollis, when she acted alone. Always Hollis, when she kicked out a leg in the corridor or found herself in a duel.

There was just… something about her.

And yet, never had it reached a level like today.

(She could still see Laura’s panicked expression as she threw her hand up to her face. Could still see the way she flinched in automatic fear when Carmilla tugged her aside in the Entrance Hall.)

“They like me,” she mumbled. Even as she said the words, she did not believe them. If there was something the Slytherins liked about her, it was not who she was as a person.

Dumbledore clearly did not, either. He nodded once. “I see. Let me ask… do you like them?”

To this, she could only shrug. She liked that they did not call her names, that they nodded to her in the hallways, that they mocked the classmates who were rude to her.

“Perhaps you should consider that there are many forks in the road. One might encounter such a divergence at any time… and choose where they wish their new destination to be.”

Carmilla didn’t know where she wanted her destination to be. She never wanted to leave Hogwarts, never wanted to consider what her life would have to be when this was over. Who would accept her as she was? The only ones who had ever seemed likely were the very people she spent her free time with, now: the ones who thrilled at dark magic, who joked about alliances with giants and werewolves, who would at least be drawn to her power, if nothing else.

“Where do you think I should be going?” she asked, the words escaping without her permission. They were thick with desperation, and she flinched back in her seat.

“That, I’m afraid, is not a decision I can make for you.” He regarded her a long moment, and then smiled. His next words were final, but not without kindness. “I will, however, suggest that you arrive at Professor Flitwick’s office tomorrow at five o’clock for your first detention.”

“Yes, Professor.”

///

February of 1974 (Fourth Year)

“You look terrible,” said Remus, tossing his things down on the table. He slouched into a free chair as she glared up at him.

“No better than you,” she shot back.

As unfazed as always, Remus merely stared, his brow knitting. “Seriously. Did something happen?
Have you not been… you know? Drinking?"

Carmilla ground her teeth, highly aware of the fang tips just beneath the surface of her gums. They were sore.

“The supply has been… short,” she admitted. She could hear his pulse pounding in his veins, and swallowed sharply. “You shouldn’t sit so close.”

“It’s not like you could hurt me,” he said blithely, rooting around in his bag and extracting a few textbooks. “Hell, you’d probably start growing fur or some crap.”

“You know that’s not how it works.”

Her tone was flat, and tense, and it made his shoulders deflate at once, all attempts at humor falling off. “What has Dumbledore said?” he asked.

“He’s working on it. His source was arrested, but he’s trying to get him released.”

“Mundungus?”

She nodded wearily.

“What did they nab him for?”

“I don’t know. Faulty cauldrons or some shit. Probably deserved it.”

Remus frowned. “Well, you don’t deserve this. I still don’t get why Dumbledore trusts him.”

Carmilla didn’t know, either. All that she had ever cared about was that he sent blood—the good kind, the kind that had been properly stored and preserved. She never asked questions on where it had been obtained; she didn’t want to know.

She shrugged. “I’ll be fine.”

“For how much longer?”

That wasn’t something she wanted to consider. “Long enough.” She raked a hand through her tangled hair. “Isn’t tonight the full moon?”

“Ah, yes, she remembers.”

“I always do. Are you sure you’ll be fine on your own?”

“Of course,” he said at once. “There’s really no reason you should be putting yourself at risk.”

“It’s not like you could hurt me,” she parroted his words back at him.

“I’ve hurt you plenty, Carmilla.”

“Sorry, I didn’t realize we were being literal,” she scoffed, rolling her eyes. There was no one nearby. She dropped her voice anyway. “Besides, I always win. You’re a terribly clumsy wolf.”

“And you’re a mean kitty.”

She drew in a breath, fighting off an instinctive hiss. “I’m not a kitty.”

“Sorry, your jungle queen highness,” he snorted. “If I let you come along, will you promise I won’t
wake up with any new claw marks?”

“I won’t ruin your face, at least. Does that count?”

He scowled, and flipped open a book with much more force than was necessary. “Aren’t you meeting with Hollis tonight?”

She grimaced. Why do I tell him these things?

“…Briefly, yes.”

“And are you planning to... tell her?”

Carmilla went stiff. “No. Absolutely not.”

“You have to have at least considered it.”

“Of course I have. And it’s insane—something you clearly know, otherwise you’d have told your friends by now.”

He had the decency to look chastised, if only for a moment. “I’m going to tell them. Soon. And besides, Laura is a good person.”

That wasn’t something that Carmilla could deny. She had cursed the girl, and been rewarded with free Quidditch lessons. She had been unpleasant, had pushed her away with fury and frustration, and had been met with only a curious sympathy and a request to meet that evening.

“I barely know her.”

“But you like her.”

If there were any blood left in her system, she would have blushed. Instead, she looked forcibly at her lap, her nose wrinkling with distaste.

“Hardly.”

His eyes were bright. “Whatever you say, kitty.”

She punched his arm.

///

There was a rhythm to these things. Ever since Dumbledore had called her to his office on the first day of second year and introduced her to young Remus Lupin, Carmilla had felt an ache somewhere between sympathy and jealousy. Here was a kid so much like herself: an unwilling participant in his own life story. That he had parents, that he had a naturally kind demeanor and the sort of draw that gave him actual friends, did nothing to diminish her instinctive desire to protect him.

Where she slipped into the Hospital Wing for private feeding sessions every few weeks, Remus was smuggled from the castle once a month. He would be a monster but for one night, where she was a monster every day, and yet she was not so wild, so destructive, even when she was hungry.

It was hard to say whose fate was the short straw.

The track she cut across the grounds with Remus, tonight, was as familiar as ever. She had been walking it for years, slipping effortlessly into the low, lithe cat-form that could make quick work of
the Whomping Willow.

Remus followed her into the tunnel amongst the tangled roots as the shadows just began their long stretch over the Hogwarts’ grounds. The sun was nestled low amongst the treetops of the Forbidden Forest.

There was still an hour of daylight, yet, and they would be well-settled before the full moon made its appearance known, but there had always been a cautious edge around these things.

“Are you sure your friends don’t know about this? About me?” she asked him, as they dropped into the remains of dusty armchairs in the Shrieking Shack. Hers creaked under the addition of her weight, but did not give out.

“I haven’t said a word.”

“That doesn’t mean they aren’t suspicious. Have they noticed that we meet each other?”

“Well,” he said, folding his arms behind his head as he lounged back, “They think I have a crush on you.”

At this, Carmilla couldn’t help but snort out a laugh. “I suppose you’re encouraging that theory, then?”

“I’m not discouraging it. Though I imagine they’ll figure out eventually that you have… other interests.”

She rolled her eyes. “I told you—”

“Yes, yes, you don’t like Laura. So you’ve said. The point still stands.”

Carmilla shrugged.

“If you don’t want to miss her, though, you should probably leave.” He tapped at his watch.

She was nodding, rolling herself back to her feet to head for the entrance of the tunnel, when she heard him gasp.

The sound was familiar, even as it was unexpected. It’s too early, she thought at once, spinning just in time to see Remus fall from his chair, curling upon himself with twitching limbs.

Teeth baring, Carmilla fell into form. Remus’s tousled, mousy brown hair was regressing even as dark clumps burst free elsewhere, ears curling up and out, snout stretching and fangs snapping. He leapt for her at the same moment she dove for him, a warning snarl breaking free of her throat.

This was not Remus, this was the wolf. It clamped its jaws briefly at her scruff, and she twisted free, massive paws scrabbling at its sides with claws just edging free of their sheaths.

It lunged for the open trap door, and she caught it about the haunches, sending it tumbling into the furniture. The armchair gave out at last, the back breaking free of the seat and falling in a cloud of dust. They rolled into it, Carmilla pinning the wolf briefly before it flipped her, claws digging hard into her gut.

A keening cry broke from her lips, and she knew blood had been drawn, but that didn’t mean she was going to let it—

The wolf leapt from where it had only a moment before towered over her, the force knocking the
wind from her body. By the time she righted herself, furious and wide-eyed, the wolf had already slipped down the tunnel.

Fuck.

///

March of 1974 (Fourth Year)

“I doubt she meant it like that.”

Carmilla scowled up at the ceiling. The Hospital Wing bed was as unyielding as ever under her stiff back. She set down her mug of blood on the nightstand.

“But what if she did? What if she knows?”

“Well, if she knows—and that’s a strong if—then she’s clearly keeping it to herself. I still say she was just joking, though. Y’know, that thing that friends do? And she’s not wrong; you could use a tan.”

Carmilla turned her glare on him. “We aren’t really friends.”

“Oh, sorry, my apologies. That girl that enjoys spending time with you and wants to help you play Quidditch? You know, the one that definitely doesn’t care about you in the least? Pretty sure she was joking.”

Carmilla’s glare did not lessen. “She’s been avoiding me for weeks. And these damn little kids keep following me everywhere; I swear I’m gonna shove one of them into a wall and that really won’t look good…”

Remus scoffed out a laugh, “I would advise against the violence, yes. And, maybe Laura isn’t too fond of your new friends, either.”

“They are definitely not my friends.”

His eyes glimmered with humor, “Ah, but they love you so dearly…”

“Imbeciles,” she muttered.

Remus sat up, testing his bandaged shoulder. “You did a number on me, you know.”

“Yes, well, I was hungry. And frustrated. At least you didn’t get away this time.”

He ignored the latter part of her comment, though his brief flinch did inspire a flicker of guilt in her chest.

“Frustrated, hm?” he asked.

A low snarl grumbled in the back of her throat. “Shut it. Not that kind of frustrated.”

“Could have fooled me.” He tipped his head, letting his elbows fall to rest languidly on his knees. “Seriously, though. When are you going to actually talk to her? You avoided her for weeks after that stupid comment—that you are still hung up on for whatever reason—and now you’re sitting here having a pity party about how she’s avoiding you.”

“I didn’t avoid her,” Carmilla argued, a blush flaring hot across her cheeks. The blood in her system
made her feel heavy and warm and a little too aware of everything. She shifted on the bed. “I waited on the pitch for her. A lot.” (Yikes, that was embarrassing) “Plus, I had a lot of homework. And there was Quidditch practice—the actual kind, with my team.”

Remus’s raised eyebrow said he did not believe her.

“If that’s true, then just ask her to meet. Explain yourself.”

“I am not telling her,” she snapped at once. The thrill of fear that shot up her spine at the sheer thought was unavoidable.

“Wasn’t suggesting that you should,” he offered, his smile sincere. “Just… apologize for staying away. Find out if she really is upset with you.”

///

June of 1974 (Fourth Year)

Carmilla wasn’t sure how she managed to pose the question. One moment, Laura’s eyes were locking with her across the library, and the next she was holding up her hands with what she was certain was the most pathetic expression she’d ever displayed across her face.

She had no idea what she was doing. All she knew was that the way Laura’s eyes had lit up at the suggestion had done dangerous things to the place in her chest where her heart was supposed to be beating. Her lungs had contracted then the way they contracted now, entirely unnecessary and yet somehow instinctive, as she spotted Laura’s figure on the grassy pitch below.

She wanted Remus to be right. She wanted Laura to want the same things that spun through her thoughts these days.

It was a dangerous hope.

Laura seemed uncertain, when she rose into the air to meet her, but they both drifted towards the stands just as they had before, and Carmilla’s own hesitation was brief as she placed her hands on the railing at Laura’s side.

It took a long moment to work up the words, once she realized that Laura was not going to take the lead. The other girl was stiff, not looking at her.

“They’re driving me crazy,” she said abruptly.

Laura almost seemed to jump. She frowned. “Who?”

The words were bitter, but easy. “My fan club.”

“Oh.”

Laura’s hair fluttered around her face, her complexion golden in the fading light. She fought with the tendrils, tucking them behind her ears, and Carmilla saw that the tips had gone pink.

She let her lungs expand, taking comfort in the action, in the warmth of the air and the push of the blood through her veins.

Laura still wasn’t saying anything.

“I wanted to thank you,” Carmilla murmured.
“Um,” Laura stammered. “For… what?”

God, why was this so difficult? Why were words suddenly so challenging? “This,” she said, waving at the pitch that sprawled before them. Doubt was creeping over her. “You—you were at the matches, weren’t you?”

“Of course I was there.”

Silence descended again. There was really no avoiding this.

“So you are mad at me,” she whispered.

There was another beat of silence, and then: “What? No. I’m not mad at you.”

“You’ve been avoiding me,” Carmilla accused, heat rushing within her. “I haven’t been able to get away in the evenings, so I’ve been trying to catch you after our classes, or in the Great Hall, but you’re always with the gingers. And they hate me more than you do, so I didn’t—”

“I don’t hate you.”

Carmilla sputtered her ramblings to a halt, her eyes going wide. Of all the responses she had expected, this had not been one of them.

“I don’t hate you, Carmilla,” Laura repeated, more emphatically. “Of course I don’t hate you. I mean… I couldn’t. I couldn’t hate you.”

She was staring at Carmilla, eyes locked with hers, and Carmilla couldn’t look away.

“Okay,” she agreed slowly, swallowing past the unexpected tightness in her throat. “You don’t hate me.”

Laura’s gaze drifted, searching her face for the barest of moments. Everything about this conversation had been uneven, and jolting, and that did not change, now.

“I’m glad you don’t like them,” said Laura. “The fans, I mean.” She shrugged. “I thought you… well, I just thought you were enjoying it.”

Carmilla couldn’t help the scoff that broke loose. She could still hear the giggles following her between classes, the embarrassing requests for autographs, the attempts at forced friendship from classmates that had only ever been cruel to her. “Laura, I don’t think I’ve ever been further from enjoying myself.”

Laura’s lips parted, and Carmilla swore she saw a hearty blush color her whole face.

She wasn’t sure what to make of that, but her lungs were still working pointlessly, her fingers trembling at her sides.

“What about Quidditch?” Laura asked, finally, clearing her throat. “How do you feel about Quidditch, now?”

The emotions flashed back through her—the feel of the wind billowing out her cloak behind her, the roars of the crowd chanting her name, the astonishment on the Keeper’s face as she feinted again and again—and a smile teased across her lips without permission.

“I’d say Quidditch is a ten.”
Laura turned to look at her, then—fully look at her—and Carmilla’s lungs went back to their still, non-breathing state. She had thought, before, that Laura’s eyes were something other, but they were so close, now, that she could make out every little detail. The flecks of darkness, the reflection of the evening light catching in her pupils, the way they shone gold around the edges—

“We should keep in touch this summer,” Laura blurted, loud and unexpected. Those eyes—those perfect, shining eyes—went huge. “I mean, if you want to,” she added hastily, “I usually write, to like, Perry and LaF, which is easy, because they live next-door to each other, so it’s really like writing to one person and they just share the letter… but sometimes I write to Danny, too, so it’s not like I’m… I mean I’m not opposed to writing multiple letters.”

Carmilla stared.

“I like to write,” Laura mumbled.

Head spinning with this new information, Carmilla felt that same warmth she’d come to associate with Laura settling heartily into place in her chest. “And talk,” she said softly. It was amazing how Laura could carry on, how she could just keep going if no one stopped her. Her chest was still rising and falling rapidly with the effort of her latest speech. Carmilla cleared her throat. “I just… don’t usually get mail.”

It was a lie. She never got mail.

There was no one to write.

And Laura was offering. Laura wanted to keep in touch.

The tightness in her throat constricted, again.

“Right,” Laura said, her head bobbing quickly, and her expression shuttering with doubt. “If you don’t want—I mean it was just a thought, like, pen-friends, or… or whatever.”

“I didn’t say no,” Carmilla corrected quietly.

She was still trying to wrap her brain around the idea. What would Laura even write to her about? What could she possibly say back?

Laura had said she wrote to all of her friends, so this was hardly unprecedented for her, this was just something friendly—but even that was a hurdle for Carmilla’s mind to get over.

Maybe Laura actually did care about her. Actually did want to be friends, even after everything Carmilla had done to her.

She looked away, up towards the sky, and blinked hurriedly.

“We should probably get back,” she forced out quickly, not trusting her voice.

As they made their way to the castle there was a silence between them, and Carmilla thought (with a desperation she knew was naïve) that it was a hopeful sort of quiet.

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June of 1975 (Close of Fourth Year)

“The game is starting any minute,” Carmilla complained. She glanced back over her shoulder, towards the classroom door, as if she could see all the way down to the pitch through its cracks.
“Relax, you’ll still see plenty of Laura Hollis action.”

Remus had been practically bouncing when he caught her in the corridor, tugging her by the sleeve into the nearest classroom and giving the door an absent-minded kick in their wake. It was clear he had something important to share. It was not often that he sought her out when she was not needed; they had never been the sort of associate publicly, after all. Theirs was a friendship of the quiet hours, one built on joint fears and heavy secrets.

Carmilla had never minded.

“Well, then, just make it quick, will you?”

He rolled his eyes. “Rain on my parade, why don’t you.” The smile in his eyes, though, the one crinkling up the corners and making thin the edges of his scars, did not fade. He took a breath and let it out in a distinctly canine-like huff, his gaze locking on hers with enough seriousness to pin her to the spot. “Carmilla… I told my friends.”

The slightest of chills worked down her spine. “You… what?”

Remus’s head shook, “Well, technically I confirmed… they asked me, last night. Cornered me, really.”

“You told them that you’re a werewolf.”

The excitement on his face, the way he could not stand still, were falling in sharp contrast to the imaginary bucket of ice that had just been dumped over Carmilla’s head. Everything was screaming that this was bad idea. That this was a moment for panic, and he was too blind to see it…

“Yes! They’d been suspicious for ages, and I guess they worked it out between them. Sirius was the one that convinced them to wring it out of me, and—and they’re fine with it!” He seemed to sag with the words, the flash of his eyes telling her he was reliving the moment over. “Hell, Sirius thinks it’s cool. I had to talk him out of that, of course, but they’ve done actual research and everything.”

There was something else pulsing behind Carmilla’s ears, something that was not her pulse—that had not been in a long while—but that was loud and drumming all the same.

“You trust them, then?” she demanded.

His feet ceased their bouncing, scuffling dance, his hands stilling at his sides, and at once he looked the somber picture she was familiar with—the Remus of collection, of books and nerves.

“Of course I do. That’s what I’ve been saying.”

“But can you be sure? How can you know they won’t go telling people? Especially if they think that this is all fun. It’s your life, not a game, Remus.”

He bristled. “I know that. And I know them.”

“Can you really, though? This isn’t just yourself at risk; this is Dumbledore, too. And me.”

The moment he went truly cold, features falling into stone and shoulders stiffening, she knew she had gone too far. And, at the same time, the wave of instant remorse shoved her into the sort of clarity that she did not want to face. The kind of clarity that told her what she was feeling was not truly concern.
It was jealousy.

“Fuck, I didn’t mean that.” She let herself step closer, and was relieved when he did not immediately shrink away. “I’m glad you have them, Remus. You know I am.” She shifted her weight between her feet, waiting until he turned his gaze up to hers, and feeling vindicated when there was calm in his gaze instead of accusation. She smiled wryly. “They might be annoying, but at least they care about you.”

He returned the light punch she gave his shoulder, and she reached up to tousle his hair—a habit from a lifetime ago, from something lost—but instead found herself leaping backwards as the door flew wide.

Remus had not latched it, and there had been no warning before Laura was there, framed in the doorway, eyes darting between them and mouth forming into an undeniable ‘o’ of shock.

“I—I’m sorry. I should… I’m gonna go,” she said, backing away as the words stumbled off of her lips.

The reality of what this looked like was not lost on her, nor on Remus. When Carmilla spared him a panicked glance on her way out of the door, she could see his face burning with the weight of awkwardness. All of this occurred to her in a frantic sort of double-time, in a background space that seemed much calmer than she felt on the surface.

“Laura!”

She caught her just around the first corner, her hand reaching out on instinct and catching about her elbow. They both jolted to a halt, and Laura spun in the same moment as she yanked herself free.

She nearly thought to apologize, but Laura was already speaking. “If you want to tell me to pretend I didn’t see anything, then you don’t have to worry. I should have knocked. I won’t—I’m not going to tell anyone.”

That was hardly her first concern.

“No, Laura, I swear,” she said, and she could hear the pleading in her own voice. “It—it’s not what it looked like.”

She couldn’t explain what it had been, though. She could not justify why she was there, what Remus had been telling her, why they were even friends.

And she certainly couldn’t tell Laura who she truly liked.

“It’s fine,” Laura said, in a voice that argued it was anything but. “It… it doesn’t matter.”

Those final words were the ones that hurt. The ones that grounded her in place as Laura backed away and vanished in a rapid patter of footsteps.

///

Remus did not try to stop her. No one, in fact, dared to get in her way as she shot down the stairs. First years dove to the sides, plastering themselves to the walls and dropping their treats from the concessions trolley as she barreled by, her thoughts going faster than even her feet were capable of. Only her last, slipping clutch on reality kept her from breaking into full-on vampire speed.

There had been a moment when she was sure reality had frozen. The Bludger had connected with
Laura’s ribs, her whole body jarring, twisting from the impact, tumbling an impossible distance. Carmilla had not been fast enough with her wand. It had been in her sleeve, useless, for the whole of the event, and it had been Dumbledore’s booming spell that cushioned the fall, Dumbledore that had whisked up a stretcher from nothingness, and Dumbledore that had carried her off to be treated.

Carmilla had been frozen.

It had been Remus at her side, having pushed through the Ravenclaw section to find her, that had jarred her back to the present, and she had been gone almost before he finished his first, stumbling attempt at reassurance.

She shoved through the Hospital Wing doors without a moment’s pause, the full force of her weight and her strength tossing them wide and slamming them against their own hinges. Madam Pomfrey nearly jumped out of her skin, a bit of potion splashing down her robes and a hiss of fury parting her lips.

“Miss Karnstein! You can’t be in here——”

“Laura.”

She was on the second bed, the only patient in the place, and she looked ashen even with her eyes open and her chest clearly rising and falling.

The scent of blood hit Carmilla’s nose at once, and it only dully registered in the background that Dumbledore was not present. He must have already gone.

“Miss Karnstein, you must leave at once. You absolutely cannot——”

“She’s hurt.”

The interruption paused Madam Pomfrey only for a moment, not that Carmilla was looking at her. She only had eyes for Laura, who had not acknowledged her presence, and did not seem at all aware of where she was or what was happening. The very thought pulled something tight in Carmilla’s chest, a string biting knots into her heart. She moved to step closer.

“Well, yes, of course she’s hurt!” Pomfrey snipped. She stood in Carmilla’s way, unflinching. “That tends to be why students are sent to see me! And I can assure you that the last thing she needs is to be barged in upon while I am trying to tend to her!”

Laura was so grey, so drawn and absent, that Carmilla barely heard a word of the nurse’s speech.

“What’s wrong with her?” she asked. Her voice came out far softer than she had intended, and it was this, most likely, that deflated Pomfrey’s indignation. She turned back to the potion, pouring out the dosage and forcing it through Laura’s parted lips. The other girl’s face twisted in response, but then relaxed.

“She was hit by a Bludger, obviously,” huffed Pomfrey.

She circled the bed, tapping her wand on a glass of something clear. It swirled a bit like smoke, and a fizzling sound filled the air. Carmilla did not pretend to understand whatever it was meant to do, but it was apparently unfinished, because Pomfrey added a dash of something from a tin and then left it there to sit.

“But… she’ll be okay? Right?”
Laura certainly did not seem okay. The blood in the air, if anything, only appeared to be growing stronger, and the iron itched at the back of Carmilla’s throat.

“Yes, yes, she’ll be fine. I’ve had worse in here. Duels, potions accidents… sixth years turning their friends into pelicans for fun…”

“So, this is normal?” She gestured, from her spot at the end of the bed, at Laura’s prone figure. There was an open seat, but somehow she could not will herself to move so close, to settle at Laura’s side like someone that deserved to be there.

Standing seemed safer.

Pomfrey scowled. “Have you recently had a Healer’s apprenticeship, Miss Karnstein?”

“No.”

“I thought not.”

Minutely, the muscles in Laura’s face twitched, drawing tight and pulling lines across her brow. A low whimper parted her lips, and Carmilla was at her side in an instant, a hand finding its way to her cheek. It was cold.

And the scent of blood was stronger.

Pomfrey curtailed her protest with a firm hand on her shoulder, tugging her backwards before she could say another word and marching her towards the doors.

“Wait,” Carmilla insisted. She spun out of the grasp, though she could have easily broken it by force alone—something Pomfrey would know all too well, herself—and darted back towards the bed.

“Miss Karnstein!”

“Please, there’s something else—I think she’s bleeding, still, and—”

“Out, Miss Karnstein!”

Carmilla’s wand was in her hand before she was even aware of drawing it, her fingers shaky and her nostrils flaring. The blood was seemingly everywhere, steaming through the air like baked goods fresh from the oven, and that visual was enough to nearly level her on the spot.

It smelled incredible, and she wanted it.

“MISS KARNSTEIN!”

She shook her head, staggering back a pace. “No, listen—”

“Whoa. What the hell?”

When she turned again, it was to find almost the whole of Gryffindor hovering in the doorway, with the ginger twins leading the way. Uncertainty hung like a charge in the air, crackling among their wide eyes.

Carmilla shoved her wand back up her sleeve in the only sensible move she’d managed that evening.

“You have to check,” she insisted to Pomfrey, desperation leaching through every inch of her body, and it was only when the woman huffed a sigh and offered a curt nod that she let herself shove past
the gathering visitors, fleeing to wherever her feet dared take her.

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September of 1975 (Fifth Year)

The moment Laura had stepped through the barrier at Platform 9¾, Carmilla had been lost. She had arrived not long before, and had slouched against the far wall with no intention of talking to anyone, and yet, the moment she had seen Laura’s face she had known it was a lost cause.

She was as beautiful as ever, her cheeks flushed from the fresh chill that September had rolled in upon, her eyes bright on the heels of some remark from the gingers. Her muggle clothing was exactly the sort Carmilla would have expected—a prim, polka-dotted button-down over sensible jeans—and she had her broom slung over one shoulder as she haphazardly steered her cart of luggage through the crowd.

Carmilla wanted to go to her at once, and she hated herself for being so weak.

Laura had not written. She had insisted on staying in touch, and Carmilla had let herself believe that it would happen, that she could deserve that sort of kindness after everything she had done. She had thought that Laura would think more of her, than whatever the gingers had said about the Hospital Wing. That Laura might know she was there because she cared.

She shifted in place, tugging her single, measly trunk closer to her legs as a crowd of muggleborns and their astonished parents wandered by, an official-looking wizard offering information about the trip. For a moment, she lost sight of the other girl, and thought perhaps she had gotten on the train, but then the space between them cleared, and there she was again.

And she was frowning. The gingers were occupied, hands waving as they discussed something Carmilla did not doubt was deeply mundane, but Laura was paying them no mind. Hopping on her tiptoes, she scanned the platform, gaze sweeping back and forth.

It never stopped on Carmilla, half-hidden behind a conveniently distressed wizard and his gaggle of children.

She should have stopped hoping when one month had turned into two, when the end of August had dawned and there had still been no sign of an owl at the windows of Bromfield Orphanage.

But none of that mattered when Laura was here, her friends beside her and yet still looking for someone.

Because Carmilla could not deny that she wanted it to be her.

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October of 1975 (Fifth Year)

It was an ordinary enough day in October when the thought first crossed Carmilla’s mind.

Laura was babbling, ranting about her friends with excessive hand-motions and exaggerated huffs, and Carmilla could not look away. She had on those ridiculous pink mittens that were just slightly too big for her, and there was a hole in one of the thumbs, but Laura never seemed to care about those things. The fact that the Gryffindor logo was fading from her scarf did not keep her from wearing the thing at every opportunity.
The crimson fabric had slipped low, draped over her shoulders to leave the slope of her neck exposed, and her cheeks were flushed. She had tried to clip her hair back, but chestnut strands were already breaking loose. They tumbled forward and caught the light to cast lines of gold that matched the flecks in her eyes.

Carmilla was in love with her.

And she knew she shouldn’t be.

It didn’t matter what Remus said, there was no way that Laura could ever share any level of interest—Laura was pure, and bright. She was the sun in this miserable, dark world. Carmilla should hardly be allowed in her presence; all she would ever do was siphon away that glow, and Laura deserved so much more.

“It’s unbelievable,” Laura finished with a huff, dropping down onto the stone at Carmilla’s side.

Carmilla bought herself a few seconds, releasing the Snitch that Laura had given her to play with and watching it zip about for a moment before she snapped it up again.

“Really it’s shocking that it’s taken them this long,” she said simply. Her voice came back to her own ears distantly, as though they were stuffed with cotton. “Besides, they aren’t nearly as bad as that whole Snape-Potter-Evans triangle.”

An odd look crossed Laura’s face, and Carmilla’s chest tightened at the miniscule little twitches in her brow, the curve of her lips, the way her hair tumbled down when she shook her head before changing the topic. “So, Hufflepuff versus Slytherin next weekend—who do you think will win?”

This was easy, at least. Carmilla looked down at the Snitch. “Slytherin. With Kirsch gone, and a new Seeker that can barely fly, they’ll be lucky if they manage to get any points before Slytherin picks up the Snitch. As much as I want to see Hufflepuff trounced, I’d rather not face Slytherin directly off a win.”

There were the expressions, again, and Carmilla ached to reach out and smooth the wrinkles from her forehead, cup her tense jaw in her palm and—

She bit her tongue, and cut off the fantasy.

That was a not a safe road. That was a road that led to Laura finding out. And if she ever found out, she would not look at Carmilla with the warmth and vulnerability that she was using, now.

She would be afraid.

Besides, Laura didn’t even want anyone to know they were friends. Even if she stayed in the dark, even if she thought Carmilla were human forever, it wouldn’t change that she was not welcome in all of Laura’s life. The ginger twins were fighting—that was the only reason Laura was here with her, now, and not with them down in Hogsmeade.

“Want to go to the pitch?” Laura asked, as if to confirm this trail of thought. Below, McGonagall had packed up her checklist. Hogsmeade would be bustling with students by now, buying sweets and getting Butterbeer, laughing over those ridiculous little tables in Madam Puddifoot’s.

Carmilla let the Snitch go, and it fluttered into Laura’s waiting grasp. “Sure,” she said, turning her back on the path to the village. “Shouldn’t be anyone there, today.”

She heard the shouts first, her head lifting a second before Laura froze on the stairwell before her.
Laura turned back to her, eyes huge, and then did exactly the thing that Carmilla knew she would—the thing that Carmilla wished she would not.

“Laura!” she cried, giving chase as the other girl rushed boundlessly towards the village. The village where people were screaming. The village that was setting off all of Carmilla’s wildest danger alarms.

She knew at once what it was. By the time they scrambled into view of the main street, the place was abandoned, and the air had been bitten through with ice.

“We have to go back,” she said, catching Laura by the arm.

But Laura didn’t move. She didn’t even turn to look at Carmilla, her whole body rigid.

“Laura,” Carmilla tried again, frantic as she tugged at Laura’s still arm. “I think—“ her voice caught. “I think it’s Dementors.”

“Dementors?” Laura breathed, the light returning to her eyes just enough to register fear.

At last, she shifted under Carmilla’s insistence, retreating back up the cobblestones. And then they froze again, Carmilla carefully shifting her body in front of Laura’s as she watched the rising, unnatural mist.

She had never seen a Dementor, but she knew enough. A desperate fear gnawed at her, the edges of her vision going black.

“Come on,” she managed, grabbing Laura with a trembling hand and pulling her to the nearest shop. The door handle didn’t budge. “Goddammit,” she snarled, changing course rapidly and directing them across the street.

She had to get Laura out of here. There were no signs of life in the village, and the fog was thickening around them.

“Let us in, assholes!” she shouted, banging both fists on the locked doors of the Three Broomsticks.

“Carmilla,” Laura whispered through chattering teeth.

When Carmilla turned to her, she saw that Laura had gone deathly pale. She was swaying on her feet, her eyes staring but not quite locking on Carmilla’s face.

And then she saw the billowing, towering figure, cloaked in black.

“Fuck,” Carmilla hissed.

There was nowhere to go, and Laura’s hand was icy in her grasp. Carmilla shifted them swiftly, forcing Laura back against the door and bracing her arms. She faced down the approaching shadow.

*It’s not like I have a soul to lose.*

That did not stop the Dementor from looking. The cold was horrible. It was a sucking, aching pull in the recesses of her gut, a clenching in her still heart that tore her back into the depths of her own mind.

“Carmilla, take your brother!”

“Run, now!”
She was frozen, one foot on the cool marble and the other still resting on the runner of the first stair.

“CARMILLA!”

She could not move. Her limbs were stone, were aching with cold straight down to her bones, and she could not look away. Could not stop staring at the body on the floor, the blood staining the furs by the fire—

The Dementor rasped, a clawed hand reaching and then retracting. Carmilla barely thought about the action, her fangs already out and digging into her lower gums. She let out the snarl, the hiss tearing at the faceless thing before her.

She could feel it.

The hole in her chest.

The place her soul was supposed to be.

She wondered if it was nearby, like Dumbledore said. If it was trying to reach out to her, and that was where the memory came from…

The Dementor slid backwards, and floated away with a serenity that such a terrible creature should not have been capable of. Carmilla was still shaking, still caught up in the memory, still baring her fangs.

“Mum,” came a strangled voice from behind her.

The spell broke—sounds rushing back and the sun registering in Carmilla’s periphery. She spun, and felt a fresh chill take hold of her, riding down her spine. There was a tear-track down Laura’s cheek, her eyes welling with more and her chin trembling.

“Laura,” she breathed. “Laura, Laura…”

She put her hand on the other girl’s shoulder, giving her a little shake, but it didn’t seem to help. Laura’s gaze was distant, seeing something that Carmilla never would.

No, no, no.

“Hey!” She demanded, squeezing her shoulder with fresh, urgent force. Laura blinked, gaze shifting, and Carmilla felt herself sag with relief. It did not matter what Laura had seen, what Laura thought of her—only that she was okay. “You with me?”

For a moment, Laura seemed to nod, her brow starting to creinkle as she took in her surroundings, but then she paled again. Her complexion took on a greenish hue.

“Shit. Stay here,” said Carmilla, darting her gaze around. Curtains were starting to open, shopkeepers and shoppers creeping from their hiding places to check on the outside world. With one last squeeze to Laura’s arm, she dodged towards Honeyduke’s.

Laura needed chocolate. She needed to be pulled from whatever horrible event the Dementors had forced her to relive.

It only took a moment. She ducked into the shop under the arms of two seventh year Slytherins, hooked a candy bar between two fingers and slipped it into her pocket, and let the crowd carry her back to the street.
It was too long of a moment. Laura was already gone.

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**November of 1974 (Fifth Year)**

Carmilla managed to dodge her for a little over a week—successfully slipping down corridors while pretending to have gone deaf, or straight-up skipping meals—before Laura inevitably cornered her one day after class. The sinking pit that had set up residence in her stomach seemed to sizzle and pop like an untamed swamp.

“Hey,” she said, as though it were the simplest thing in the world. As though she had not just clamped Carmilla’s wrist in her vice-like grip and almost pinned her to a wall.

Carmilla had not expected her to be so strong.

She had also not expected her to stand so close.

It only took the span of a breath shivering out of Laura’s parted lips before she seemed to recognize this, hopping back with noticeably wider eyes and a tint of pink patching its way up her throat.

Carmilla ignored this.

“Hey,” she echoed flatly, calculating her odds of side-stepping the other girl and making a break for it.

Laura scowled. “Don’t ‘hey’ me. I know I lost you in Hogsmeade, but you haven’t even given me a chance to explain.” This was not what Carmilla had been expecting. As she stared, Laura huffed out a sigh and prattled onwards: “I got swept away in all that chaos, and then Perry grabbed me to take me back to the Tower for the big ‘Heads of House’ announcements about all of our fun new restrictions, and I figured you were probably trying to get me some chocolate, because of the Dementors, which was really… nice of you.”

She eyed Carmilla expectantly, in the wake of this speech, and Carmilla imagined she vaguely resembled a goldfish.

“Laura,” she finally managed, dropping her eyes to her feet. She worried her lower lip between her teeth, thankful that her fangs were not so much as itching, today. Mundungus had been punctual. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

This, she knew, could be the end of things. There was a very real chance—and the thought had been plaguing her at all hours, for the last week—that Laura had put together the pieces.

They had spent too much time together. Carmilla had taken too many risks. If she had seen any of what had happened in Hogsmeade, had heard the monster’s snarl breaking from her throat, then she would surely have suspicions. Those suspicions, in turn, would lead to questions—questions that Carmilla could not possibly answer.

It was at least a good sign that Laura was still talking to her. Was still trying to reach out. Whatever inkling she might have, whatever she may have witnessed, perhaps she did not believe it.

“Okay,” Laura said, but her voice was small, resigned in a way that spoke far louder than the word itself.

No, Carmilla thought, heat rising behind her eyes, she was not quite safe.
"You can’t be serious," Remus scoffed. His pale eyes were locked on the pendant that she was hastily trying to shove back down the front of her robes. "That’s from her, isn’t it?"

"No," she lied.

Remus scowled, and she knew he was barely restraining an eye roll. “Honestly, Carmilla, sometimes you’re exhausting.”

“Nobody told you to worry about me,” she muttered, tossing herself down on the bench at his side. The pitch was still mostly empty. There was plenty of time left before the match.

“Odd. I distinctly remember Dumbledore telling us to ‘look out for each other.’”

“Ah, that’s where you’re mistaken. Maybe he was trying to spare your feelings, but I was very much assigned as your babysitter.”

“You keep telling yourself that… But, seriously.” He leveled her with a hard gaze. “You still don’t want to tell her?”

The humor slid off her face. “No. I don’t.”

“Why?”

Carmilla shrugged. “Everything… it’s good the way it is. I don’t want to change that.”

“You mean you don’t want to lose her.”

The pendant was still between her fingers, the chain tangled and unwilling to be shoved out of sight. She turned the little Quaffle over and over, watching the way the sun shone off the gloss of red paint.

“I can’t,” she admitted, giving her head one helpless shake. “I just… I can’t risk it.”

“You have to know she has feelings for you.” As she looked up, mouth falling open, he put up a hand and hurried onwards. “I think she has for quite some time. And this is Laura Hollis… do you really think she would ever hurt you, Carmilla?”

The answer to that was a resounding ‘no.’

“It doesn’t matter if she’d keep the secret. If she couldn’t—if it changed the way she treated me, or-or if she didn’t… if she could only see the monster…”

“My friends don’t see the wolf.”

She studied him, from the faint scars along his jaw to the earnest light in his gaze, and heaved a sigh.

“Not yet, okay?” she whispered. “I just… I want to keep her, Remus. As long as I can.”

Remus was possibly the least touchy person Carmilla had ever met, but that did not stop him from reaching around to tug her shoulder against his own. She closed her eyes and accepted the warmth.

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“Laura?” she asked. The name very nearly stuck in her throat, caught on the blood she had choked down not long before. Laura’s head lifted, her eyes wide and soft in their bed of caramel gold. Carmilla swallowed. “Did you really sit outside the Hospital Wing that whole time?”

Laura’s hand tensed in hers at the same time as a flush colored across her cheeks, and it was an answer even before she murmured, “I might have.”

“Why?”

She could hear the pained curiosity in her own question, and she knew Laura had heard it as well. The other girl’s brow crinkled.

“Because you were hurt,” she said, as though it were the simplest thing in the world. “And they wouldn’t let me see you.”

She watched the way Laura’s eyes darted over her features, as if searching, even now, for signs of injury, and for a moment she stilled under the scrutiny, the tenderness in Laura’s eyes almost more than she could bear. There was a pull in her chest, a tightening in her lungs, an internal pleading to tell her.

If there was anyone who would understand, anyone that could put this aside, could still look at her with all of that beautiful, undeserved kindness, it would be Laura.

Laura, and no one else.

Unbidden, her free hand reached for an anchor and found the Quaffle pendant, instead. She was everywhere, and everything, and she was looking at Carmilla, now, with expectation in her eyes.

She only just remembered she was supposed to be breathing, before she forced out the only thing she could think of.

“You know you didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course I did,” Laura insisted, and the way she squeezed Carmilla’s fingers in her own was a warmth Carmilla had not expected. Neither were her next words. “I care about you.”

Any protest was lost, because the honesty was in her voice, and in her gaze, and the distance between them had shrank such that it would take nothing at all to close it.

She imagined telling her. Imagined a world in which she accepted it as easily as Remus’s friends had accepted the wolf. Imagined Laura kissing her.

“Laura?”

“Yeah?”

Laura’s gaze flicked from her eyes to her lips, so fast that Carmilla almost missed it, but it still sent a shiver through her.

“There’s something…”

She could see Laura’s eyes going huge, could see her pulling back, running. Could hear her whispering the word monster with stuttering fear.

She could see a world without her, a world in which Laura hated her.
The connection of their fingers was too much, was another lie on top of it all, and she wrenched her hand away as she whispered, “Never mind.”

There was a pang of silence, so loud that it hurt, and then Laura’s fingers were soft and warm on her chin, and she was saying Carmilla’s nickname in the most perfect of ways… she could never resist, could never keep from meeting her eyes.

Or her lips.

For one shimmering moment, Carmilla forgot what she was doing. She forgot that Laura did not know, that Laura needed to know, that Laura could easily hate her.

Because Laura was soft against her, was gentle and yearning in a way that was somehow desperately honest. She was pushing forward, asking a question without words—a question that Carmilla wanted nothing more than to say yes to.

When she remembered, it was all at once.

She couldn’t look at Laura. She felt the full weight of Laura’s stillness even before the other girl pulled away, and so she kept her eyes pressed shut, her lips still tingling with the memory of everything she could not have.

“Laura… I can’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Laura sputtered. “I shouldn’t have—I didn’t ask, and I don’t know what I was thinking. I won’t do it again, I promise. I can’t—I don’t want you to think that I—I mean, we’re friends, and you don’t even have to say anything, or do anything. Or, or if you don’t want—I mean, I can just go, if I made this weird—”

It was too much. Laura’s words were pleading, and desperate, and aching with an emotion that Carmilla could not allow herself to feel, nor recognize. It will go away. It will go away, when she knows, and you will see it burn into nothing.

“Please, stop,” Carmilla begged, and Laura’s frantic words were crushed into silence.

She wanted to run, more than she had ever wanted to before. There had been days when the children at the orphanage had tormented her, had trapped her in that closet, had burned the last of her family photos. There had been days when her housemates had whispered loud enough for her to hear the names they called her. There had been days she had not even felt the barest flicker of humanity left within her.

Never had she wanted so badly to disappear from the world as she did when the next trembling words slipped off Laura’s tongue, thick with tears.

“Are you mad?”


Carmilla clenched her jaw, fighting down the lump in her throat. She could not hold it back much longer. There were already tears building in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she forced out.

Everything hurt.
“Can we still be friends?” Laura half-whimpered. She was certainly crying, though Carmilla still did not dare lift her head. “We can pretend this never happened. Please, Carm. Please.”

Laura did not deserve this. The pain should be Carmilla’s alone, should be the weight she carried with all the others she had built up in her short life.

She could run from Laura, cut her out, free her from this terrible mistake of a friendship, but there was an agony within her at the idea. And there was a helpless fire in Laura’s eyes that she could not snuff out.

“Oh okay,” she said. She was losing against the tears. Squeezing her eyes shut and willing them not to spill over, she ground out: “This... never happened.”

Carmilla barely made it down the spiral staircase before the first sob worked its way through her, and the only thing that propelled her onward, that kept her legs working towards Ravenclaw Tower, was the knowledge that she could not let Laura see—that she could not let Laura understand how she had wanted that kiss more than she wanted a beating heart in her chest.

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June of 1975 (Close of Fifth Year)

It was Remus who caught her by the arms as she plowed through the Entrance Hall.

She could still smell Laura’s blood—it was a thick, sweet smell, clogged in the back of her throat. It burrowed deep, and hungry, and she wanted to claw it out and free it from her own thirsty, uncontrolled depths.

“What’s happened?” Remus cried. Students were pausing to stare, catching the harried wildness in her eyes, but she did not care.

He was taller than her, now, towering by nearly a head, but he was still gangly, still sick at his core—she could fight him off with ease, and she nearly did. His hands, though, were warm as they shifted up to seize her by the shoulders before tugging her into a more secluded corner.

The same corner she had once pulled Laura into, pressing her wand to the other girl’s scarred cheek…

“What’s happened?” he demanded.

He was searching her quickly, scanning for visible signs of injury, but she cut him off with a desperate shake of her head. A sob bubbled in her throat, and she cracked open.

“Laura. She knows. She knows, and it—it’s over—she’s out there, and I left her, and she’s—I have to get to Dumbledore. I have to. I need to tell him—Remus, I can’t be here! I can’t—”

“Whoa,” he repeated, and now the grip he held on her cloak was the only thing keeping her upright. Her legs were melting under her, the sobs coming so fast that she couldn’t think straight. She didn’t even need the oxygen, but something was clearly being deprived within her, something essential to function—

That wasn’t important, though. It didn’t matter.

“Come on,” Remus urged. His eyes were huge. “I’ll take you to Dumbledore, okay?”
"No, no," she stammered, fighting his pull. "Laura. She’s—she’s hurt, and I left her—"

"She’s *hurt*?" he demanded, stupefied. "Carmilla, you didn’t—?"

"No!" she almost choked on the word in her desperation to get it out. She felt nauseous as she relived the moment, reminding herself that she had backed away in time. "No. She’s—she fell, and there was *blood*, and I—"

Realization dawned on his face. "Okay. Alright. I’ll go get her. Can you… can you make it to the Hospital Wing?"

"Dumbledore," she insisted.

He didn’t bother fighting with her. "Fine. Can you make it there?"

She nodded, sagging in relief. Someone was going to get Laura. She was going to be okay.

With one last, overtly concerned look at Carmilla, Remus dodged away across the Hall, ignoring the alarmed looks he raised as he burst out the castle doors.

In a dazed sleepwalk of sorts, Carmilla dragged herself through the corridors, rounding the familiar corners towards the Headmaster’s office.

She was unfazed by the gargoyle at the entrance, merely choking out her name as a question, a request for entry, as she had so many times before.

"Carmilla Karnstein?"

For one unsteady second, she thought perhaps he was out. Her mind raced, horror eating at the edges of her stomach and her vision starting to blur at the edges—but then the gargoyle leapt neatly aside and the staircase began its slow turn in the space behind.

Her head felt heavy, by the time she arrived at the top and let her knuckles fall against the thick wood of his door.

"Enter," came Dumbledore’s smooth tone, as the lock clicked and the door fell open before her.

Carmilla was still shaking, the quiver in her limbs surging to new life once she had nowhere else to go.

"Professor," she gasped. There were tears already tracking down her face—they had probably been there from the instant she left Laura in the stands, but she had not felt them until this moment. She sniffed hurriedly as she swiped at her eyes. "Professor, I’m *sorry*…"

Dumbledore had been behind his desk, teacup in hand, but he stood swiftly at the sight of her, sweeping across the room and resting one slender hand upon her shoulder. The weight of his touch was an instant relief.

"Carmilla," he said. "Tell me what has happened."

"Laura," she said at once. The name ached on her lips. "L-Laura Hollis. My friend. Sh-she *knows*. I didn’t mean to, but she was bleeding and I couldn’t—I couldn’t control it—"

"Where is she, now?" he cut in swiftly. The urgency in his voice was at once comforting and distressing.
“Remus… he’s getting her. We were—we were on the pitch, sir. She fell over the railing, and I think she twisted her ankle, but then her face, it was just covered in blood—”

Her voice broke.

“Sit,” Dumbledore instructed, sweeping a chair up behind her with a careless swish of his wand. She dropped heavily, without protest. “There were no other witnesses to this?”

She shook her head.

“Did you not drink from her?”

Again, a hurried shake.

Dumbledore nodded sagely. “Remus will take care of her, I trust. And I have reason to believe Miss Hollis will protect your secret.”

Carmilla shivered, tucking her legs up onto the chair and hugging them to her chest like a small child. “I scared her,” she whispered. “She was just so scared, Professor.” She pressed her forehead to her knees, but could not quite stop the sob from breaking loose. “The way she looked…”

Laura had pulled back, mouth open and eyes wide with a panic unlike Carmilla had ever imagined seeing in those kind, honey depths.

Terrified.

Carmilla had made Laura terrified.

Of her.

“The two of you are close?” he asked calmly. He was still standing before her, his head dipped to regard her.

She hesitated before she forced a nod. “She’s—she was my best friend.”

“And you think she will not accept this about you?”

A fresh line of tears slipped down her cheek, dropping from her chin and down onto the front of her robes.

She couldn’t say the words. *I’m a monster. Laura knows I’m a monster.*

She said something else, instead. “You should send me away. I—I told you I shouldn’t come here, that I would—that I could hurt someone, that the risk was too great, and now…”

Dumbledore let the silence stretch for a long, hovering moment.

“While I hold many regrets, Carmilla,” he murmured softly, “You will find it hard to convince me that your attendance here should be one of them. Now, I believe that Miss Hollis should be arriving at the Hospital Wing any moment, if Remus has been swift. If you would be so kind as to help me finish my pot of tea, I will ensure your friend is in good health.”

All Carmilla could do was nod.

She did not touch the tea.
You can yell at me below, or swing on over to tumblr: jg-firefly

Next update due at Christmas!
Chapter Summary

The aftermath, and a confession

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to everyone that's celebrating.

Chapter title from 'Things to Say' by SafetySuit.

Spring of 1975 (Fifth Year)

Her Cleansweep would not go any further. Huddled on the broom, one foot dangling uselessly and the other shifting on the mount to maintain balance, Laura leaned forward once more, a snarl curling her lips. The handle vibrated, the sound not unlike the growl of a dog fighting its leash, and she could not keep the string of curses from breaking loose.

She could not walk. She could barely stand—something that had become abrasively obvious when she had tried in the lengthy seconds following Carmilla’s departure.

How she had made it onto her broom at all was still somewhat of a mystery to her.

But that hardly mattered if she couldn’t get into the castle.

Laura did not care about the pain in her ankle, nor the burning in her nose, nor the blood that had spattered down her robes and surely ruined any chances of wringing another year from them.

She kept seeing the look on Carmilla’s face, and the shadow that had swept ghost-like across her features. The way she had given her head just a fraction of a shake, hand clasped tight over her mouth, terror chasing its way through the depths of her dark eyes.

She had not tried to explain, had not waited to hear Laura’s thoughts. She had fled.

Which could only mean she thought the worst.

An angry, guttural cry tore from Laura’s throat, somewhere between a groan and a sob.

This was all her fault.

Dropping enough that she could set her good foot on the ground, Laura clenched her teeth, squeezed her eyes shut, and leveraged her other leg over the tail. The Cleansweep hovered loyally at her side, her grip on it the only thing keeping her from toppling over.

“I don’t suppose you’ll let me lean on you into the castle?” she muttered bitterly. One experimental tug told her that it wasn’t going to happen. There must be some spell that prevented active broom-use
indoors, something she would no doubt have been aware of if she had done a more thorough reading of *Hogwarts: A History*.

Carmilla probably knew all about it. She had read the book cover-to-cover at least once a year, and recited from it periodically with a self-satisfied smirk that simultaneously managed to frustrate and impress Perry.

“Whoa!”

One of the massive Entry doors swung wide, with no warning, and a barreling figure very nearly collided with her. Remus’s shoes skidded on the stone, his arms flying out to correct his balance.

“Oh my god, Laura,” he said. His eyes went huge as he swept his gaze over her, taking in what would have undoubtedly been an excellent Bloody Baron costume, had such a thing been her intent.

Laura did not pause to ponder the coincidence, or to worry about ramifications. She seized him by the arm.

“Carmilla,” she said at once. The name was blurry on her tongue, and the taste of iron and snot was still thick in her throat. She swallowed past it, opening her mouth to demand his assistance, but he was already speaking.

“I know,” he said. “I saw her, and she told me—” he shook his head, cutting off the thought, and started again. “You can’t tell anyone, Laura, okay?”

It took a moment for his words to register. A frown burrowed deep across her brow. “What? No. I won’t—you saw her? Where—where is she?”

Remus stared, and then let out a bark of laughter that at once put her on edge. She could feel the tips of a new fury curling their way up from her gut, growing stronger each minute that she was kept from finding Carmilla.


“Where is she?” Laura snapped.

Whatever sort of ironic humor Remus had found in the situation, it slipped from his face in a hurry. “She went to find Dumbledore.”

A stone fell into the pit of her stomach, hitting like an anchor in shallow waters. “Dumbledore?” she echoed.

He nodded, “She sent me to find you. She said you found out; that you were hurt.”

“She didn’t hurt me,” Laura insisted, alarm flaring in her widened eyes, “I fell.”

“I know.” He glanced down at where she was holding her injured foot off the ground, “We should really get you to the Hospital Wing.”

The panic returned with a vengeance. “No, Carmilla—”

“Doesn’t need to see you covered in blood,” Remus finished pointedly. “Again.”

Laura wanted to argue. Words bubbled hot in her throat, her desire to see Carmilla such an
overwhelming *need* that she barely felt the twinges of her injuries.

But then there was the memory of that shadow in Carmilla’s eyes, and her shattered expression, and the inhuman snarl that she had not been able to control—

Her shoulders deflated.

The Cleansweep went lifeless, as Remus positioned himself at her shoulder and took on her weight.

He explained, as they maneuvered their way into the castle and through the clusters of students celebrating the end of term, that he did not know enough healing magic to risk trying anything that would make their journey quicker. She ignored his apologies about the pain she must be in, and his platitudes about Dumbledore knowing best.

*My fault*, her rushing thoughts whispered. *This is all my fault.*

“He won’t expel her, will he?” she whispered, finally, when they rounded the last corner before the Hospital Wing.

Remus had been mid-sentence, babbling nervously about how Pomfrey would make sure her nose didn’t heal funny, and he drew up short at her question, nearly pulling them to a halt as he did so. His footsteps faltered.

“No, of course not. He worked too hard to get her to *come* here.”

There was no time to ask what he meant by that. He was pushing open the doors to the Hospital Wing, and calling out for Madam Pomfrey.

The nurse was not amused at Laura’s state. She checked her over with the gleaming, darting eyes of a bird of prey, muttering under her breath all the while, and finally pushed her down onto the edge of one of the many empty beds and began mixing up a potion in a tall glass. She said nothing about Remus’s presence, choosing to ignore his existence altogether.

The potion tasted foul, and she gagged on it twice before she managed to swallow the last of it down. Pomfrey watched her with pursed lips, and then set to clearing the blood off of Laura’s face to ‘get a better look at the situation.’

“*Episkey,*” she declared, finally, her wand suddenly brandishing in Laura’s face.

“*Ow!*” Laura hissed, hand flying up at once to prod at her nose—which was far more intact than it had been a moment prior. It stung rather violently.

“Would you have preferred a warning?” Madam Pomfrey snapped, and then seized her leg and pulled it up and onto a stool to survey her ankle. Laura barely had time to recognize that her nose felt just the same as ever before there was a crunching sound and a blinding moment of pain—this time from her leg.

Pomfrey stood, dusted herself off, and performed a quick charm that swept the majority of the blood off of Laura’s skin. As predicted, her robes were stained beyond saving.

“The last day of term,” Pomfrey grumbled. “Three burns, one missing finger, five owl bites, and now *this.*”

Laura almost wanted to ask about the missing finger, but the question was lost quickly in favor of a new realization.
“So… I can go?”

“I don’t want to see you until next term,” Pomfrey snipped by way of answer. “And preferably not at all. Off with you.”

Remus shadowed her from the Wing, the doors swinging shut solidly behind them.

Laura suppressed her memories of this corridor, and these closed doors, and took a steadying breath. “Dumbledore,” she stammered. “She’ll be—she’ll be in his office?”

“Ah, my timing is impeccable,” said a calm voice that did not belong to Remus.

They both jumped, spinning at the same moment to find Dumbledore standing mere meters away. He smiled pleasantly.

“I see you have been discharged,” he said.

In her five years at Hogwarts, Laura had not had much occasion to converse with the Headmaster. The closest she had come was during dinner chats at the close-quartered Christmas Feast, when the castle occupancy dipped low enough to warrant a single table shared between students and professors. Even then, direct words from Dumbledore had been along the lines of a compliment to the magenta pirate’s hat that she had pulled from a cracker.

His eyes were a quick, lightning blue, but filled with nothing but kindness as they surveyed her from behind his half-moon glasses.

“Professor,” she stammered.

“Miss Karnstein will be quite pleased to hear of your clean bill of health,” he said.

“Can I—can I see her?” said Laura. The words were more of a plea than a question. She could hear the edge of desperation in her own voice, but could not bring herself to care.

“Oh, I insist that you do,” Dumbledore promised, his smile widening. “Remus, if you would be so kind as to collect one of Miss Karnstein’s portions from Madam Pomfrey before you join us?”

“Yes, sir.”

Laura nearly missed the wave of Dumbledore’s hand that indicated she should follow him. She stood dumbstruck for a moment as his robes swished up the corridor, and it was only with a prod from Remus that she finally set off at a jog to catch up with the Headmaster.

He took them on a winding route through the castle, his stride confident and the little smile never falling from his lips.

She nearly ran into him when he pulled to a halt in a seemingly ordinary corridor, facing a tall, elegant statue of a gargoyle.

“Peppermint Toads,” he declared, smoothing the hairs of his long, silver beard.

The gargoyle shifted to life at once at the password, stone muscles contracting as it hopped to the side and took up a guard’s post beside the entryway to a well-lit spiral staircase.

“I should tell you,” said Dumbledore, making no move towards the stairway, “That I believe Miss Karnstein’s trust in you to be well-placed.”
Laura’s mouth had gone very dry, and she swallowed. “Thank you, sir?”

His eyes sparkled as he turned to her, “There is no need to question, Miss Hollis. Trust is, undoubtedly, the highest form of compliment.”

Laura did not know what to say to that, but it did not seem to matter. Dumbledore stepped forward onto the first step, and, with a little creak, the whole staircase began to curl its way upwards. Laura hastened to follow, her heart pounding its way up into her throat.

Dumbledore did not hesitate to open the heavy wooden door that waited for them on the landing, breezing inside and leaving her with little choice but to join him.

Her gaze swept across the chamber, took in a blink of silvery instruments, overstuffed bookcases, and mismatched furniture, and stopped abruptly upon a cushy orange armchair placed haphazardly in the very middle of the space.

She stopped breathing.

“Carm,” she whispered.

The other girl’s head had whipped up at their sudden arrival, and she pressed back into the chair, now, with an urgent sort of panic. Her knuckles stood out, sharp and white, as she gripped at the arms of her seat.

“Laura?” she rasped, and, in the flickering lights of Dumbledore’s office, the tear-stains shone silver on her cheeks.

Breathing did not become any easier.

Dumbledore, either blissfully ignorant of the tension in the air or otherwise unfazed by it, was pouring out three cups of tea. He hummed an unfamiliar tune.

“Sugar?” he asked, smiling politely at each of them in turn.

Laura, mouth open, managed to nod. Carmilla said nothing, her eyes never leaving Laura’s face.

Dumbledore dropped three sugar cubes into Laura’s tea—exactly the way she liked—and added a splash of cream to Carmilla’s before he placed the cups on the ornate, glass-topped table that had materialized before them. There were two other chairs, now, as well: a plushy, purple thing—which Dumbledore dropped into with a satisfied sigh—and a yellow armchair that Laura expected was meant for her.

Carmilla was still staring. She flinched slightly when Laura stepped into the miniature sitting room that Dumbledore had created. Their chairs were close—close enough that Laura could reach out and touch Carmilla’s arm, and Carmilla seemed to have a great fear of this, because she retracted into the far corner of her seat and tucked her arms over her chest.

Laura still did not know what to say.

“Hogwarts,” Dumbledore began calmly, once he was satisfied with the seating arrangement, “was always meant to educate young witches and wizards. Now, of course, there were some—even among our illustrious founders—who thought there should be a higher standard than mere magical capability.”

Laura did not know where he was going with this history lesson, but she let her eyes dart between
Carmilla and the Headmaster as he spoke, unsure of where to leave her attention. She wanted, more than anything, to reassure Carmilla. To smooth that harsh edge of fear from the clench in her jaw and the shimmer in her eyes.

Dumbledore was continuing: “I have always held that all those gifted with magic deserve to learn how to properly wield their abilities. After all, how could we be expected to build our society if we put up such barriers between our peers?” He took a sip of tea, tipping his head to Laura. “I am sure you agree on this point, Laura?”

The use of her first name was startling. Laura’s hands shook around her teacup, which she had yet to so much as blow on, let alone drink from. “I—yes. Of course.”

She darted her gaze to Carmilla. Surely she remembered the conversation they had had not two weeks prior.

_Everyone deserves to have their story heard._

For the first time, the other girl looked away, shutting her eyes and lowering her head towards her lap. Her hands clasped together, clenching tight.

“You can imagine, then,” said Dumbledore, “That I would be quite distraught to find that there was a young witch who did not think herself worthy of my school.”

If it were possible, Carmilla seemed to curl further in on herself.

“I, of course, did my best to convince her otherwise, and she arrived safely at our gates and began her education. I daresay she was the top of her class—a talent that deserved to be recognized and shared. I considered all to be well… until this afternoon, when she burst into my office and suggested I should reverse my efforts.”

“_What?_” Laura stammered. She leaned forward in her seat, barely keeping herself from standing in indignation. “No. Carm—what did you tell him? She didn’t—Professor, please, she didn’t do anything wrong!”

From the corner of her eye, Laura saw Carmilla lift her head, but she did not turn to look at her. Her fiery gaze was locked on Dumbledore, whose expression remained infuriatingly calm.

“You can’t send her away. She’s—she’s the top of our class. You said it yourself! And it shouldn’t—it _doesn’t_ matter that she’s a vampire, or what happened on _accident_. And it—it was all _my_ fault, anyways! I wasn’t careful, and I got hurt, and she—her reaction was completely reasonable!”

Dumbledore’s eyes sparkled, his lip curling upwards as he folded his hands in his lap. He had finished his tea at some point, the empty cup resting beside the kettle.

“I believe your friend has just presented an excellent defense for your case, Carmilla,” he said, blue eyes turning to the other girl.

Laura followed suit, and her chest constricted, the breath shivering out of her and leaving her icy in its wake.

Carmilla was crying silently, her chin wrinkled and her eyes shut. Her shoulders shook as the tears slipped off her cheeks.

Laura forgot about Dumbledore, about the office she was in, about the fact that she had just a moment before nearly yelled at her Headmaster. She was out of her seat and crouching before
Carmilla, placing a tentative hand on the other girl’s knee. Carmilla gulped at the contact, eyes flashing open.

“Carm. Carm, hey, hey, it’s okay. It’s okay, I promise…”

The tears did not stop, though the shuddering of her shoulders calmed. She tried to say something, but it was garbled, starting and stopping on a blurry attempt at Laura’s name.

Before Laura could say anything further, a ringing, bell-like announcement resounded through the office: “Remus Lupin.”

Laura jumped, and Carmilla with her. And then Carmilla’s hand was landing on top of hers, squeezing it to her knee with a desperate pressure, and Laura did not care what else was happening, or that Dumbledore had stood and swept across the chamber and through the door.

“Carm,” she tried again, shaking her head helplessly. “I’m so sorry. I’m just—I’m so sorry. If I had just said something sooner, or if—if I had paid more attention—”

The pressure on her hand turned crushing, and now it was Carmilla who was shaking her head, a frantic energy taking hold in her shiny, reddened eyes.

“Laura… you know?” she whispered.

The words caught her off guard. Slowly, she began to nod. “Yes. I—I’ve known for a while.”

Silence crashed down around them. Carmilla’s eyelashes, caught with tears, shivered up and down as her gaze darted over Laura’s face. She was searching, still desperate and afraid, and Laura vowed she was never going to let go so long as Carmilla was anything less than happy.

There was no time to figure out what Carmilla was looking for—what the question was that kept rewriting itself in the wrinkles of her brow—because Dumbledore breezed back in with Remus in tow.

“It appears we need more seating!” he said merrily. For the briefest of moments, Laura expected another oddly fluffy armchair to materialize in the little circle. Instead, at the insistent little twirl of Dumbledore’s wand, Carmilla’s chair jerked underneath her, stretching and popping seams until it had clawed itself into a respectable loveseat.

Carefully, her eyes on Carmilla all the while, Laura clambered up beside her. Even as she freed her hand, she kept her fingers in place on the other girl’s wrist until she was settled beside her, and, watching her face in trepidation, she slid their palms together and threaded their fingers.

She was certain she saw the faintest of rises and falls in Carmilla’s shoulders, and the sight released a knot of tension in Laura’s gut.

Remus smiled at her kindly, perched on the edge of the mustard armchair that had a moment before been hers. She returned the gesture, squeezing Carmilla’s hand all the while. It was cold in her grasp—colder than she had initially realized.

“I believe this should make things a bit more… comfortable?” said Dumbledore.

He relieved Carmilla of her untouched teacup, replacing it with a periwinkle blue mug with dark contents. He tapped the rim with his wand, and a thin line of steam rose from within.

Carmilla’s shoulders were tense, her nostrils flaring as she stared at the offer. The cold of her skin—from their shared grip to the brush of their shoulders on the loveseat—seemed to intensify. Laura
realized she could see dark, spider web lines standing out on her neck.

She knew, without asking, what was in the cup.

“Drink,” she whispered, nudging her elbow into Carmilla’s side.

Carmilla shivered, but did not move.

“Hey. It’s okay, Carm.”

Still trembling, Carmilla reached shaky fingers out to catch in the handle of the mug. She kept her gaze downcast as she raised it to her lips and took a heavy sip. Her lips left a smear of crimson on the rim, and the bright contrast held Laura’s gaze long after she had lowered the mug to her lap.

She snapped her eyes back up a fraction too late. Carmilla’s lips were pressed thin as she turned away from her.

“I am afraid we have reached a most necessary part of our evening,” Dumbledore began anew, his tone taking on an unexpected gravity. He surveilled them each in turn before settling on her. “You understand, of course, Laura, that the information you have obtained can never be shared with anyone outside of this office.”

There wasn’t a moment’s hesitation, “Of course.”

“And,” he continued, “You have not shared any previous knowledge, or suspicions, up to this point?”

She shook her head. “No, I haven’t said anything—not even to LaF or Perry. But…” she bit her lip, contemplating how to word the information, “I think… Lily Evans might know something?”

Carmilla’s head lifted, but it was Remus who spoke next.

“I’m afraid that’s my fault.” He glanced at Dumbledore, for the first time looking uncomfortable. He shifted in his seat, hands tense on the arms. “She saw Carmilla and I returning one night, sir. She believes Carmilla has been the one teaching Snape those spells he’s been using, and I think she’s gotten it in her head that she’s used them on me.”

At this last admission, he grimaced out a half-hearted smile and gestured at the scar lines cut across his features. The ones Laura had noted but never questioned. The ones that did remind her vaguely of the injury Carmilla herself had given her, all those years ago…

“Returning from where?” she found herself asking, her lips not waiting for permission from her brain.

Remus’s gaze was clear and somber, as he turned to focus upon her. She had never seen him so serious, nor felt so scrutinized. She resisted the urge to squirm in place, even as she felt Carmilla’s gaze turning towards her, as well.

“You haven’t asked how I know about Carmilla,” he said quietly, “Which I have appreciated, seeing as you must have a number of questions about my involvement in all of this… and if you can keep Carmilla’s secret, I hope you will keep mine as well.”

Laura’s heart jumped in her chest, her fingers tightening unconsciously around Carmilla’s.

“I am a werewolf.”
Laura did not feel the jolt she would have normally expected at such an admission. Instead, she found herself nodding, a slow realization rolling over her as the pieces fell into place—and there were certainly a number of them.

She had been so focused on Carmilla—on where they stood with each other, on what Carmilla was, on how Carmilla’s safety might be impacted—that she had never paused to consider that she was not the only student at Hogwarts with a unique situation.

“That makes… so much sense.”

Dumbledore beamed, Remus laughed, and Carmilla continued to stare.

“Well then, I see no further need for my involvement,” Dumbledore said. He stood, “And I do believe that your classmates will be heading to the Great Hall as we speak. It is time for us to wish another year farewell, and I believe there is a House that needs celebrating.” He tipped his head to Carmilla.

The implication of dismissal was clear. The chairs vanished the moment they had all stood, and the tray and tea along with them. Carmilla’s mug morphed smoothly into a silver flask.

Dumbledore led the way from his chambers and through the short maze of corridors to the Entrance Hall. There, Laura caught Carmilla by the arm before she could slip through the doors to the feast with the rest of the students. Remus glanced back, but did not wait for them.

“Hey,” she said, touching Carmilla’s shoulder to get her gaze to lift. “I-I know we can’t sit together. And that we’re leaving in the morning for the summer. But I still—I need to make sure you’re okay. That we’re okay.”

Carmilla said nothing, but she was meeting Laura’s stare and that was more than enough to propel her words onward.

“I am going to write you. Every day, if I can. And—and I’ll tell Cogs not to leave you alone unless you write back, you got that? Because I can’t go this whole holiday without speaking to you. I think I’d go insane.”

The silence stretched. Carmilla was frowning.

“Carm?”

She looked better, now. There was some warmth radiating from her, and Laura had caught her taking several more drafts from the flask as they rounded the corridors. That, and the moisture had cleared from her eyes.

The sadness had not gone, though. It lingered, doubtful and nervous.

“You’re really okay with all of this?” she murmured, finally.

The simple question collapsed something inside of Laura’s chest. Without thinking, she seized Carmilla’s hand again, tracing her thumb over the ridges of her knuckles as she swallowed against the sudden lump in her throat.

“Of course I am, Carm.” She managed a smile, “You’re my—we’re best friends, remember?”

Carmilla’s lips parted, her brow furrowing and clearing and furrowing again, all within the span of mere seconds. Finally, she gave her head a little shake, and, catching Laura entirely off-guard, pulled
her forward with one swift tug and wrapped her arms around her.

Laura sank into the embrace, releasing Carmilla’s hand in favor of wrapping both arms tight around Carmilla’s back.

She felt her own warmth echoing back at her off of Carmilla’s skin, and let herself breath in the chilly, fresh scent of Carmilla’s hair as it tickled against her nose. She was like a winter day, like the fresh breath of air rising high over the pitch with the world laid out before her.

Laura let her eyes slip shut.

“Please come stay this summer,” she whispered into Carmilla’s shoulder, her lips only centimeters from Carmilla’s ear.

Shivering slightly in her grasp, Carmilla nodded.

///

The train ride to London was entirely too long and too short, all at once. Though she sat with Carmilla, tucked close enough on their bench that LaF kept raising an eyebrow at her, they did not have much opportunity to talk. The conversation waxed and waned on summer plans, O.W.L. result expectations, and Quidditch strategy.

Even when LaF and Perry slipped out to make a quick round for their Prefect duties, Laura could not find the right words to fill the silence. She fed off the same topics that had propelled the rest of the trip, too afraid to bring up anything more real for fear of overstepping the new invisible line that stretched between them.

Carmilla knew that she knew. She knew that Laura had held back—had not told her in all of this time.

Laura had no idea how Carmilla felt about that, but she seemed tense.

Laura also knew it was not something she could mention in a letter.

There was a stone of guilt, settled low in her stomach, for half-wishing away the weeks ahead in Paris with her father. She hadn’t seen him in months, and here she was already counting the days until she left him behind again.

When the train rumbled into the station, her nerves were pulled taut, even as everyone around them smiled and laughed and began calling goodbyes to one another.

The four of them kept close as they gathered their things, and Laura found herself reaching continuously for Carmilla, a fear curling darkly in the back of her mind that the other girl would slip away before she could say what she needed to say. If Carmilla minded—or even noticed—the brushes against her arm, she did not comment.

“Bye, Laura!” Perry said, pulling her into a crushing hug with enough force to express the sentiment for herself and LaFontaine (who offered a quick pat on the arm and a bashful nod). “We’ll write you lots! And, of course, my offer stands to come stay through the end of the summer!”

“Right, thanks, Perr,” Laura agreed, waving her and LaF off to their waiting families. Her hand had found Carmilla’s again, fingers knocking against hers. *She’s still here,* she reminded her racing heart.

She smiled at her friends until they had turned their backs, and then spun to face Carmilla.
“Hey.”

Carmilla attempted a smile, but it did not reach her eyes. “Hey. I should get going.”

“What?” No, not yet.

Carmilla shrugged, pushing a loose curl back behind her ear. “It’s a decent walk. And I… I’ll see you in autumn.”

“But you will come stay, right? The train from Paris—it comes through London. We’ll pick you up.”

She had said yes, the day before, hadn’t she? She had nodded, when Laura asked. Now, she shifted on her feet, worrying her lip.

“LAURA!”

There was no time to prepare. She was swept into a whirlwind of a bear hug, her feet flying out and her arms instinctively clasping around the shoulders of the man before her.

“Dad!” she squeaked.

When he set her down, she was grinning undeniably, everything forgotten, for one shining moment, except for how much she loved him.

“I’ve been waiting for hours—I got here early and do you know they won’t let muggles into that magic alley without their witch daughters? I swear that dirty pub with the brick wall and that odd little bartender was supposed to be next to that bookshop, but I couldn’t find it for the life of me…”

Laura laughed. And then her gaze darted, and she felt her breath catch in relief as she found Carmilla—startled and slightly flushed, but still very much present—standing beside them.

Dad noticed her at the same moment.

“Ah, so this must be Carmilla.”

Oh.

Oh, no.

“Laura’s told me a great deal about you!”

Carmilla’s eyes had gone very wide. They darted to find Laura’s. “She… has?”

“Well, of course. I don’t think I’ve ever heard so much about any of Laura’s friends. You’re a special kid.”

“Um. Thanks?”

He beamed, and then glanced around them. The station crowds were thinning, families disappearing back through the barriers to disperse into London or catch trains back home. “Where are your parents?”

Laura had rambled a great deal about Carmilla in her letters—‘Carmilla helped me with this spell,’ and ‘Carmilla finally perfected this one Quidditch move,’ and ‘Carmilla really loves mint candies, just like Mum’—but she had failed to mention that Carmilla was an orphan.
There was still so little she knew about it, herself. And, for some reason, it hadn’t felt right to share. Even with her Dad.

Carmilla shrank, ever so slightly. “Oh. I don’t—I mean I just walk, usually—”

“Nonsense. I’ve got the car. We’ll give you a lift to your place. It is in London, then, isn’t it?”

The panic in Carmilla’s eyes was expanding. “No, no, really—”

“Is that all you have? We’ve got plenty of room.”

There was very little to be done. Dad was already heaving Carmilla’s single trunk onto a waiting trolley. She tried to convey an ‘I’m sorry’ at her while his back was turned, but Carmilla was steadfastly examining her shoes. He added Laura’s things one-by-one, setting Cogs’ cage on top. The little owl hooted a greeting at him, hopping eagerly on his perch and trying to peck out a friendly greeting on his fingers through the bars.

Carmilla said nothing, as they left the platform behind and made their way through the bright archways of King’s Cross and into London proper. The car was indeed waiting, and, despite his promises, there was a struggle to fit all of their belongings inside. Laura wound up riding with Cogs’ cage in her lap and her broom tucked up against the window.

From the back, Carmilla offered half-hearted directions whenever Dad checked to make sure they were going the right way.

They left the main thoroughfare and circuses behind, drifting down side-streets so narrow that there were no proper road markings or zebra crossings. Dad drove slow, hunched over the steering wheel to peer at street signs, but never complained, even when the ride stretched over twenty minutes.

He prattled on about how excited he was to have Laura home, asking about the schoolyear and expressing infinite interest when it was mentioned that Ravenclaw—and therefore Carmilla—had won the Quidditch Cup that year. The more he revealed himself to know about Carmilla, the darker the flush grew in Laura’s ears.

She had talked about Carmilla more than she realized.

*Much* more than she had realized.

At last, they pulled up in front of a tall, grey-bricked building in Bethnal Green, with narrow, barred windows. A plaque on the front, long faded to green from copper, read: ‘BROMFIELD ORPHANAGE – EST. 1743’.

Dad frowned, but parked the car at the curb without comment.

“I’ve got it,” Laura insisted, when he unbuckled his seatbelt.

She shuffled her way free of her belongings and shut the passenger door behind her, sweeping around the back to haul Carmilla’s trunk free of the boot. The other girl hovered on the curb, arms hugging tight around her chest and bangs falling over her eyes.

Laura tried hard not to let herself focus too much on the building, or how sad it looked, or how there were faces peering from several of the windows at them.

(Or how she desperately did not want to leave Carmilla here.)
She failed on the last one.

“You can’t come to Paris, can you?” she asked quietly, still standing in the street. The sidewalk gave Carmilla an extra few inches on her, such that she had to tilt her head up to look her in the eye.

Carmilla shook her head. “I can’t leave the country.” She shrugged, though her words were too heavy for the disaffected gesture to mean much. “There are… regulations. Risks.”

It made sense. That didn’t make it hurt less.

“Please tell me you’ll come stay when I get back, Carm? Please.”

For a long moment, the heavy look in Carmilla’s eyes read like a no. And then she bit her lip and nodded.

“Promise?”

Her lip quirked just slightly at the corner, and Laura struggled not to melt where she stood.

“I promise.”

“Good. And I know it’s only seven weeks ’til then, but I just…” She couldn’t look directly at her. There was heat rising behind her eyes. “I’m really going to miss you, okay?”

It was just as unexpected as the day before, when Carmilla pulled her into her arms. It was briefer this time, both of them aware of their audiences, but Carmilla gave her shoulders one final squeeze as she was pulling back, her words almost a sigh as she murmured, “I don’t deserve you, Laura.”

She had stepped back before the words could settle, before Laura could unlock her jaw and fight through the thickness in her throat to argue. Carmilla hauled her trunk up into her arms—no one had stepped out of the orphanage to greet her—and made her way up the weed-infested walk to the door.

Laura was still standing behind the car when the heavy door creaked shut behind her. It took her another moment, still, before she could work her legs enough to return to her side of the car and climb in.

“You really like her, don’t you?” Dad asked quietly, not yet cranking the engine.

Laura stared at the sorry building that had just swallowed Carmilla whole, and shook her head.

“I’m in love with her.”
Neither Laura nor Carmilla has had a summer holiday quite like this one.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Just Say Yes by Snow Patrol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Summer of 1975 (Post-Fifth Year)**

**July 6th, 1975**

Carm,

Fun fact, Paris is not as pretty in person as it is in pictures. Especially when you’re actually staying a whole two hours outside the city. The most entertaining thing we’ve found to do here is get croissants—there’s a cute bakery, if you’re willing to walk twenty minutes (which Dad and I totally are)—and they understand our charades well enough when we hold up money and point at the things we want.

Hopefully the pastries hold up enough that you can enjoy a few of them. Cogs flies pretty fast, but who knows what they do at the O.B.C.; maybe I’m not even allowed to send food across borders. Who knows. France is weird about their culinary secrets. They’ll probably think I’m trying to steal their recipes or something.

I wish you were here. You’d make fun of all the French signs with me, and I bet you’ve read at least a dozen books about French history and would get way more out of this than I am.

Missing you,

-Laura

**July 10th, 1975**

Laura,

The croissants made it fine. Still buttery, in fact. Thanks.

-Carmilla
July 13th, 1975

Carm,

I think I should have made it clearer—you’re supposed to write a full response. (Cogs might bite if you don’t. Just a warning!) Anyways, there’s this old muggle that lives across the street and I swear he looks just like Filch. For the first few days I actually avoided him because, well, he looked like Filch, but turns out that was deceiving. He speaks a little English, and he’s really nice! (Super friendly with the neighborhood cats, though—must be a universal Filch-doppelganger thing.)

The Harpies finally dropped Greta Stickler, which, I mean, about time, so they’re trying out new Chasers, now. There was a whole article in the latest Quidditch Weekly about it. I’ve already read it like five times, so I’m sending it to you so that you can finally appreciate my team.

I still wish you were here.

-Laura

July 18th, 1975

Laura,

I think your owl hates me. I had to shred my first attempt and start over because I made an astonishing number of mistakes with him pecking at my fingers. I apologize in advance—I’ve got him locked outside my window right now, which I promise will only be for the two minutes it takes me to copy this out in peace. (He’s still making a massive racket, even with the bread scraps I tossed out to him.)

I read the article, and it was very interesting. I’m still on the fence about the Harpies, though. I’m sure that means you’ll keep trying.

Cat people are still good people. Even if they are Filch.

-Carmilla

P.S.- I know I’m no good at this, but please don’t stop sending letters.

July 25th, 1975

Carm,

Only three weeks (and a few extra days) until I get back to London!! We went shopping in Paris this week, which was mostly just looking at ridiculously pricey things in windows and scoffing at bad fashion, but it was fun. London is still better, even if the Eiffel Tower is pretty at night.

I took Dad into one of the Wizarding quarters, which made him very, very happy. He still gets way too excited when someone cleans a spill in the street, so he’s like a tourist, but a muggle tourist, AND English, so it’s really just a trifecta of French witches mocking us behind their hands.

He was happy, though, so who cares, right?
Anyways, I’m sorry it’s taken so long to get back to you. Cogs is being... difficult. I found a solution, though. I hope you like her. Happy late birthday, Carm.

-Laura

July 30th, 1975

Laura,

You can’t possibly be serious about this bird. You actually bought her for me?

-Carmilla

August 4th, 1975

Carm,

You did want an owl, right? I’m sorry I just sent you one without asking for input. I mean I didn’t send a cage or anything, so I guess I didn’t think it through, but I can watch her for you until we get back to school, if you want? Or I can try to exchange her, but she seems to really like you (she keeps glaring at me for taking so long with this, so I know she wants to get back to you.)

-Laura

P.S.- I am really sorry if I overstepped.

August 9th, 1975

Laura,

You misunderstood my last letter; I’m not upset with you. I just know what she must have cost, and I can’t believe you did this.

-Carm

P.S.- I named her Cassiopeia.

August 13th, 1975

Carm,

I’m so glad you like her!! Also, that name is a mouthful—I think ‘Cass’ for short works nicely. (She seems to like it, too!) I’ll see you in a few days. Remember—the eighteenth. Make sure you’re packed.

-Laura

P.S.- I really can’t wait to see you.
The Night Ferry had not treated Laura well on the departing trip, and she had felt no better about it on the return. She was apparently immune to motion sickness medication, and, while Dad was spending the final leg of their journey wide awake and merrily rambling about the latest muggle football news in the paper, Laura dozed fitfully with her face pressed up against the window of the train.

She jolted awake for the final time as the train stuttered, the whistle sounding loud and long somewhere far ahead of their car. Her hand went first to her pocket, finding the wrinkled edges of Carmilla’s letters, and then to her sleeve, pulling back her jumper to read her watch.

It was just shy of nine o’clock. They were pulling into Victoria Station.

Laura’s pulse, which had been bouncing in peaks not unlike a particularly exciting rollercoaster, immediately began its way up and down a fresh track.

She had not heard from Carmilla since she sent her final letter several days before, which in itself was not particularly concerning. With the delay of owl-travel across the channel, and having to go through screening at the Owl Border Center, she likely hadn’t received the letter until yesterday or the day before and it was only logical that she would not have replied, given that she was expecting to see Laura in person.

Still, it made Laura uneasy in a way that she could not quite describe.

“Excited?” Dad asked, tapping her bouncing knee with a knowing forefinger. She stilled the motion, the jitters shifting internally.

“Uh-huh.”

The train squealed to a halt, and, by the time they had gathered their things and stepped onto the platform, the steam was already dissipating. They made their way through the meandering crowds of muggles, dressed in a mosh of flowy blouses and business attire, but every now and again Laura caught a shimmering blink of a figure in brilliant robes, cutting through lines or otherwise slipping snake-like amidst the throngs.

She did not point these oddities out to her father, who had seen a poster for Manchester United and was happily prattling on about football without regard for her interest in the topic.

The car was waiting where they had left it, looking dusty but otherwise the same. Dad checked it thoroughly for scrapes and dings, anyway, reminding her about the time he had gotten a broken brake light after parking in a long-term lot on a trip to Scotland in his university days. Laura nodded along—having heard the story at least a dozen times over the years—though her mind already miles ahead, in a very specific borough across town.

Dad paused after he cranked the engine, hand resting on the shift stick. “You okay, kiddo?”

This time, her “Uh-huh” was not nearly as convincing.

“I did promise not to tell too many embarrassing stories, didn’t I?”

She squirmed in place, toying with the seatbelt. “You did.”

“And you said she liked the owl, right? What did she name it? Caspian?”
“Cassiopeia,” Laura corrected automatically, a hint of a smile teasing its way into the corner of her lips. “She’s a girl owl, dad.”

“And since when did that matter?” Touché. He placed his much larger hand over her own and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “I’m sure she’s just as eager to see you.”

“She doesn’t think of me like that, Dad,” Laura reminded him in a low, pleading voice. They had been over this at least a dozen times since they had pulled away from the curb in front of Bromfield, and, as a result, her father was now the only person in the world—besides Carmilla and herself—who knew about the full events of that evening after the Quidditch match.

Laura had always confided in him, with everything about her life. It was second nature.

(He told herself that the wizarding war did not count, but that did not stop a reflexive tug of guilt from jolting in her stomach.)

“You never know,” Dad said simply. He slid the car from its parking space and joined the flow of traffic out of the station and into the bustling streets of London.

He was a navigator in all of the ways that Laura was not. She could still find herself lost within the familiar corridors of Hogwarts, but he turned easily down side streets as though he had made this trip countless times, across many years, rather than once on shaky instructions.

It was nearly ten o’clock by the time Laura recognized their surroundings enough to know what to expect around the next turn. The tall, gloomy form of the orphanage rose into view as Dad slowed and signaled himself into the only remaining spot on the street.

“Be quick,” he said, tapping on the window glass. “I don’t think this is technically legal parking.”

Laura nodded, steeled her nerves, and forced her shaking steps up the path to the door. The paint was peeling, the brass numbers dangling from bent nails, and the doorbell, after several uncertain presses, did not appear to be in working order. She rapped her knuckles against the wood instead, as there was no knocker.

It took several long moments for footsteps to click their way into the foyer, and another lengthy beat of silence before the door opened smartly before her.

The woman on the other side was short and harried. Her grey-blonde hair stuck out at angles from its bun, and the glasses perched on the end of her nose were entirely too large. She looked like a younger Trelawney—were Trelawney barely eye-level with Laura—except with shrewd, narrowed eyes.

“No solicitors” she snipped.

“Oh, no, I’m not—I don’t have anything to sell. I’m here for Carmilla? Carmilla Karnstein?”

The woman’s eyes swept over her, the wrinkles in her forehead drawing deeper shadows into her stony pallor. “Karnstein?” she repeated suspiciously.

“Um, yes?” She peered around the woman’s shoulders hopefully, as if Carmilla were going to materialize there. She did not.

“Are you one of her lot, then?”

Laura blinked at the venom-laced question, returning her gaze to the woman’s face. “Her—what?”
“Her lot,” the woman snapped irritably. Her sharp eyes did another sweep over Laura, and her nose wrinkled as though she had found something distasteful. “From that school.”

Whatever Laura had expected, it had not been this. It had never occurred to her to ask Carmilla how much the muggles in her life knew.

“Yes?” she answered tentatively.

She really wished Carmilla would show up. The narrow stairway Laura could see, in the poorly lit space behind the woman, remained abandoned.

With an uplifted tilt of her stubby nose and a distinctive sniff, the woman shut the door in her face.

For a moment, Laura was too stunned to properly react. And then, recovering herself, she found a roil of fury working its way into her gut. She threw her knuckles back against the door with fresh insistence, teeth clenched and shoulders pushed back.

She was going to give this woman a piece of her mind, even if she had to magic the door open to do it… and she was a mere step away from doing exactly that, in fact, when the door opened unexpectedly. Laura jumped back, her raised arm collapsing at her side.

“Wha—Carm!”

She didn’t register the irritable woman shoving Carmilla’s trunk out onto the stoop, or the door shutting again only a fraction of a second after it had crashed down at their feet, because her arms had flown up automatically to wrap around Carmilla’s slender frame.

“Hey,” Carmilla said. She slid out of Laura’s arms without hugging back, and ducked to grab the handle of her trunk.

The sudden distance bit at Laura, but it did not stop her from reaching for the luggage. “I can get it, Carm. Dad should have the boot open and—”

She stopped short.

Carmilla had straightened as Laura pulled the trunk from her grasp, and she had gotten her first proper look at the other girl’s face.

“Oh my god, Carm—”

At once, Carmilla swept her bangs as low as they would go, bowing her head a little to aid her efforts. It didn’t matter. Laura had already seen the shiny bruise that cut under her eye, lining the inside of her nose with purple.

“Let’s just go,” Carmilla muttered, and, when Laura continued to stand there, gaping, she sighed and added, “Please, Laura.”

It was the ‘please’ that shook Laura from her stupor.

“Right,” she stammered. “Right, okay… c’mon, we’ll get in the car…”

Dad did not notice the black eye, though Laura suspected that was more due to Carmilla’s concerted efforts to hide it, rather than his obliviousness. She sat in the seat directly behind his, and turned her head deliberately towards the window.

By the time Laura had heaved the trunk into the car and clambered back into her seat, he was already
“Dad,” Laura interrupted his re-telling of the weather on their way to Paris, with a little more bite in her voice than she had intended. “Can we go?”

“Oh! All set?” He glanced at Carmilla in the mirror, and then Laura beside him, and finally pulled away from the orphanage.

Laura felt at least part of her newfound tension slide from her shoulders as the building disappeared behind them.

Dad’s excitement was palpable, as he routed them towards Charing Cross, and he filled the silence with stories about wizarding Paris and how he simply loved the champagne he had ordered there (which had frothed actual, edible bubbles into the air around him). He was thrilled to tell Carmilla about all the wizarding books he had read, too—namely, Laura’s forgotten textbooks from earlier schoolyears—and how he could recognize a number of spells, now.

Carmilla nodded politely to this, occasionally making small, grunting noises of acknowledgment. From the corner of her eye, Laura watched the way the other girl nervously smoothed down her bangs.

The ache in her chest intensified.

Dad did not have to be led or encouraged, when they finally found parking and started on their way up Charing Cross Road. His eager eyes swept across the storefronts, seeking out the faded sign and the ancient door that eluded the typical muggle gaze.

If he was particularly bothered when it took Laura pointing it out for him to locate it, he did not let it show. Instead, he beamed and seized the door by the handle, holding it open for the girls and gazing about with a level of wonder that certainly did not befit the dreary pub interior.

The Leaky Cauldron was, as always, rather dim and damp. A fire burned low in one corner grate, and in the other (cast long with masking shadows) there was a card game of some sort, one that appeared to be hosted by a rather gnarled goblin and attended solely by wizards in face-shielding cloaks.

Laura made certain to urge her father in the opposite direction, seating them close under the watchful eye of Tom the barkeep, who sloped his way out from behind the bar to present them with brunch menus and a yellow-toothed smile.

“I’m just gonna…” Carmilla hooked a thumb towards the dingy corridor behind the bar, over which a faded sign read ‘TOILETS.’

She slipped away and disappeared into the shadows, and, after only a moment’s hesitation, Laura stood and stammered out a lie about needing to go as well.

It was against her better judgment to leave her Dad alone in a wizarding establishment—curiosity, particularly his, could be a dangerous thing—but she doubted she would get another chance to talk to Carmilla alone until they were back at her cottage… and that was hours away. This couldn’t wait.

The women’s toilet was only a single stall, however, and the door swung wide to the simple push of Laura’s fingers.

“Carm?” she asked uncertainly, backing into the corridor. She was certain she had not missed the other girl’s return. But then…
There was a ‘STAFF ONLY’ door across from the toilets, propped open a faint sliver. Light spilled across the sticky floorboards, and Laura could make out muffled voices on the other side.

“…Carm?” she tried again, pressing her knuckles to the door. It slid open as easily as the lavatory.

On the other side, Carmilla jumped back, one hand clutching a brass goblet and the other flying up to cover her mouth. As her gaze, dark and furious, swept over Laura’s face, recognition dawned over her features and the look was replaced at once with horror.

“Laura,” she gasped, and, as her hand dropped, Laura saw that her lips were stained crimson.

Tom, who Laura now realized the other voice in the room had belonged to, glanced back and forth with one eyebrow raised higher than the other. When he took a step between them, Laura found her voice.

“It’s okay.” She wasn’t sure who she was reassuring—Tom or Carmilla—but it hardly mattered. She let her gaze linger over Carmilla’s face: her tight lips; her dark, endless eyes; her sharp, expressive eyebrows. “I was just looking for you.”

Carmilla, eyes averted, set down the goblet and, with her head still turned, rubbed quickly at her lips.

“Your eye,” Laura started again. She let herself step fully into the room, and the door swung shut behind her. The space, she realized, was a storage cupboard of some sort; the walls were lined with rickety shelves, half of which were collecting dust and the other half of which were loaded with sacks and boxes. Nothing seemed to be labeled.

“Tom fixed it,” Carmilla muttered. She reached up to touch the spot at Laura’s words, fingertips brushing over the expanse of white, unmarred flesh around the hollow of her eye. There was no evidence that there had ever been a bruise at all. And, yet, Laura could not forget.

Tom, as if the introduction of his name was as good an exit as any, shuffled awkwardly past Laura and shouldered his way out the door without so much as a word to either of them. Laura watched him go, waiting as the door creaked slowly back to its frame. It clicked with a deafening finality when the latch finally fell into place.

“Has he… has he had to fix a lot, like that?” she heard herself ask.

Carmilla picked up a jar, filled to the brim with some sort of sludgy, purplish substance that might have been jam, and twisted the glass between her hands.

“Some.”

Laura’s sharp intake of breath drew Carmilla’s gaze up, though it darted away just as quickly.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t—Carm, how can you say it doesn’t matter?” She had to clench her hands at her sides to keep them from trembling. “Someone hurt you.”

Again, Carmilla shrugged. She scowled down at the floor, setting the jar heavily on the nearest shelf.

“I’ve gotten hurt plenty just playing Quidditch.”

“But that’s a sport!” Laura pointed out, indignant. “That’s—that’s almost supposed to happen! I mean, probably not with the frequency that it does, and certainly both of us have taken trips to the
Hospital Wing that were decidedly unpleasant, but, but… it’s not the same thing, Carm!”

Carmilla said nothing, for a stretching, hovering moment. Her lips twisted with indecision, and Laura watched the signs of her internal war with a growing sense of helplessness.

“Laura, do you know what you just walked in on?” Carmilla sighed, finally. “What this is?”

Laura glanced, unimpressed, at the goblet that Carmilla had just reclaimed.

“I assumed it was blood,” she said. “I mean… that’s it, isn’t it? You looked sort of, well, paler than usual, and so this makes sense. And if there were a place to go that wasn’t Knockturn Alley, Tom would be the one, right?”

Another beat of silence, and then Carmilla slowly shook her head.

“You poke your head into a back room and find a shady exchange of human blood in progress… and your biggest question is about a shiner I had this morning?”

Laura frowned. “Well, yeah.”

“This doesn’t—I mean you aren’t bothered…?” she held up the goblet again, insistent.

Laura wished they were not having this conversation in a storage closet with her Dad waiting, unsupervised, just up the corridor. There were so many things she had not dared put into her letters.

“Of course not, Carm. I mean, seeing it is a new thing, sure, but it doesn’t change that I’ve known for quite a while.” Her gaze darted again to Carmilla’s healed eye. “So, yeah, it’s things I don’t know about that I’m going to find more concerning… especially when your health is involved.”

Carmilla blinked, lips parting long before they formed actual words. When she spoke, her voice was soft, and Laura almost thought there was an edge of hope mixed in with her seriousness.

“Why? Why do you care so much, Laura?”

Laura fell back a step.

Because I’m in love with you. Because that kiss was everything I’ve ever wanted and it’s killing me that we agreed to pretend it never happened.

She shook her head. “Carm…”

The door opened without warning, and Laura got a taste of her own medicine. She jumped much the way Carmilla had at her own intrusion moments before.

“Misses,” greeted Tom with a dip of his head. His smile was as pleasant and crooked as ever. “I believe this belongs to you?”

He pulled a sopping wet, sheepish-faced Sherman Hollis into view.

///

It was closing in on five o’clock, when they crossed into the tiny parish of Busbridge that Laura had called home all her life. Carmilla, who had been reading a book silently in the back, seemed to sense a shift in the car, and raised her head to look out the windows as the trees gathered in close at the roadside. The branches arched in a near-tunnel, washing them each in shades of green as if they had stepped under a massive stained glass ceiling.
Laura had always loved Busbridge. She loved the quiet of the town; the tight-knit neighborhood they lived in and the stray cats that sometimes slept under the daffodils in their garden; the warm scent of fresh cut grass in the summertime, or the pristine, unmarred snow in the dead of winter. Everything had a familiar edge, soft and yet tangible—a hook that could pull her back in time and wrap her up in its colors and smells.

She cranked down her window as they turned through the familiar, winding streets, and she smiled at the sign for the Arboretum that had long been her personal playground, even long after her childhood had passed by.

And then they were pulling past the old, wooden posts at the end of the drive, and the car rocked over gravel just before the cottage came into view behind the giant alder tree that took up much of the garden.

The house had belonged to her grandparents. It was where Dad had grown up, though Laura had never seen it as anything besides her own home. She had never known her father’s parents; he had been a bit of a surprise baby, from her understanding, and they had been elderly and already failing in health when Laura was born. She had been only one or two when they passed away, in quick succession, and the most she had were a few old, fading photographs of the pair cooing over her in a crib.

Dad had kept the place in perfect condition over the years. Even after Mum was gone, he took over the gardening and the housework, and, while the place was a bit cluttered—a bit packrat-ish in its picture frames and trinkets, its piles of disorganized books and unfiled papers—it was home.

He waved off Laura’s attempts to begin unpacking, once they had successfully extracted their things from the car and piled them in the narrow foyer at the base of the stairs. Instead, he ushered them into the kitchen and set about making tea while their last frozen pizza cooked in the oven.

Carmilla, for her part, was very polite about the mess. She wove through the clutter and the mismatched furniture, and paid great attention to the many photographs that littered the walls and bookshelves. Laura caught her smiling softly at a shot of her at age four, nestled between both parents on the sofa, and looked away quickly. There was something about the idea of her Mum and Carmilla, and them never meeting, that sent a prickling heat into the corners of her eyes.

“How did you do on your exams?” Dad asked, once the three of them were clustered around the breakfast bar, steaming teas in hand. “Laura tells me you’re a bit of a genius.”

Carmilla flushed ever-so-faintly, offering a shrug. “I did alright.”

“Oh come on, now,” Laura complained. “Brag a little, Carm. How many ‘Outstanding’s did you wind up with?”

Still staring intently at her tea, Carmilla muttered, “Nine.”

Laura’s smile grew triumphantly. “And how many classes did you take?”

“…Nine.”

“Ha! Told you.”

“That’s very impressive,” Dad agreed. He downed half his cup of tea, and then clutched it in both hands and leaned forward earnestly. “You must have big ambitions, then? Laura’s always telling me about Perry wanting to be the Magical Minister… it sounds like you would be worthy competition.”
“I’m still… deciding,” Carmilla hedged.

“There are a lot of options,” Laura offered quickly. “Especially for someone with as much talent as Carm—and it’s really in our sixth and seventh years that we’ll start actually focusing on careers. There’s a lot of time.” She waved her hands, and turned her focus on Carmilla. “Anyways, I’ve been meaning to thank you; I actually just barely scraped an O.W.L. in Potions! Not that it’s enough to continue on, or even that I would want to, regardless… but still. I couldn’t have got it without you.”

“Laura, that’s great!” Carmilla declared, and her honest enthusiasm was jarring. She sat up straight, her face breaking into a beaming smile. “Even without me, I knew you could pull it off.”

Laura was very aware of her father watching the exchange, and ducked her head to better hide her grin. “Nah, I needed the help. You know how much I hated all that studying.”

“Ah, yes, I do remember a great deal of moaning…”

The glare Laura shot her was playful. She gave her shoulder a light shove. “I did not moan.”

“Oh, please. You did a great impression of Myrtle.”

Laura gasped in mock horror, as Dad asked—glancing between them with humor in his eyes—“Who’s Myrtle? Is that another girl at school?”

“Sort of,” Laura said. She eyed Carmilla, still fighting down a laugh. “She’s a ghost. A toilet ghost.”

Dad blinked. “Huh. That’s… very interesting.”

The oven timer dinged loudly, and Laura was saved going into further detail on the oddities of Hogwarts—many of which she had done her best to hide over the years—by the serving of their rather sad little pizza.

Laura was already halfway through her first slice, which crunched in a rather burnt sort of way, when she realized that Carmilla had not touched her plate. In fact, she was staring at the pizza with unexpected wariness.

“Um. Is there… garlic on this?”

Dad paused, mouth stuffed and cheeks bulging like a chipmunk. He swallowed loudly. “Oh. I dunno. Are you—do you have an allergy?”

Laura’s stomach dropped. She had forgotten. How could she have forgotten?

“Oh my god, Carm, I’m so sorry. I should have realized—” she was already out of her seat and fishing the box out of the bin. She scanned through the ingredients and found it listed near the end: garlic powder. Her face was ashen when she looked up to meet Carmilla’s gaze.

“It’s fine,” the other girl promised. She nudged her plate away with a careful knuckle, somehow managing a grimace of a smile.

“It’s not fine,” Laura argued. “That could have—you could have—”

“I didn’t eat it,” Carmilla cut her off. She raised an eyebrow. “No harm no foul, Laura.”

Dad collected the plate gingerly, dropping her slices onto his plate and tossing the greased paper into the bin.
“I should have asked,” he said. “Though I’d have expected a mushroom allergy, first… never heard
of garlic. Huh. Anything else I should know before I whip you up a sandwich, kid? Any
preferences?”

Carmilla stared at her fingers, splayed flat on the now empty space before her. “Oh, really, I’m not…
I don’t need anything, Mr. Hollis.”

He shushed her, opening a series of cabinets and extracting ingredients. “Nonsense. What do you
like? Bacon and cheese? Tomato? Maybe just jam on toast?”

Carmilla darted a nervous look at Laura, but she simply smiled encouragingly. With a cringe,Carmilla said, “Tomato is fine?”

“Perfect.”

He slipped out the back door before Carmilla could process what was happening. When she looked
to Laura, brow wrinkled with questions, all Laura could do was laugh. And then Dad returned, the
screen door banging behind him, and set a fresh-picked tomato down on the counter to begin slicing.

“Dad fancies himself a gardener,” Laura explained, grinning cheekily.

Dad glared over his shoulder. “Hey now. It’s not a fancy if you win the *Busbridge Regional Garden
Party Award for Brussels Sprouts*, now, is it?”

“Wow, Dad, that sounds even *more* real when you brag about it in front of company.”

He sputtered, pointed at her sharply, and then turned to Carmilla with a dignified lift of his chin. “It is
real, and it’s held every year. I have a blue ribbon and everything.”

“That’s, uh… that’s very nice,” Carmilla stammered.

Laura struggled to keep her laughter muffled behind her hand.

It was another hour before he excused himself to ‘wash off the grime from their travels,’ encouraging
Laura to give Carmilla a better tour of the cottage before he took his leave.

“C’mon,” Laura said, standing and, after only a moment’s hesitation, offering Carmilla her hand. The
other girl accepted, raising an eyebrow but gripping back regardless.

They started at the front of the house, and Laura felt like an unprepared tour guide at the world’s
most boring museum as she began pointing out rooms and pieces of old furniture that had been
passed down from one relative or another. Carmilla smiled softly throughout, pausing now and again
to question certain items—usually handmaid, childlike creations that dated from Laura’s pre-school,
pre-magic days—and her eyes seemed to brighten with each pointless little tidbit that Laura shared.

By the time they arrived at Laura’s room, it was nearly dark outside and Laura was certain that
Carmilla could navigate the place nearly as well as she could—perhaps better, with her superior night
vision.

“Well, this is it,” she grimaced, pushing the door wide.

Her space had changed subtly over the years, drifting from the princess décor her parents had picked
out when she was a toddler, into her brief dinosaur obsession at age six, and onward to an explosion
of Quidditch fan-gear. There were remnants of each stage: the walls were still a faint, cloudy pink
(underneath the many moving posters of Harpy players), and there were stegosaurus and t-rex
stickers all over her headboard, only half of them peeling but all of them faded such that just the outlines remained.

The rest of the room was fairly standard teenager-fare. Her clothing was folded but disorganized, stacked on her dresser after she had run out of space, and her school things were strewn about where she had left them in the Paris-induced-packing-haze. She had needed the trunk, and had not exactly had the space to store her textbooks and robes and potions gear.

She grimaced, now, as she took in the mess, and scurried to throw her scarf and various other Gryffindor-themed articles of clothing into the open closet.

Carmilla leaned a shoulder on the doorframe to watch her work, grinning.

“I wouldn’t have pegged you for a clean freak,” she offered, after a long moment of indecision on Laura’s part, standing in the center of the room with a set of brass scales gripped tightly with both hands.

“Wha—I am not a clean freak!”

Carmilla raised an eyebrow.

“Dad would go crazy if he knew I didn’t tidy before you got here,” she tried to justify.

The eyebrow did not drop. “Sure, sure. That why you labeled all of your drawers, too? For guests?”

Laura followed her gaze, flushing as she recognized the old stickers. “I got a label-maker when I was nine,” she argued. “I—I thought it was fun.”

“Uh-huh,” said Carmilla. “Is that a chore wheel?”

She could feel herself growing redder by the second. She shoved the scales down in front of the offending item.

“No.”

“Remind me—do you have any siblings? Or was that just for you?”

“Shut up.”

With a chuckle, Carmilla unhooked her shoulder from the door and slipped inside, shaking her head a little but letting Laura continue with her tidying as she leaned to look at an assortment of items on Laura’s shelves.

Laura desperately hoped she had not left any old unicorn figurines out. She would never hear the end of it, if Carmilla found those…

She had just finished kicking the last of her dirty clothing under the bed when she heard a little intake of breath behind her that sounded a lot like a ‘whoa.’

“Oh god. What did you find?” she groaned, turning nervously only to find Carmilla dropping lightly onto the edge of her mattress, holding a tiny picture frame cradled in her palms.

Laura joined her, letting herself settle close at the other girl’s side. Their hips brushed, but Carmilla did not shift away. Instead, she turned the picture to show Laura, her lips parting in a wondrous smile.
The photograph—a still, fading muggle image—was of Laura on Platform 9¾. She was small, clearly a first year, and she was smiling in a gap-toothed way, holding a wand like it was a prop rather than a magical tool. She was already in her robes, with one stocking pulled higher than the other, and her hair was pushed back behind her ears with a bright pink headband.

“God,” Laura murmured. “I can’t believe that was—what?—five years ago, now?”

Carmilla gave her head a little shake, and then pressed her thumb over the corner of the frame, tapping insistently. Laura’s eyes followed the movement, and then she gasped.

There, one foot on the train and the other on the platform, was a small, raven-haired girl with pale features and big, dark eyes. She was looking back over her shoulder, her gaze seemingly locked on the girl in the forefront of the image.

“Is that you?” she breathed.

Carmilla let out a little laugh. “Yeah. It is.”

///

Dad brought a pile of blankets into the room while Carmilla brushed her teeth down the hall, and set about making up a bed of sorts on a roll-out mattress in the corner.

“Open door policy,” he said lightly on his way out, and Laura rolled her eyes. She propped the door so that it was pressed to the jamb—but not latched—the moment Carmilla was safely back inside.

“You can take the bed,” she said, shuffling herself into Carmilla’s way before the other girl could finish her beeline to the corner. “You’re the guest.”

Carmilla scoffed. “It’s your bed, Laura.”

“And?”

“And I’m not taking it from you.”

“But you’re the—”

“Vampire,” Carmilla cut in, her voice low. “I’m the vampire.”

The declaration drew Laura up short, words failing her. She knew her eyes had gone wide, and did her best to snap her mouth shut and keep it that way.

Carmilla shook her head. “I’m not going to get a back injury or a neck crick or anything. It’s… one of the perks.” She eyed the pile of blankets. “Besides, I’ve had far worse.”

That hardly sounded like a ringing endorsement of what was only a little better than the floor, but there was no arguing with her. A steely glint had taken up residence in her eyes, and, despite her gritted teeth, Laura had little choice but to admit defeat. She settled reluctantly into the cool wrap of her sheets.

“Carm?” she asked softly into the dark, once they had both stopped shifting about and a heavy, nighttime silence had blanketed them.

“Mm?” Carmilla hummed in response.

“Is this okay?”
There was a beat of silence, and then, “Is what okay?”

Laura shrugged, even though she knew Carm could not see the action. The sheets crinkled. “Staying here, with me. I know I—I didn’t actually give you much choice.”

Another pause, and then Carmilla shifted, and Laura’s eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness to see that she was sitting up in her corner. She peered out nervously from under her covers, unsure how much of her face Carmilla could make out.

“No one has ever wanted me to visit them, Laura,” she admitted, finally. “It’s… more than okay.”

Laura nodded, her voice lost under the tightening in her throat. She watched as Carmilla sank back down, nestling into the pillows.

“Get some sleep, Laura,” she whispered.

The blankets were heavy and so Laura let her eyes slip shut, but not before she murmured her own, “Goodnight, Carm.”

///

It turned out that Carmilla liked to sleep in late. She grumbled and tugged the blankets up tighter when Laura poked at her shoulder the following morning, and so Laura left her to get the extra rest and padded lightly down the stairs, her toes icy on the worn wood.

Dad was in the kitchen, pouring what Laura suspected was his second—or possibly third—cup of tea. He grinned and gestured to the still hot kettle, resting on its cozy. Her eyes still slightly bleary, she stepped through the kitchen on autopilot, digging out one of the last teabags from the tin of Earl Grey and locating the honey on the top shelf more from feel than sight.

He passed her the half of the muggle paper that he had finished with, and Laura flipped through the headlines, scanning for anything magic-related that might have made it through.

She had been keeping updated, even in Paris, having finally budgeted out enough of her wizarding funds to pay for a Prophet subscription. Dad, who was thrilled by her plans to pursue journalism, insisting that he’d always liked her writing (even though she was certain he had not read any of her recent work) took her new obsession with the papers in stride. He commented frequently on the ‘quality’ of articles, and was polite enough to not steal the Prophet from her until she had finished with it—and had therefore subtly removed anything too blatantly dangerous.

Not that there was anything blatant in the papers these days—magical or not. Deaths and disappearances were catalogued matter-of-factly, and were brushed off as oddities that were not worth further inquiry. Laura would have called the research shoddy, had it not been for the familiarity of several names in the ‘Missing’ category at the start of the summer, and her knowledge that they had belonged to the newspaper staff.

Laura tried not to think about what that might mean for her.

There were still two years before she left—surely the war would be over by then. Surely someone would stop Voldemort. Weren’t there still Aurors fighting to restore order? Wasn’t Dumbledore doing something? That’s what the rumors all said, even in Paris…

She also tried not to think about the long silence from Danny, and the ominous feeling that had settled in her gut when Cogs returned ruffled from his last attempt to locate her, with Laura’s unopened letter still tied to his leg.
There was nothing in today’s news, not that she had expected otherwise. The local headlines were all about garden parties, recent engagements, and a new reading room at the Guildford library, while the national focus appeared to be upon the George Davis robbery case. Protestors had dug up the pitch at Headley and it looked like the final match with Australia wasn’t going to go on.

*A national disaster,* Laura thought sarcastically as she folded the paper and tossed it aside.

Still, she was relieved when her Dad spent the next twenty minutes griping on that exact matter. Sometimes, she wished she were unaware of the explosions and disappearances that signaled Death Eater initiations or attacks, and the longer she could keep him caring about things like *cricket,* the better.

He left for work before nine o’clock, kissing her sweetly on the top of her head and extracting a promise that she would stay out of trouble while he was gone.

“Always do,” she said.

Carmilla finally traipsed down the stairs close to noon, wandering into the kitchen to catch Laura midway through a batch of cookies. She froze in the doorway as Laura’s head flew up from the stove at her arrival, and they both smiled at the same time, tentative and overly aware of themselves (or at least Laura was aware—she couldn’t seem to stop noticing even the smallest of details.)

“Hey,” she said. She set down a hot tray with a clatter. “Cookies?”

Carmilla laughed. “For breakfast?”

“Nope, sorry, the kitchen closed for breakfast about… oh, two hours ago?”

Still shaking her head, Carmilla dropped into one of the stools at the counter, folding her arms in front of her. She was wearing a long, loose sort of sweater. The sleeves were bunched up, hiding her hands.

“I don’t think *lunch* is any more suitable for cookies, y’know.”

Laura almost dropped the dough she was spooning out. “Blasphemy!” she gasped, pointing her spatula like a weapon. “If you want any of this chocolatey goodness, you take that back!”

“Just give me a damn cookie.”

She reached for one of the ones on the cooling rack, but Laura swatted her hand away. “Hey! You just said you didn’t think they were lunch-worthy!”

“Not for a human,” said Carmilla. Her tone was calm, but her eyes were searching even through her humor. She took advantage of Laura’s distraction to snatch a cookie, and bit it in half. “Hm. These aren’t bad.”

Laura put aside the bowl, the spoon, the spatula… and drummed her fingers on the edge of the counter, coming to stand just across from Carmilla. She bit her lip.

“Can I ask something?”

“You just did,” Carmilla pointed out, still chewing. She swallowed, eyes jumping across Laura’s furrowed brow, and added softly, “You can ask anything you want, Laura.”

“Okay…” Laura’s fingers quickened their beat. “Do you—I mean what exactly does your diet *need*
to look like? Do you—do you have to have… food?” She gave Carmilla only a half-second, and then buried her head in her hands. “Oh god that was probably really rude, wasn’t it? I’m sorry, I was just—I’ve been curious, and I shouldn’t’ve—”

Carmilla’s hand was cold on her forearm. She stopped rambling at once.

“Easy, cupcake,” Carmilla said, and Laura lifted her gaze in surprise at her teasing tone. The bravado dropped quickly, along with her stare. She, too, busied her fingers, finding a napkin to shred. “It’s fine. I—I want you to ask questions.”

“You do?”

She shrugged. “I figure you must have a lot.” Her eyes darted up, swift and uncertain. “Right?”

“Some,” Laura admitted. Her voice was small.

Carmilla finished murdering the napkin, and moved on to another. This one she began working into narrow strips, her movements deliberate and almost artful.

“I don’t technically need food,” she said. “I can live off of just blood. But it’s… uncomfortable. Like not breathing.”

“Because you don’t have to breathe, either, right?”

“Right.”

“Then… why do you?”

She didn’t stiffen the way Laura would have expected, nor did she cringe away from answering. Instead, she just let one shoulder rise and fall, languid and easy. “Partly reflex… and partly because it draws attention. If I don’t.”

“Oh. That—yeah, that makes sense.”

Carmilla offered a small smile. “Someone would be bound to notice if I never ate; if I never breathed. And, besides…” she stole another cookie, “Food still tastes the same.”

“And blood?”

Now, at last, Carmilla tensed. “What about it?”

“Does it—do you mind drinking it?”

She didn’t say anything for a long moment, and Laura had to reach a hand up to keep herself from worrying her lip any further, lest she draw her own blood and lead them into a whole different mess of a scenario.

“I don’t want to like it,” she murmured. Her voice shook.

Crap.

“Hey, no, Carm, I wasn’t… I was just asking. I mean it’s like water for you, right? I just meant like… y’know, some people don’t like water, and they have to add flavor to it or they’re just dehydrated all the time, and it would suck to have to live off something if it didn’t even taste good, so it would make sense if you like, subsided on cookies and such to make it better.”
Carmilla blinked, and then dead-panned, “Last I checked, you’re the one that subsided on cookies.”

Laura couldn’t help but snort out a laugh. “True. But my point stands. And, I mean, I’m not sure how much you need to have, or how much you brought with you, but we can figure out a good way to disguise it so that Dad doesn’t find out. Not that I want to lie to him, or anything, but he’s a little intense about safety, and it would take a lot of explaining, especially with all the magic stuff that he just doesn’t fully get, so that’s why I wouldn’t want to—”

“Laura.”

She paused. “Yeah?”

“You’re rambling.”

Laura stared, and then managed a few unsteady breaths. Carmilla smiled up through her eyelashes and began laying out her perfect little napkin strips, weaving them into a pattern. Laura watched, too transfixed and worked up to ask what she was doing—if she was even doing anything more than messing about.

“If I were sitting here, drinking a glass of blood, would you even bat an eye?” she asked, without looking up.

“No?”

Laura watched the way her throat shuddered as she seemed to release a breath. The action was so human, so familiarly Carmilla, that it took effort for Laura to remember it was merely reflex. And then Carmilla opened her mouth again.

“Does any of this bother you?”

This time it wasn’t a question: “No.” She hurried onward, before Carmilla could interrupt with any more of these queries. There had been too many of them, already. “I wish you would believe me, Carm; I’m never going to think any less of you. I mean, you know my secrets… and you’ve never thought less of me, have you?”

Carmilla frowned. “What secrets?”

Cold laced its way down her throat, curling like smoke in her lungs.

“That I’m gay.”

Carmilla opened her mouth, eyebrows lacing together and head starting to shake… and Laura darted her gaze away quickly.

(We said we weren’t going to talk about it.

(It was one thing to be accepting of the concept, another to be the subject of your best friend’s unwanted interests.)

She pushed away from the counter, and shut off the oven. She had never put the next tray in.

“Anyways!” she said, her voice too loud. She cleared her throat. “I have plans for today! We should get dressed. Or I guess I should. You… seem to be dressed already. Yeah. So, just me.”

Carmilla continued to stare, unmoving from her barstool, and Laura used it as her chance to bolt.
By the time she returned, wearing an old, flowy summer dress and sandals instead of Doctor Who pyjamas, Carmilla was busy poking through the many piles of un-shelved books that littered every kitchen nook. Their previous conversation, while most likely not forgotten, had at least been put aside.

Laura took full advantage.

They spent the evening—and really the majority of that first week—roaming about Winkworth Arboretum. Laura pointed out the various highlights of her childhood (“and after I fell out of that tree, Dad made me wear a helmet any time I came out here”) and found them the best spots to sit on the water for picnics.

They talked about Carmilla’s love for Lewis Carroll and Mary Shelley, and traded childhood fairytales. Carmilla had somehow never heard the full stories—not Sleeping Beauty or Snow White or even Cinderella—and Laura, though she’d read them before enjoyed hearing Carmilla’s take on the wizarding equivalents—things like Babbitty Rabitty and her Cackling Stump or The Tale of the Three Brothers.

It was Friday morning, both of them slumped under a willow tree, when Carmilla finished her rendition of The Paper Swan only to find Laura’s head nodding dangerously close to falling on her shoulder.

“Hey,” she hummed, the word low and rumbling in Laura’s ear as she tapped at her arm with an index finger. “I did the voices and everything—you better not have slept through that.”

“M’awake,” Laura grunted, but her head cracked back against the trunk as she jolted upright. “Ow.”

“Very convincing,” Carmilla commented, eyebrow raised and lip quirked.

“Well, it’s not my fault your voice is so relaxing,” Laura complained. She rubbed at the back of her skull, where she was certain she could feel a lump rising.

Carmilla opened her mouth, but then snapped it shut in favor of turning towards the path they had come down, a furrow in her brow. It took an extra few seconds for Laura to catch the sound of approaching steps, rustling through the leaves.

It was Mrs. Hughes, the elderly woman who lived two cottages down. Stomach dropping, Laura plastered on a smile and shifted away from Carmilla so that there was a good six inches of open air between them.

She barely pulled it off before the woman was upon them. She insisted that Laura stand to give her a hug, and then berated her for not eating enough, and turned the whole thing into a lecture on the loosening of guidelines for boarding schools.

But then she eyed Carmilla, and, with a prodding, gnarled finger pointing at her, asked Laura, “Does this school of yours have boys?”

“Yes, of course,” Laura answered. She tried not to focus on the way Carmilla was watching the conversation, or the questions she knew must be writing themselves in her expression right now. She didn’t dare look. “In separate dormitories, of course, but, um, we have shared classes.”

“Good,” intoned Mrs. Hughes, nodding severely. “Wouldn’t want you to turn out like that Tilly girl—good on your father, recognizing that weakness and sending you to a proper school.”

“Right,” Laura murmured dimly.
It was several long minutes, and an interrogation of Carmilla that she barely heard over the ringing in her ears, before Mrs. Hughes remembered some pill or other that she needed to take before dinner, and made her way off up the path—not before she managed to toss in a comment about needing to catch up with Laura’s father, though.

The silence, when Laura dropped back onto the banking and closed her eyes, was heavy with the echo of their conversation.

“She seems lovely,” Carmilla said, at last, and the dryness in her words immediately drew a laugh.

“Oh yeah, she’s a real peach. You should hear her at town hall meetings.”

The silence drew up again, like a thick curtain.

“You can ask,” she murmured, finally. She could feel the weight of Carmilla’s eyes on her, the uncertainty tight in her shoulders.

It wasn’t as if Carmilla hadn’t given up plenty of herself, in the past week. The mentions had been small, but they had been everything—a comment about her mother’s favorite perfume, or a mention of the way her father used to fold his ties. Laura clung to each bit of information with a hunger, tying them together on a string in her mind, afraid they would float away if she did not properly catalog each detail like the gifts she knew they were.

Carmilla hesitated. “Does—does your Dad know? I mean, that you’re..?”

“Yes.” Laura turned to meet her gaze as steadily as she could. “He’s the first person I ever told.”

“So, did you know that… Tilly girl, then?”

Laura let her gaze slip past Carmilla, and out over the water. She shrugged. The event in itself wasn’t a bad memory, nor was it a good one. Mostly, it stirred the discontent in her gut that came from any run-in with Mrs. Hughes—or her sort.

“Matilda Grey. She was a few years older than me—I think she was twelve when I was ten, that summer. Her parents sent her off to an all-girl’s boarding school, and before that we had been friends, but in that distant, neighborly sort of way… the sort where your parents set up the playdate so they can chat and have tea, and it’s just convenient that there’s another kid to entertain you?”

She glanced to Carmilla, and saw her nod, eyebrows furrowed with attention.

This wasn’t Laura’s usual rambling. It wasn’t falling over words or going so fast that her tongue couldn’t keep up. The story spilled out slow, and heavy, and it caught in places even when she did not think it should.

“I didn’t really understand why it was such a big deal at the time… but she kissed me on the swings one day, as I was getting ready to leave. One of the other parents made a fuss about it—a big fuss. They tried to launch a campaign against ‘bad influences in our neighborhood.’ But Dad told me it was nothing to worry about… and then Tilly ran off with an older girl from her school, when she was fifteen, and it started up again. I was in third year. I heard about it when I got home that summer, and I… well, that’s when I told him I thought I liked girls instead of boys. And he’s been—he’s been really great about it. Some people just… aren’t so much.”

She took a steadying breath, when the last words had broken free, but she didn’t quite dare to look at Carmilla. It was one thing for her to know the information, but another to hear the whole story, and behind her eyelids Laura could almost see the shadowy figure of her boggart, rising with Carmilla’s
voice and slurs on her tongue…

Carmilla’s hand slipped into hers, threading with her fingers and squeezing.

“Well, Mrs. Hughes can stuff it,” she said softly.

And Laura laughed.

///

It had to mean something, the way Carmilla kept her shoulder pressed to Laura’s that evening, or the evening after that. It had to mean something, the way she’d brush their knuckles together, her eyes tracking the movement with a deliberation that belayed any doubt of an accident.

It had to mean something, the way her brow got that little furrow, the way her head tipped just so when she’d catch Laura’s eye across the kitchen or in the mirror before bed.

It had to mean something.

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Friday was their last real day of solitude. Dad had booked up their weekend with a trip to the cinema in Godalming (Carmilla had admitted to never attending a show, much to his horror), along with a number of other last-minute-bonding activities and errands, and so there was a sense of finality when Laura set their picnic basket down on the floor of the old boathouse.

It was, by far, her favorite spot in the Arboretum. There was something familiar and comforting in the old wood; the thing had been built in the 1800s, and creaked at every joint, but it smelled like smoke and salt and the occasional wisp of flowers when the wind was just right in summer.

Carmilla paced out to the balcony, the slope of her shoulders falling just the way it did when they spent a late evening on the pitch. Laura left the basket behind and joined her.

“It’s beautiful,” Carmilla murmured. Laura watched her gaze sweep over the lake, spread out smooth far before them, with only the occasional ripple to signal the drop of an insect or the rise of a fish.

“I figured I’d save the best for last.”

They ate with their backs pressed to the building, watching the low swoop of birds over the water through the balcony slats, and talked about little things: the upcoming Quidditch season, their bets for how many O.W.L.s LaP and Perry had scored each, Laura’s thoughts on caring for Cassiopeia.

Carmilla told Laura the Greek mythos behind the name, admitting she liked the constellation far more than the woman behind it (“the stars are comforting, especially the ones you can find… the ones you can name”) and though the words were not direct, Laura could hear a thank you echoing in every refrain on the barred owl that was currently taking up residence on top of the dining room armoire.

“It’ll be nice to be able to send you letters, next summer,” Carmilla commented when they had packed up their things and resumed their places on the balcony. She had her back to the railing, feet kicked out before her and ankles crossed, and she gazed up thoughtfully at the cracked edging on the roof. “If I doubted your bird’s feelings before, the new owl droppings on my trunk have cleared them up.”

Laura stiffened at the words, her fingers tightening unconsciously on the railing and her thoughts jumping both backwards and forwards at the same time.
“What?” she asked.

Carmilla blinked. “Cogs,” she said, as though this were obvious. “He clearly hates me. Which is obnoxious, seeing as I’m not the one that did all the biting…”

“No, no. You said—next summer. That you’d write to me.”

“Yeah?”

Laura turned to better face her, color flooding her cheeks in something that, for once, was not embarrassment.

“You can’t—I don’t want you to write.” She swallowed past the ache in her throat. “Carm, I don’t want—you can’t go back there.”

The stories still echoed dark in the back of her mind, images conjured up by the flat, pained tone of Carmilla’s voice late one night as she spoke of closets, and stolen letters, and mocking words. She ground her teeth, hearing the it doesn’t matter breathing off her lips in a way that said Carmilla truly believed it. Believed her suffering did not matter.

“You’ll be seventeen, right?” Laura insisted, voice hiking. “You—you’ll turn seventeen in July.”

Carmilla was still staring, brow furrowed in confusion. Laura rambled onward.

“You can just come here, can’t you? You can—you can stay with me, and Dad, the whole summer. I mean, I know Dad can be a little overbearing, and I—I might be annoying, sometimes, but you do like it, here.” She faltered. “Don’t you?”

The look Carmilla gave her was not new, but it was just as perplexing as every time she had seen it, thus far. It was like there was a thought skittering just on the edge of her lips, hiding like a ghost in the shadow of her dark gaze.

And then the look softened at the edges, flattening out until Laura couldn’t help but remember Firewhisky and poorly timed firework balloons.

Carmilla answered her question with a question: “Laura… When, exactly, did you figure out I was a vampire?”

Laura darted her gaze away, staring down through the gaps in the balcony at the lap of green water against the old boats below.

“A while back,” she admitted. “Long enough that I should have said something… that I should have spoken up a lot sooner.”

Carmilla touched her arm. “No, Laura, I just…” her sigh was heavy, almost frustrated. “When?”

The stone in Laura’s gut shifted, poked sharply enough to twang at her insides.

“It was after the Dementors,” she admitted, finally. “But not—not right away,” she added hurriedly. She had glanced up, and caught a shift in Carmilla’s face, a shocked part in her lips. Laura grimaced. “I know it was forever, but it wasn’t until Christmas that I put it together, and then I didn’t—well I wasn’t certain, of course, and I didn’t know how to bring it up, when it was clear you didn’t want anyone to know. So I was afraid of scaring you, and what you would say, or if you would think I had invaded your privacy or something, so I…”
She stopped talking of her own accord, words catching on her unexpected inhale, because a single tear had just slipped down Carmilla’s cheek.

“Shit, **Carm**, I’m so sorry, I know I—”

Carmilla shook her head, the hand that had not quite left Laura’s arm now gripping her in a reassuring sort of way. And then she **smiled**.

“You knew already,” she whispered, eyes bright and searching and softer than Laura had ever seen them. “In—In February, Laura. You **knew**.”

_February?_  

“I thought… I thought it would change how you felt, once you knew, and so I couldn’t tell you—couldn’t *lose* you—but I couldn’t let you know how *I*…” her breath rattled, teeth digging into her lower lip as she shook her head. She was very close, still smiling, urgent and hopeful, and Laura’s heart nearly stuttered to a halt with realization.  

February, when she had waited outside the Hospital Wing. February, when she had stood next to Carmilla on the Owlery Tower and worked up a surge of bravery she had never imagined herself capable of.  

…February, when everything had crashed down in regret, when Carmilla had pulled away and insisted not that she *didn’t* want Laura… but that she *couldn’t* want Laura.  

Because, apparently, she couldn’t lose her.  

Any fresh questions fell away as she took in the look on Carmilla’s face—the hope that was still vibrant there, shimmering in her eyes and putting actual color in her cheeks. And then her gaze flicked down, catching on Laura’s lips.  

“Yeah,” Laura managed, the word catching, “Yeah, I—I knew in February.”

She was smiling, too.  

Carmilla leaned closer, and her breath was cool and soft between them, tickling the hair that had fallen out from behind Laura’s ears. Her hand brushed Laura’s as her eyebrows drew together with the question, and Laura answered twofold: she slid their fingers together tight, and closed the remaining space between their lips.  

At her touch, Carmilla hummed, lips parting, and Laura pulled back just a fraction to tilt her head—Carmilla chasing the contact with the faintest whimper of protest. The sound swooped low in Laura’s stomach, curling her up onto her toes to fight what little there was of a height difference between them.  

Carmilla tasted like shortbread and raspberry, and Laura imagined she must as well, what with the crumbs of their biscuits probably still floating in the water below.  

When she pulled back, it was only far enough to breathe, her forehead shifting automatically to press against Carmilla’s and her fingers searching further into the cool tangle of her hair. It was somehow even softer than she had imagined.
“Hey,” she whispered, their faces too close to see each other properly, though she could tell Carmilla’s eyes had flickered open as well.

The single tear-track had dried shiny on her cheek, and it shifted with the curve of her smile.

“Hey,” Carmilla whispered back.

Chapter End Notes

Catch me on tumblr: jg-firefly

Most of the places I reference in this fic are real, even if I have not had the pleasure of visiting them in person. Google streetview can do wonders. If you're curious about the specifics, check out Winkworth Arboretum, specifically the Boathouse.
These Certain Things

Chapter Summary

Some secrets are revealed. Some secrets are kept.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Summer of 1975 (Pre-Sixth Year)

“Carm?” Laura whispered into the dark. She pressed back into her pillows, scooting up as she peered into the corner where Carmilla’s makeshift bed lay.

Sleep had wavered in and out for a moment before reality took charge, and now she wasn’t certain what was real and what was not. She knew that the TARDIS could not have actually crashed into Greenhouse Five—she was in Surrey, after all, and not at Hogwarts—but the sound that had woken her was something else, and not at all like the cry of a Zygon.

It was the faint glow of the quarter moon outside that adjusted Laura’s vision enough to catch the other girl’s silhouette and answer her question. She was not lying back amidst her nest of blankets. She was propped up against the wall, the sheets gleaming white from the floor.

“Carm?” Laura tried again, slipping her feet over the side of her mattress.

“Sorry,” Carmilla whispered, without lifting her head. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Laura stared at her for a lengthy beat, trying for force the shadows into better clarity and read Carmilla’s face. It didn’t help.

“Are you okay?” she asked, finally. Her toes scuffed the floor as she gave her legs a tentative swing. The wood was cold and forbidding, but Carmilla’s extended silences, and the tightness in her voice, were nearly propelling her across the room despite her body’s reluctance.

“Fine.”

She did not sound fine.

“Well, I’m glad you woke me,” Laura murmured. “I was dreaming that the Zygons were attacking Hogwarts and the TARDIS had just crashed into the greenhouses, which destroyed all of our Self-Fertilizing Shrubs—and apparently we hadn’t received marks on them, yet, so it was quite devastating.”

She thought she saw Carmilla’s silhouette lift its shadowy head.

“Anyways, the whole Zygon invasion was pretty alarming, and then we couldn’t get the TARDIS doors open, so we thought maybe the Doctor was trapped inside, or that he wasn’t even with the TARDIS, which would have been even crazier. Plus, Sarah was already captured by the Zygons, so clearly this was supposed to be picking up after last night’s episode, and—”
“I was there?” Carmilla asked. She had picked up on the ‘we.’

“Oh. Well, yeah. We were practicing at the pitch, I think—that was how the dream started, anyways. And then somehow we were over by the greenhouses… not really sure how that happened. Actually, I’m not really sure how most of it happened… Professor Sprout was actually a centaur, for instance. Huh. That seemed normal, at the time.”

“That’s quite the dream,” Carmilla said, and her words were lilted in that familiar way that they always were when she teased. Laura could almost picture her lip quirking up, just in one corner, a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

“It was.”

There was a silence, and Laura half-expected Carmilla to offer up what had woken her—what she had been dreaming about, herself—but, she did not.

Instead, she reached for the tangle of sheets on the floor, tugging them up and across her lap.

“Carm?”

“Hm?”

Laura bit her lip, pushing her hair back behind her ear and feeling the rush of heat, there.

“Do you—would you want to come up here? With me?”

The Carmilla-shaped figure was looking at her again, her expression still lost in the darkness, and Laura wished she had thought to turn on a light. It was too late for that, now, but she just needed to know what Carmilla was thinking—to see her reaction and know if she had gone too far, if this was awkward—

“Okay.”

It took Laura a moment to register the word and its implications, and another for her to remember how to function enough to pull her legs back up under the covers before Carmilla crossed the room.

She scooted towards the wall to give Carmilla space on the narrow bed, and then all at once they were centimeters apart under the warm sheets, both of them very still and very aware. Despite the dark, Laura could see Carmilla’s face, now, could see the hollows of her eyes and the sharp line of her jaw against their shared pillow.

“Hey,” she whispered, and watched Carmilla’s eyelashes flick against the pillowcase as she returned her gaze.

They had not done this, yesterday. They had returned giddy from the boathouse, faces flushed and hands twisted together, but there had been dinner with her Dad and then game night cramped together over a Ludo board on the coffee table, and by the time they had said their ‘goodnight’s and brushed their teeth, Laura had lost the courage to stop Carmilla when she dropped into her usual spot in the corner for the night.

“…Hey,” Carmilla echoed, the word slow. Her eyebrows had drawn together, her mouth pressed thin, and Laura caught her gaze darting down to her lips.

“I have no idea what I’m doing.” she wanted to say, because she did not, indeed, have any clue what she was doing.
(She was certain that Carmilla could hear her roaring heartbeat, regardless. The words were hardly necessary.)

Instead, she traced her hand up between them, towards her face, and, with fingertips trembling, stroked Carmilla’s hair off her cheekbone and behind her ear.

It was a wonder, that she could do this, now.

Carmilla’s eyes were impossibly dark, and very wide. She turned into the touch, pressing her cheek into the palm of Laura’s hand with a sigh, and she was warm in the way a blanket might be that had been left just a moment in the sun—warm in a way that was not quite human, but still as familiar as though Laura had felt it a thousand times before.

Her knee was warm, too, when it brushed tentatively into Laura’s under the covers and momentarily stole the breath from her lungs.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell my Dad,” Laura blurted, and then clapped a hand over her mouth when the words echoed back just a little louder than was really advisable at four in the morning. She continued in a hushed whisper, peering up through her eyelashes rather than meeting Carmilla’s gaze directly, “I just—I knew he’d have a lot of questions, and I don’t—I mean I’m not exactly sure how to answer them, or if that would make you uncomfortable, or even what you want, and if it’s not the same thing then that would be even more awkward, so I—”

Carmilla pressed close, her nose nudging into Laura’s, and Laura choked to a halt, eyes going wide. She waited for Carmilla to kiss her, not quite breathing, but Carmilla remained where she was, lips parting only to ask a question: “What do you want, Laura?”

Without her permission, Laura’s eyes darted down to the Carmilla’s lips, and saw them quirk in amusement even as her cheeks lit into a new, dusky pink.

They both knew that wasn’t what she had meant.

“Do you remember the day of the first Hogsmeade visit, last year?” Laura asked.

Carmilla nodded, and her apprehension was visible in the suddenly sharp line of her shoulders, the narrowing of her eyes.

“Not the Dementor part,” Laura clarified. “I mean… obviously not that part. But just… we were sitting up in the clock tower, remember? And nobody knew we were even friends, but all I could think was how much I wished we were down there getting our names checked off with everyone else. Going to get Butterbeer and browsing through Zonko’s… holding hands while we walked through the village.”

Carmilla was quiet, and Laura watched her expression flicker. There was something in her eyes that was almost sadness, and she wished she could reach out and brush it away as easily as a stray eyelash.

“I wanted that, too,” Carmilla whispered, and the response sank into Laura’s skin with more weight than Carmilla could have possibly understood.

There were not words—at least not words she dared whisper here and now, when she had only just kissed Carmilla less than forty-eight hours prior—and so she drew forward to press their lips together in a quick, aching sort of way.
“So—can we? Do something like that, I mean?” She was still close enough that she could feel her own breath echo back hot against her lips.

“I’d like that,” Carmilla breathed, and her smile came on the tail of another kiss. Laura could not tell who had initiated, but she felt like the warmth in her chest could not possibly stay contained; it curled there like a cat and she almost did not dare move for fear it would bound away.

And then a yawn tugged at her without permission, and Carmilla’s chuckle was low in her chest, rumbling in the space between them. With careful, uncertain movements, she laced her fingers through Laura’s hair and pulled her head down against her shoulder.

“Sleep,” she murmured.

Nodding into the touch, Laura pressed against her side and let the hum of Carmilla’s controlled, unnecessary breathing lull her back to unconsciousness.

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They were, thankfully, out of bed and dressed for the day when Dad knocked on the doorframe the following morning. His smile was apologetic as he leaned inside, one hand on the doorknob, to inform them that he had been called away to work. There was some issue at the new construction site, something his weekend crew was apparently incapable of figuring out for themselves, and he’d be gone for at least the whole of the morning.

Laura did not stop grumbling about the canceling of their cinema plans until Carmilla shoved a cup of steaming tea under her nose and agreed to let her eat the last of the cookies—and even then the glare remained planted firmly on her face. She propped her head on her fists, watching bits of sugar dissolving on the tea’s dark surface.

“Who would have thought you’d be the grumpy one?” Carmilla teased as she settled onto her stool at Laura’s side. “Here I was, thinking I had that covered...”

Laura stuck out her tongue, and Carmilla responded by bumping her shoulder.

“C’mon, creampuff. I really don’t mind missing out on the film. Let’s do something fun.”

“Well, we can’t go back out to the Arboretum,” Laura said, gesturing to the foggy, rain-spattered windows of the kitchen. “It’s storming.”

“Really?” said Carmilla. “Gosh, I hadn’t noticed.” At Laura’s glare, she merely smirked. “I think we can find a way to have our own fun, right here.”

“Here?” Laura glanced around the untidy space. “I know you like to read, Carm, but this is our last day off, and I thought—”

Carmilla silenced her with a quick, soft kiss.

“...Oh.”

“Mhm,” Carmilla hummed, kissing her again.

“Okay. I think I can get behind this.”

Carmilla hummed again, the vibration sending heat pouring down Laura’s spine. “Stop talking,” she whispered against Laura’s lips.
“Mmm. Okay.”

Carmilla pulled back, ducking her head and letting out a chuckle. The warmth that spread in Laura’s chest at the sound was overwhelming.

“Laura,” she complained, even as her eyes sparkled with mirth.

Laura flushed, and then, biting her lip, she hopped down from her stool, abandoning her tea on the counter in favor of wrapping Carmilla’s hand up in her own.

“C’mon. The den is more… comfortable. We can put on morning cartoons, or something.”

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“You’re sure about this?” Carmilla murmured one final time. Dad’s keys jingled at the door, fumbling in the lock, and they heard him call out a greeting from the hall as he finally shouldered his way inside.

Laura held up their joined hands, pressing her lips to Carmilla’s knuckles. “Positive.”

“An entire shipment of bad drills,” Dad griped. His boots clomped loudly as he kicked them off. “And of course it’s Sunday, so getting someone on the telephone was a nightmare, and then this horrible man from Grunnings tried to tell me that it was my team’s fault! Absurd. I tell you, I’ll be having a strong word with—oh.”

He stopped short in the doorway.

Laura was tucked into Carmilla’s side, her legs curled up under her and her head resting in the crook of the other girl’s shoulder. Carmilla’s arm was looped softly about her, their hands laced on Laura’s lap.

“Hey, Dad,” she said, her face pink as she worried her lip. “So… work wasn’t great, then?”

He glanced between them with his eyebrows raised high. “Uh-huh,” he said, and then worked his way across the room, settling with slow, deliberate motions into the armchair across from them.

“Well,” he began. “Is this your way of telling me something, girls?”

Laura gave Carmilla’s hand a squeeze. Her voice came out pitched, the words rushing together: “Carmillaniredating.”

Carmilla normally would have smirked, mocking her for her incomprehensible babbling, but she was very still against Laura’s shoulder, eyes locked on her Dad.

He had always been a pro at understanding her—he had interpreted her toddler-speak with freakish accuracy, or so he said in his frequent, and embarrassing, retellings of her childhood. It was no different, now.

“I figured,” he said simply. His eyes drifted to their linked hands. “I supposed I just have two questions, then.”

Her face now closer to crimson than mere pink, Laura nodded and cleared her throat. “Shoot.”

“Does she make you happy, Laur?”

The words were serious, his head tipped forward and his hands clasped together. He didn’t
acknowledge Carmilla, his gaze never leaving Laura’s face. “Very much,” she whispered.

Calmly, he nodded and leaned back. “Good. That’s all that really matters.”

There was a beat of silence. “You—you had two questions, Dad?”

His gaze shifted over to Carmilla, his expression twisting with uncertainty. “Are you a vampire?”

There was a fire crackling low in the hearth, but at his words it chilled, the flames flickering their dying breaths and falling away. The cold, it seemed—as it settled harsh and instantaneous over the room—extended beyond just her imagination. She could see goosebumps rising on Carmilla’s pale arms.

Dad glanced at the hearth, eyebrows raising. “Yes, sir,” Carmilla whispered.

The words made Laura jump. She had been so busy trying to formulate a response of her own, her thoughts swinging wildly between urgent lies and reassuring truths, that she had not even considered the idea of Carmilla speaking for herself.

She looked small, in the wake of the admittance; smaller even than she had curled in that armchair of Dumbledore’s office. Laura barely managed to keep hold of her hand as Carmilla tried to pull away.

Dad opened his mouth and shut it several times, in quick succession, and then let his hands separate and grip, instead, at his knees. He turned to Laura. “You knew this?”

Grip tightening on Carmilla’s icy hand, Laura nodded. “Yes. And it—it’s not like the books, Dad. This isn’t Dracula, or any of those muggle movies or stories or, or any of that.” She glanced at Carmilla, at her pale features and downcast eyes. Her voice came out soft. “Carm would never hurt me.”

“I should hope not.” When Carmilla’s head lifted, he locked his gaze with hers, and smiled. “You know, one of the first things I taught Laura was that, when she found someone, she needed to make sure they deserved her. Of course, at the time I thought it would be some punky little boy she met in secondary school, and I’d have to pull him aside and have a conversation with him about priorities and respect.”

Carmilla did not look away. Laura did not think she was even pretending to breathe, anymore.

Dad was earnest, his smile genuine. “Now… I don’t think I need to worry about that.”

Despite the lack of flames in the hearth, some of the cold drifted out of the room. Laura felt the heat restoring itself to her cheeks and the tips of her ears. “You’re… okay with this?” Carmilla managed, finally. She looked so pale that, were she human, Laura would fear she was about to faint.
“Well, I did read Laura’s textbooks, and they suggest that vampires have all sorts of extra abilities—strength and speed and sensitive hearing and all that—is that right?” Carmilla nodded dumbly, lips parted and brow furrowed. “Then you should have no problem looking out for her, what with all that other magical… stuff that’s out there.”

Laura was certain she was hearing him wrong. “What?” she stammered.

“I know you are perfectly capable of taking care of yourself, kiddo. But it’s dangerous out there, and I… hear things.”

Heart thudding guiltily, Laura dropped her gaze to her lap.

“You just keep making my daughter happy, alright?”

“I—yes, of course, sir.”

He stood and, with three long strides, crossed to the sofa and tugged Carmilla up into his arms. “It’s Sherman,” he said, practically lifting her off her feet. “Or ‘Dad,’ if you like.”

“Oh my god, Dad,” Laura complained. He set Carmilla down, and ruffled her hair for good measure. She looked too startled to form proper words, and stumbled slightly until Laura touched her arm to guide her back onto her cushion.

“Alright, then, I’m going to go start the roast! Have you girls packed, yet?” They exchanged a look, and he sighed. “Right. Go on, then. And don’t forget the ties you’ve got hanging in the washroom.”

They packed quickly, dodging around one another in a sort of dance as they collected their things from various nooks and crannies of Laura’s room, stuffing them into their respective trunks with little regard for organization. Every now and again as they moved, Laura would catch Carmilla’s eye, and the pair would smile unabashedly at each other.

Laura could not help but think that she had never felt this happy. And, watching the way Carmilla’s eyes sparkled when she passed Laura her scarf, she could not help but think that she had never seen Carmilla this happy, either.

(The idea was an ache as much as it was a comfort.)

Dad asked a number of questions over dinner, pestering Carmilla for information on vampires until Laura finally made him stop after he’d extracted all of the details on Carmilla’s aging process (“So you’ll just stop at some point in your twenties?” and “What do you mean Laura will live almost as long as you? How long do witches live?”). In fact, she thought the worst of the fallout from today’s revelations was over after he had finished regaling Carmilla with stories about Laura’s childhood—from her first words to her penchant for fluffy, pink stuffed animals—and they had escaped upstairs for one last night in the cottage.

“Laura,” he called, crashing these hopes in their tracks. “Can I speak to you for a moment?”

She glanced back over her shoulder at Carmilla, who was leaning into the doorframe, already in her pyjamas, and trod slowly down the stairs to join him. He led the way into the kitchen, where he was having a final cup of tea.

“This isn’t about Carm, is it?” she asked warily. She did not sit, merely resting her arms on the edge of the counter and regarding him with a raised eyebrow. “Because I think you know enough about vampires, now, to write your own book. Which, also: don’t do that.”
“It’s not about your girlfriend,” Dad promised, and the word sent a thrill through her. *Girlfriend.* “I just figured, what with you leaving tomorrow… that I’d get the sappy goodbyes out of the way without an audience.”

*Oh.*

He held up his hand. She saw the way his throat bobbed, and there was no fighting against the mistiness that rose up behind her eyes.

“Dad…”

Without pause, he tugged her into his arms, wrapping her around the waist and scooping her off of her feet as though she weighed nothing.

Normally, Laura would have giggled, whacking him lightly on the shoulder as she pleaded to be let down. This time, she rested her head on his shoulder and squeezed back.

“You know I miss you, Laur,” he whispered. His stubble tickled against her cheek as she nodded helplessly. “And your mother… oh, kid, she’d be so proud.”

Laura choked on a sob, and pressed her face further into the softness of his shirt.

“So proud,” he repeated. He set her down, pushing her hair back and blinking at the tears in his eyes. “And y’know what? I think she’d really like that girl of yours.”

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They arrived at King’s Cross well before eleven o’clock, tickets in hand and trolleys loaded with their things. Cogs and Cassiopeia hooted at one another from their cages, in an indignant sort of conversation that Laura imagined was probably somewhat inspired by the gifting of Cogs’ old cage to Cass—something that had been carried out without his input.

(Cass seemed quite proud of herself, and was mostly ignoring him.)

The platform was already crowded, even with the early hour. Students milled about with their parents, half of the crowd in robes and the other in unassuming muggle garb, and Dad eagerly pointed the moment he spotted LaFontaine and Perry with their parents, dragging the girls over to join them.

“You barely wrote!” Perry fussed, once she had pulled Laura back from their hug to give her health a stern appraisal. She had tugged Carmilla into an embrace before Laura had a chance to respond, and the other girl stared wide-eyed over Perry’s shoulder, stiff and unsure of herself.

If Perry noticed, she said nothing about it.

“How have you been? You both look well, and of course when you wrote about your O.W.L. scores we were both very pleased for you, Laura… but how did you do, Carmilla?”

“Nine ‘Outstanding’s,’” said Laura, bumping Carmilla’s shoulder with her own. “I have to brag for her—she’s too humble.”

“That’s wonderful,” Perry agreed, but her eyes flashed ever-so-slightly. She had received eight, herself, and two ‘Exceeds Expectations’ in Divination and Arithmancy. Even though the tone of her letter had been happy, Laura could read between the lines.
“Damn, Karnstein,” said LaFontaine. They forced her into a fist bump. “Badass.”

At this, Carmilla managed a chuckle, lip quirking up in an undeniable smile. When it lifted its way into her eyes, Laura beamed.

With her pulse quickening, she nudged Carmilla’s hand until their fingers locked, and then lifted her gaze to search her friends’ faces.

LaFontaine noticed first, their eyes narrowing. “Wait. Are you two—?”

“Oh my goodness, finally!” Perry cried, clapping a hand to her face. She hugged them again, in urgent succession. “When did this happen? We were worried you would never figure it out!”

“Perry wanted to launch an intervention,” LaFontaine informed them knowledgably. Their expression was still mostly blank, their gaze darting between the girls’ faces and linked hands.

“It actually, uh, just sort of happened?” said Laura. She ran her thumb over Carmilla’s.

“That’s wonderful,” declared Perry, and her eyes were bright in a way they had not been when she used those same words to praise Carmilla’s test scores.

She glanced expectantly at LaFontaine.

At last, they smiled, and, even if it was uncertain and wavering, the drop in Laura’s shoulders felt like relief.

“Yeah,” LaF said. “That’s… great, you two.”

A distant whistle announced the arrival of the Hogwarts Express, the red engine throwing smoke across the platform as it surged into place, doors opening invitingly.

“We’ll grab a compartment,” LaF said hurriedly. They hooked Perry by the arm and hauled her off to the train. A few meters away, Dad was still locked in a conversation about the wonders of wizarding transportation with Truman LaFontaine.

She turned to Carmilla, and found the other girl frowning at her shoes.

“Hey. You okay? I thought they seemed happy for us.”

The ‘us’ in her sentence felt thick on her tongue, turning the statement into a different question. Her thoughts immediately rushed backwards, ran through their evening at the boathouse, the quiet kisses in her bed the following two nights, the hushed conversation they had held about what they wanted, the way things had gone when she told her father that morning…

Had it all happened too fast?

Carmilla didn’t answer the question. “I didn’t realize we were going to tell everyone,” she said.

Her voice wavered slightly, and her eyes shifted.

“Oh. Oh. I mean—did you not want to tell them?” Laura asked, her voice lowering so far that it nearly cracked. “Oh god, Carm… I didn’t think. I should have asked you if you were okay with telling other people—people that weren’t my Dad. And—oh my god, I didn’t even ask if you were okay with people knowing that you liked girls…”

“Laura.”
She stopped, meeting Carmilla’s suddenly earnest stare and finding warmth there. Carmilla smiled. “It’s okay. I think enough people have guessed I was gay at this point—probably before even I figured it out—and, well, I was brought up in the wizarding world. *Outing* is less of a thing, here.”

Laura drew a steadying breath. “Right. Right, okay. So you—you’re okay with this, then? Because I still should have asked, especially after all those crossed wires about us even being *friends*, and how I didn’t tell people, then…”

Carmilla looked away, shrugging. “It’s fine.”

Laura frowned, and was already formulating a response into how it did not, in fact, *seem* fine, when the train gave a warning whistle.

LaFontaine and Perry had re-emerged at some point, and were now wrapped in hugs from their respective parents. Right on cue, Dad stepped over and surprised Carmilla by wrapping her in a massive bear hug first, before he turned to Laura.

“Be safe out there,” he whispered into her ear.

“You too,” Laura murmured back, her lungs constricting from more than just the clutch of his arms around her.

They boarded the train, and, with a few last waves and smiles out the windows, the platform lurched out of sight and was replaced gradually by grey buildings and the sloping English countryside.

Their timeliness that morning had earned them a compartment near the back, away from the bustle of the luggage compartments, and the four of them settled cozily inside, knees bumping in the narrow space between the benches.

They talked about the upcoming year and the classes Laura was eagerly dropping, and rehashed Laura’s trip to Paris. LaFontaine had gone on a two-week trip to Egypt with their parents, a subject which actually seemed to engage Carmilla’s interest, and they had stretched the topic nearly to the hills of Scotland before the trolley worked its way far enough through the train to interrupt them.

Perry pulled the compartment door open at the Trolley Witch’s call, buying herself and LaFontaine Pumpkin Pasties to snack on and passing over the sickles as though they were nothing. Stomach jumping, Laura dug into her pockets, flipping over a single galleon again and again. LaFontaine had moved to shut the door, the trolley pushing down to the last compartment, when she made up her mind, hopping to her feet.

She ignored the looks of surprise and stepped out into the corridor to make her purchase. It was ironic that her pocket felt heavier with the collection of sickles and knuts she received in return, but she didn’t let herself dwindle. Instead, she returned to the compartment and cracked open the package of Peppermint Toads, offering the first handful to Carmilla.

Her astonished smile, and the accompanying tint of blood rising in her cheeks, was well worth the dip in Laura’s already meager savings.

Perry and LaFontaine made their Prefect rounds as night began to fall, and when they returned Carmilla was sleeping lightly against the window while Laura read through a book of poems the other girl had brought along. Remus Lupin followed them in, with Lily Evans on his heels, and it was immediately obvious where LaF and Perry had found them—both wore identical Gryffindor Prefect badges on their chests.

“I see congratulations are in order,” Laura said, dog-earing the page she was on and closing the little
“And to you as well, apparently,” grinned Remus.

At the comment, Carmilla’s eyes slid open. “The gossip spreads like Fiendfyre around here,” she muttered under her breath. Still, she smiled at Remus, only adding an “oh, shut up,” when he flopped down across from her and reached over to nudge her shoulder.

When she glanced at Laura, biting her lip to better hide her smile, it was enough to make Laura flush a happy pink.

A moment later, though, shifting on the bench as it became evident that their guests were not just popping in for a quick hello, all of the amusement drained from Carmilla’s face. Laura was laughing at something Lily said—a comment about Sirius’s absurd new motorbike, which could not possibly be legal—when she noticed the shift, catching the way Carmilla tucked her legs up and pressed her skull hard into the crook where the seat met the window.

“We should probably change,” Laura declared, cutting into the conversation abruptly. The others fell silent, raising eyebrows at her. She cleared her throat. “Carm and I, I mean. We’re still dressed like muggles.”

They were, indeed, the only ones. As Prefects, the other four were already in full uniform.

“We’ll be back,” she said simply, and tugged Carmilla up by the arm. They hopped through the mess of limbs and robes, pushed out the narrow gap of the compartment door, and fell into the corridor beyond.

Laura shoved a hand through her mussed hair and led the way, never letting go of Carmilla.

“What are you okay?” she asked lowly, as they sifted through the luggage cart to find their trunks.

Carmilla shrugged. Her unnecessary breaths were coming quicker than usual, and there was a darkness at the edges of her eyes that bit into the brown of her irises.

“I’m sorry that they all know,” Laura murmured. “I didn’t want to hide how I felt, anymore, but if—if you weren’t okay with it, I should have made sure we kept it private, and then even if we told LaF and Perry we could have had them keep the secret. That—that could have been something we did. Instead.”

Carmilla’s breath stuttered, and then stopped. She cleared her throat. “It’s not that,” she whispered, and then she bowed her head, scraping her fingers through her hair. “There were just… a lot of people. In a—a very small space.”

Laura was still, and she blinked slowly as she processed this new information. She remembered Carmilla’s description of the orphanage, and the closet the others had liked to lock her in. Nausea swirled in her gut.

“Carm, are you… claustrophobic?”

Carmilla winced at the word. Without lifting her gaze, she nodded.

“I—I didn’t know that.”

Why did I not know that?
As if Carmilla had heard her thoughts, she sighed. “I didn’t tell you.” When Laura said nothing in response, she pressed her forehead into the heel of her hand. “I don’t like to talk about… certain things.”

“I did know that,” Laura murmured. She bit her lip, and her voice came out soft as she added, “I wish you would tell me, anyways.”

When Carmilla peered up through her eyelashes, her lips pressed thin, there was a gaunt sadness about her expression. And a question.

“I will,” she murmured. “I—I will.”

But not right now.

The words tacked themselves on, flowing from the pleading light behind Carmilla’s gaze. Laura did not have the power to refuse—no matter how much she wished she could just take all of the information off of Carmilla’s shoulders. Wisk it away.

(How much more did she not know?)

“C’mon,” she said, at last, nodding towards the windows. “Let’s… stay here for a minute. Just you and me.”

Eyes finally softening, Carmilla pressed close beside her and, together, they watched the last embers of daylight fall away over the Scottish hills.

Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: jg-firefly
Chapter Summary

There are a lot of firsts, in the fall of 1975.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Fall of 1975 (Sixth Year)

“It is astonishing,” Laura groaned, burying her head in her hands over her half-empty bowl of porridge, “Just how little I know about Seeking.”

She had a copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* propped up against the sugar bowl, open to a section on the necessary qualities of any good Seeker. There were quotes from various players and captains of the major European teams, but none of them had sank in as particularly useful.

Tryouts were set to start in no less than twenty minutes.

“You are the captain, you know, Laura,” Perry said primly. She tapped her spoon on the edge of her teacup, blowing delicately on the steaming liquid inside. “You can always put the auditions off.”

“They’re not called *auditions*,” LaFontaine grumbled. Perry ignored them.

“Besides, haven’t you been on this team for four years?” she continued. “Just look for whatever it is that Peter was always doing.”

Laura flushed. “It’s not that simple. Johnson was always just—he was busy doing his Seeking stuff, and Danny’s instructions to him were more like… ‘fake out the other Seeker,’ or ‘get the Snitch as fast as possible.’”

“Well, there you have it, then!” Perry decided. She turned her attention back to her tea, giving it a tentative sip.

Laura shared an exasperated look with LaFontaine, but her gaze shifted without her permission, drifting over the ginger’s shoulders towards the Ravenclaw table. The urge was as insuppressible as a sudden itch. She knew she would not find Carmilla there—the other girl had come and gone quickly that morning, collecting a few slices of toast and dropping by the Gryffindor table only long enough to touch Laura’s arm and say *good luck*—yet, still, she looked.

She had asked Carmilla to come along: to be her moral support in the stands. They had spent the better part of the week—when they weren’t slogging through a truly alarming stack of start-of-term homework—going over Quidditch strategy. Carmilla’s ideas, in this realm, tended to line up fairly well with Perry’s, and as such they had found themselves surrounded by books in a way that threatened to give her O.W.L. flashbacks.

This, however, had been where her support ended.

“*Somehow I doubt that my presence would help your credibility,*” Carmilla had murmured, and
there was honesty lingering behind the teasing edge of her words and the kiss that had followed.

When they made their way down to the pitch, Perry carrying extra apples in case they needed a ‘snack break,’ it did not escape Laura’s notice that LaFontaine seemed pleased to find only Gryffindors awaiting them. She bit back her irritation and tugged her whistle out from under her robes.

“Alright! Tryouts will begin in approximately five minutes, and we’ll be starting with Chasers! If you could just sort yourselves—yes, good, like that.”

There were barely any new faces amongst the crowd. The only tryouts for Beater were Melanie and Davie, who were sure-things anyway; Potter had of course brought along his cronies, but this year it seemed that only Sirius was planning to make a fool of himself, as opposed to the whole gang; and her two new Chasers, Devon Brown and Alec Reeves, only had a few second and third years vying for their positions.

Laura’s far greater concern came from the dozen or so nervous figures that huddled in the area she gestured to for Seekers. She recognized the majority of them from the common room, though she could only put names on a handful. A few of the second years looked like they might faint—or be ill.

At least some of her nerves fell away when she hopped on her Cleansweep. It had been months since she had flown, but none of the instincts had faded. Her breath rolled out cool and smooth.

*Freedom.*

She did one full lap, alternating between hugging tight to the broom—making herself one with the instrument, feeling the way it hummed with her pulse—and rising off of it with only feather-light touches to guide her way.

When she returned to her prospective players, they were waiting patiently. Her long-term teammates looked bored, though she saw Potter mouth ‘showoff’ at her with a mocking grin, and the rest were eyeing her with odd expressions, some of them pale and others simply wide-eyed.

It took her a moment to realize they had been watching her lap. That they were reacting to her flying.

She cleared her throat past the surge of unexpected pride.

“Okay, so… Chasers, on your brooms, then. Potter, let’s get this over with, shall we?”

“Hell yes.”

This part of the tryouts went off almost entirely without a hitch. Her previous Chasers showed off the level of talent she expected. She was even thrilled to discover a third year, Victoria Edgar, with the sort of talent she’d need next year when Alec left Hogwarts.

Melanie and Davie reclaimed their spots in mere minutes, and went off to make-out somewhere in the stands. LaFontaine only barely scraped their spot as the back-up Beater, making it over a fourth year boy that Laura had never heard of, but who had surprising enthusiasm.

Her Keeper back-up reclaimed his role without a challenger.

And then there was nothing left but to face the music.

“So, you’ve seen the team, you’ve seen some expectations… if anyone wants to leave, now would be a solid time to save yourself the trouble.”
Two of the second years—who looked suspiciously like first years, now that she eyed them more closely—scurried away.

“Cool,” she said, adjusting her gloves. “So. We’ll do a warm-up, I suppose? Does everyone have a broom?”

Her ragtag band of potential Seekers (plus Sirius, wearing a shit-eating grin), hopped aboard their mosh of personal and school-owned brooms. Many of the younger students had to be coaxed into the air, while several others rocketed off in an almost dangerous way and had to be rounded up by an exasperated LaFontaine.

She launched several dozen ping pong balls into the pitch, once her Seekers were situated, and proceeded to watch the chaos unfold.

This, at the very least, had the useful side-effect of weeding out another five contenders. If they can’t handle this, they’ll be useless in a match, she reasoned.

Sirius, who had bailed after receiving a ping pong ball to the eye, came to hover beside her pleasantly.

“Not bad, Captain.”

“Nope. Not your captain, Black.”

“But we’re both Gryffindors. And you’re the *Gryffindor* Captain…”

“Not how that works.”

He pouted, which she stoically ignored, choosing to watch the pitch, instead. A few of the prospects were fairing decently—at the very least they were successfully dodging one another, even if they were not catching many of the balls.

“So,” he huffed. “Karnstein, huh?”

She tightened her grip on her broom, shooting him a sidelong glance. “Yes.”

There was a long beat of silence, and then:

“I’m impressed, Hollis.”

She was still bracing for the bravado, the insult, the attempted mockery. “Wait. What?” she demanded. She had lost her focus on the tryouts, turning now to fully face him.

He didn’t even look all that chagrined. He was *smiling*.

“Hey, she’s a total hottie.”

She pulled to the side just enough to punch him in the shoulder.

“Ow!”

“Don’t call my girlfriend a *hottie*,” Laura warned, though she couldn’t keep her lips from quirking at the label. *Girlfriend* still sent a thrill of wonder through her. She wondered if that would ever stop, if there would be a day when she was no longer amazed that this was real. That she was dating Carmilla.
He rubbed his shoulder, his pout still in place. “Noted.”

Laura turned her focus back to the pitch, finding her whistle to put a halt to the pelting of ping pong balls.

“We’ll do individual trials, now!” she called, and then checked the sign-up sheet. “Is Tim… Abington still here?”

A sorry looking kid flew forward, his hair cropped short and his eyes huge. He had a slim build, which was at least promising for a Seeker, and she waved the rest of the students off the pitch and set to work.

It wasn’t until Laura was on her fifth tryout, and growing more exasperated by the minute when each seemed to fall worse than the last, that she heard Sirius give a little cough beside her. She had been doing her best to ignore him, what with his exaggerated facial expressions and his reactionary hums and grunts to everything, but this drew her focus.

“What?” she snapped. She was more than ready to order him back to the school, if this was about to be some snide comment about the fourth year that was, honestly, just trying her best. (Which was not good.)

“I think your girlfriend might be here?”

Her next “what?” came out with an entirely different tone than the one before. Eyebrows shooting towards her hairline, Laura followed Sirius’s pointing finger and located a familiar sight. The Ravenclaw team was setting up residence in the stands.

“Oh, for Dalek’s sake,” Laura muttered, “Not again.”

She blew her whistle, and was halfway across the pitch before she realized that Carmilla was not, in fact, present. The whole rest of the team appeared to be, though, back-ups and all. Their captain crossed his arms as Laura approached.

“You don’t see my house invading other team’s private tryouts, Perkins,” she snapped.

“Not a very good captain, are you, if you can’t even properly book the pitch, Hollis,” he tossed back. He was grinning, and she felt her stomach sink, even as her hands clenched at her sides.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that Ravenclaw requested this timeslot, and Madam Hooch graciously allotted it to us. If those words were too big for you, I can always—”

“We’re in the middle of tryouts!” Laura cut him off.

He was right, and she hated him all the more for the glint in his eyes that said he knew it.

She had not booked the pitch. She had known when the other tryouts were being held—had known that Ravenclaw was getting a head start and that Hufflepuff and Slytherin were competing for Sunday—and the idea of officially putting in a request was absurd. It was the sort of thing that got political and complicated before a big match, not the first week of term.

“What’s going on?” LaFontaine asked, landing beside her and scowling at Perkins.

“They’re kicking us out,” Laura ground through her teeth.
“What?”

Perkins, still grinning toothily, unfurled a small scroll. “Want proof?”

Laura snatched it from him, even knowing what she would find written there. It was a standard pass. She had gotten dozens over the course of the last year—some of them trickier to obtain than others. She knew what they looked like.

Still, she crumpled it in her hand before she shoved it back at him.

“We’ll wait,” he said cheerfully, giving her a mocking wave. She spun on her heel, and returned reluctantly to the cluster of uncertain-looking Gryffindors.

They hadn’t even played a match yet, and somehow she was already a worse captain than the year prior.

///

Laura squinted once more at the note. Carmilla had left it for her, tucked into the nook where she normally stored her broom, and it had been as blank as the last one. Thankfully, she had enough memory—and intelligence—to cast a revealing charm, this time.

Carmilla’s looping scrawl had asked her to meet in the abandoned classroom beside the axe-wielding statue of armor on the fourth floor, and she had been wandering the corridors for the past twenty or so minutes, looking for just that.

She was definitely late—late enough that she kept hoping to find Carmilla out looking for her.

This whole thing made her uneasy. Laura had thought they had left the cloak-and-dagger behind when they revealed their friendship, and she had certainly hoped that it would remain true for their relationship.

They had only been back at the castle for a week; Carmilla could not have already changed her mind, could she?

But what if she has?

Laura could not say if the feeling was more relief or trepidation, when she rounded another corner (they were all starting to look the same) and discovered the gaudy, emerald encrusted armor waiting for her. It took her a moment before she could get her fingers to close on the handle of the door at its side, and another before she could actually push the thing open.

Carmilla leapt to her feet, her eyes wide in the darkness and her figure silhouetted by the window she had been resting against.

“Hey,” she stammered, as Laura turned to push the door shut again. It clicked into place.

“Sorry. I, uh, I got lost.”

“Right,” agreed Carmilla, just a hair too quickly. Her head bobbed. “I-I figured that was it.”

Carefully, Laura cut across the shadowy room. The desks were old, the wood crumbling a bit at the edges, and most of them were pushed aside to leave a wide, open space between the entrance and Carmilla.

Laura did not come up to meet her fully, pausing when there was still about a meter to go, and toyed
with the sleeves of her sleep robes.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked, her voice fraught with nerves, “Because… it seems like there might be something wrong, and I don’t know if it was me—if I did something, or if—”

“Whoa, Laura,” Carmilla said, closing the distance in two lengthy strides. She tipped up Laura’s chin with a brush of her forefingers, her thumb strokes along her jaw. Her smile was sad, and it reflected in her eyes. “No, okay? You didn’t—you haven’t done anything.”

“But something is wrong?”

The tightening of Carmilla’s lips was as good as an answer, and Laura felt the cold reach back inside, slipping down her throat.

She swallowed.

“Carm. Please—what is it?”

Eyes closed, Carmilla sighed out: “Laura, I quit the team.”

Laura let the words sink in, her brow furrowing and her fears slowly morphing into confusion.

“The Quidditch team?”

Still not looking at her, Carmilla nodded.

Laura wanted to laugh, but she held it in. Her incredulity was nothing in the face of Carmilla’s distress—and her face was drawn into tight lines, now, her downcast gaze thick with anxieties.

“What happened?” Laura asked, softly. “Do you—do you want to talk about it?”

She was surprised when Carmilla muttered, “Perkins,” under her breath. Without pause, she caught Carmilla by the arm and tugged her carefully to a pair of the less-dilapidated desks.

“He was saying these things, today,” Carmilla admitted, once they were seated. “Things about you. Us. It doesn’t matter. I just—I go so angry. And I told him I was done.”

“What was he saying?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Carmilla repeated.

With one hand, Laura touched her arm. With the other, she reached up to push back her bangs. Carmilla lifted her gaze, at last, and blinked back at her.

“It does matter,” Laura insisted. “Anything that upsetting you is something that matters, Carm.”

Carmilla did not look as if she believed this, but the lights behind her eyes at least glimmered faintly in response. And then she took a breath, and muttered, “He said that the least I could do, while you could still stand me, was to get information on your team.”

It took a few seconds, before the red fully descended over Laura’s vision. Her grip tightened, where it still held Carmilla’s arm.

“That absolute arse.” She did not have to ask if Carmilla had ignored him—her expression clearly said that she had not. “He has no right to say that to you. To suggest that, that—”
“It’s okay,” Carmilla cut in, shaking her head. “I’m not surprised he wanted me to spy. And it’s not like—I mean, I know you would have trusted me not to snitch, if I had stayed on the team.”

Laura sputtered. She was arguing about the entirely wrong thing.

“I’m not mad about that, Carm. Heck, I’m not even surprised—it’s right in his character… But, I mean, he tried to make you think you weren’t—that I wasn’t—”

She didn’t know how to explain. There was one word that kept fighting towards the tip of her tongue, but she felt certain it would do more damage than good, and frightening off Carmilla right now was the very last thing she wanted.

“I’m in this, okay?” she pleaded, threading her own fingers with Carmilla’s icy ones. “I’m in this, and I’m not going anywhere.”

Carmilla stared at their joined hands for a moment, her thumb tracing back against the pressure of Laura’s grip.

“Actually,” Laura added, shuffling her feet, “I was a little worried that you were trying to go somewhere.”

“What?” Carmilla’s head lifted, her expression transforming into one of pure astonishment. The whites of her eyes gleamed in the low moonlight. “You—what?”

“Well, you called me here, after hours, and you used a note rather than asking in person. I just—I figured you were trying to back out.”

The look of horror on Carmilla’s face only deepened. “I would never. I’m not—I told you I’m not great with sharing, with talking about these things, but…” Her expression shifted, her teeth digging into her lower lip for a second and the palest of pinks turning her cheeks patchy. “Laura, you do know that all I’ve wanted for such a long time has been you… don’t you?”

Well, now I do, Laura’s thoughts whispered. Something was swelling inside of her at the words, buoying her heart up into her throat, and she felt impossibly heavy and light, all at once.

She surged forward, her lips urgent in their struggle to put action to every aching, overwhelming emotion that Carmilla evoked in her, and, for a moment, Carmilla returned the pressure with just as much desperation.

And then she tangled one hand into Laura’s hair, fingers tracing out patterns on her scalp, and each draw of her tongue along Laura’s lips, along the line of her teeth, slowed their movements until Laura was not sure she was still solid, that she was not physically melting.

It was especially hard to tell, when Carmilla’s other hand landed lightly upon her hip.

“You’re very good at that,” Laura breathed, when she pulled away enough to refill her lungs.

“Well, you’re the only one that would know,” Carmilla murmured back. The sadness was gone from her eyes, but it had left behind footprints in the darker corners. Still, she was smiling with a roguish simplicity, now, one that said her thoughts were back on their familiar, sarcastic track.

She kissed Laura again, but did not linger long enough to steal more of her oxygen. Instead, she pressed her forehead to Laura’s with a contended hum.

“You are perfect, Laura Hollis,” she whispered.
Laura let herself smile fully, unable to hold back the grin, and ran her fingers up Carmilla’s arm to rest upon her shoulders.

Then, she sighed. “Are you going to be okay?” she asked, “About Quidditch?”

Her eyes only partially open, she more felt than saw the way Carmilla shrugged. “Yeah. And, I mean, this way your friends definitely won’t think I’m hanging around your practices for nefarious purposes.”

“Hey.” Laura tilted back, tapping her chin and meeting her gaze seriously. “It doesn’t matter what they think. I know how much you liked playing, and… if you wanted to go back, we could talk to Flitwick. Maybe even Dumbledore.”

Carmilla shook her head. “No, this was my choice. But, if you really want to piss off Perkins… you can always schedule a practice on Thursday at six. That’s when he’s going to try to find my replacement.”

Laura laughed, and kissed her again.

///

The details for the first Hogsmeade visit of term were posted in the waning days of October. It was scheduled for the weekend after Hallowe’en, which put only six days between Laura and what she and Carmilla had vaguely carved out as a first date, two months earlier.

Carmilla made no indication that she had heard the news, the morning after Laura discovered the sign pinned to the common room announcement board (surrounded by wide-eyed third years). Instead, as she dropped beside Laura into her traditional spot at the Gryffindor table, she made herself her usual cup of tea and flipped open an Advanced Transfiguration textbook.

“Good morning, Carmilla,” Perry greeted, her tone wavering the way a parent’s might, when they were trying to correct the poor etiquette of their child.

Carmilla, who was used to these attempts, paid them little mind—which was about in line with how LaFontaine and Laura treated them, themselves. She nodded, barely glancing up from her book, and flipped a page with casual indifference. Still, on the bench between them, her fingers found Laura’s hand and began tracing patterns onto her skin.

She was warm, today, Laura noted. She must have visited the Hospital Wing recently—perhaps even just that morning.

“So, anyway, this weekend I figured we’d hit the Apothecary, first,” LaFontaine declared, finally setting aside their second helping of sausage. “That way, I could get my potion supplies restocked. And then we can spend as long as you guys like in Honeyduke’s.”

Laura glanced at Carmilla, whose eyes were no longer darting with their usual efficiency over the pages.

“Um, right,” she said slowly, pushing around the remainder of her mash. “Carm, you like Honeyduke’s, right?”

“Sure, cupcake,” she said, without looking up. Her tone was as disaffected as ever—LaF and Perry probably saw nothing out of the ordinary about the response—but, her hand had stilled it’s ministrations.
Perry made a soft *tsk* noise and said, “LaFontaine, don’t be ridiculous. This is Laura’s first Hogsmeade visit with a girlfriend. She doesn’t want to go traipsing about on errands with us.” She turned her piercing gaze on Laura, “Isn’t that right?”

“Oh. Um…”

Laura could not get a read on Carmilla. Could not tell if she was breathing or not, or if she was even tuned into the conversation they were having. She had to be, though. Didn’t she?

At the same time, both Perry and LaFontaine were watching her expectantly, eyebrows raised.

“Right,” Laura managed, well aware of how lame she sounded.

This was not how she had wanted to ask Carmilla on their first date. And she most certainly wanted the trip to be a date—a *real* date, not the sort of hanging out they did during their hours of rule-breaking throughout the night-darkened castle. Making out on the Astronomy Tower was wonderful in its own way, but it wasn’t what Laura thought of when she pictured herself *dating* Carmilla.

But, actually *asking* Carmilla was hardly something she wanted to do at the crowded breakfast table, with her friends watching.

Unfortunately, it turned out that there were very few other opportunities to have the sort of conversation that Laura wanted. In the days leading up to the Hogsmeade visit, her only chances to talk to Carmilla always seemed to be surrounded by unwanted company. She came to Laura’s Quidditch practice on Wednesday evening to play witness to the nightmare that was the new Gryffindor Seeker, but left early to finish her Potions essay. When Laura quietly asked her about sneaking out, Thursday night, she shook her head and said she was helping Remus with something. And then, Friday, it was the Hallowe’en Feast.

The Feast was normally one of Laura’s favorite parts of the year—the corridors smelled of roasting pumpkin and autumn spices, and the decorations were always superb. This year, despite the aerial show of live bats overhead and the hearty vegetable stew steaming pleasantly under her nose, she found herself only interested in the back of Carmilla’s head, one table over.

“Still planning, are you?” LaFontaine asked around a mouthful of pastry.


“You two have been dating for two months, haven’t you?” Perry asked politely, neatly setting aside her silverware and dabbing at her lips with a golden napkin. “There’s really no need to be nervous, Laura.”

She flushed, “I’m *not* nervous.”

Annoyingly, this only made LaF and Perry exchange a look—one that suggested they thought they knew better than her. Laura did not bother correcting them, choosing to instead focus on stabbing her vegetables with more force than was really necessary.

What if Carmilla thought this was not important? What if she thought *Laura* did not find it important?

When the following morning rolled around, crisp and bright with the promise of November, Laura found herself pacing in front of the door for Ravenclaw Tower, running on entirely too little sleep.

But, she had a plan, and that had to count for something.
She hoped.

The first Ravenclaws that drifted out gave her odd looks, a few of them mumbling behind their hands to one another in a way that said they knew exactly who she was there to see, but none of them spoke to her. They breezed by, one by one, on their way to the Great Hall for an early breakfast. No doubt many of them had their own plans for the Hogsmeade trip. Ones that were less muddy than her own.

“Laura?”

Carmilla stopped short, and a tall seventh year girl nearly tripped over her.

“Hey,” Laura said quickly, “Um, good morning!”

Side-stepping her way around a few absurdly tiny first years, Carmilla came up at Laura’s side and tugged her by the hand until they were at a respectable distance from her common room, their elbows brushing at the shadows under one of the wall candles.

“What are you doing here? At this hour?”

Her pulse jolted, pulling like a taut string in her throat. “Today’s the Hogsmeade visit,” she stumbled hurriedly. Carmilla was searching her face, her perfect eyebrows drawn together to put two little creases over her nose. “And, uh, well, we didn’t exactly get a chance to—I mean, I never got to actually ask you, so I wasn’t sure, and I’ve been trying to get you alone all week, which should not be this difficult—”

“Laura.”

“Right. Sorry.” She took a steadying breath. “I really want this to be an actual, y’know… date. You and me, and… and all of those things we talked about, this summer.”

Carmilla, rather than answering, merely looked perplexed.

“Um, unless that’s not what you want, and then we don’t have to—”

“Laura, you’re my girlfriend.”

Warmth arched all the way down to her toes. “Right. Right. So that means…?”

Carmilla’s laugh was silent, a quick parting of her lips and a shake of her head. “How long have you been worrying about this?” she asked, finding Laura’s hand and tracing the tips of her fingers over the sensitive lines in her palm.

Laura shivered a little, and bit her lip as she hedged, “Just… a little while.”

“All week?”

She huffed, blowing a strand of hair off of her nose, “Maybe.”

Carmilla opened her mouth, and something passed through her eyes, something warm and intriguing, before she shook her head again and murmured, “You’re amazing, you know that?”

Laura couldn’t help but think that was not what she had been going to say. Not with the way her features had gone all soft, her lips curling up in a new, magical sort of smile that Laura was certain she had never seen before.
Her ears hot, she pressed her hand back against Carmilla’s and urged, “So, today…”

“Was already a date.”

“Okay, and you weren’t—I mean, you seemed upset, when LaF was talking about this weekend like it was some casual, group thing.”

Carmilla blinked at her in a slow, surprised way. One that said she had not expected Laura to pick up on this. “I might not have been… thrilled with the idea of sharing you,” she admitted.

“Oh.”

Carmilla sighed, scrubbing her fingers quickly through her hair.

“I wouldn’t have cared, though. If you had wanted them to come along, or if you had just wanted it to be regular trip, one without any… pressure? It would have been fine.”

“But that wasn’t what you wanted,” Laura argued.

Again, Carmilla shrugged. “Yes, but, you would have still been there. And… you’re really all I need.”

Laura’s head was spinning. It took a nearly physical effort to keep the words down—to keep herself from blurting them here, in the sleepy corridor outside Ravenclaw Tower.

When she did speak, it was slow and deliberate. She did not trust her own tongue.

“Will you just… promise to tell me, next time? When you want something? Especially if you don’t think you’re going to get it.”

Carmilla hesitated only a second before she nodded. And then she stepped close, directly into her personal space, to whisper, “You are still perfect, Laura Hollis,” before she captured her lips.

“Come on, then,” she added on a hum, when she slipped back, “Let’s get some breakfast into you, before this date of ours.”

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Despite Laura having done the official asking of the matter, Carmilla seemed to have a fairly solid idea of how the day should go. The moment they had reached the first cobblestones of Hogsmeade, she took the lead. Laura let her, grinning against the bite of frost on her nose as they slipped into the crowds and through the worn archways of Honeyduke’s.

“You do like this place!” Laura beamed, leaning up to press a kiss to Carmilla’s cheek before she hauled them off in the direction of a giant Chocolate Frog display.

Carmilla indulged her, listening as she rattled off the favorites of her collection as well as the few famous witches or wizards she was still lacking (“I swear the Bowman Wright cards don’t even exist!”) before they made their escape from the crowds. They drifted into the much less popular Gladrags Wizardwear to poke through the latest selection of unusual socks, and then Carmilla doled out a small selection of sickles from her thin purse to buy a new quill and inkwell at Scrivenshaft’s, before they braved the student-filled aisles of Zonko’s.

“Where to, now, cutie?” Carmilla hummed pleasantly, once they had tugged their scarves back into place on the joke shop’s stoop. Laura had bought a small pack of trick cards that were on sale, and
the little bag swung at her side. “And please don’t say Puddifoot’s.”

“Oh, what, you don’t want this?” Laura teased, catching Carmilla by the elbow to tug her across the street. They halted before the window of the putrid tea shop, the interior of which were as frilly and pink as ever through the misty glass. Inside, a collection of awkward couples made up the majority of Madam Puddifoot’s clientele. The remaining tables were overcrowded with giggling third year girls, traveling in packs on their first trip to the village.

Carmilla wrinkled her nose. “Ugh. It’s even worse up close.” With a sidelong glance at Laura, she added tentatively, “You don’t want to go in there… do you?”

Laughing again, Laura squeezed Carmilla’s arm where she still held a grip at her elbow.

“Hardly. I think we’re more of a Butterbeer and long, philosophical walks kind of couple.”

“Oh, thank Merlin,” Carmilla muttered.

The Three Broomsticks, as was standard during a student weekend, was overflowing with Hogwarts colors and bubbly conversation. There were very few of what Laura assumed were the ‘regular crowd,’ and these individuals kept to the corners, no doubt grumbling about the invasion of teenagers.

Madam Rosmerta, the young woman who ran the bar, did not seem at all bothered by the extra business. She filled a good dozen or so glass mugs with Butterbeer at once, the froth pooling over the edges to leave rings on the wood, and collected the coins that were tossed in their places with practiced fingers. Laura and Carmilla only had to wait a moment for the crowd to clear before they could claim their own, and then tucked themselves into a tiny table by the door.

It was the only one available, and fairly chilly, but Carmilla put her back to the breeze with vampiric indifference. She smiled at Laura over her mug.

“So. Having a nice time, cupcake?”

Laura swiped at her lip to clear away the Butterbeer mustache, and declared with mock indignation, “I don’t think you’re supposed to ask that while we’re on the date, Carm. Isn’t that pretty much First Date 101?”

“Well, how else am I supposed to know if this is living up to all of your hopes and dreams?”

“You wait until it’s over, and you see if I kiss you goodbye.”

Carmilla scoffed. “In case you missed it, cupcake, we’ve already kissed like five times.” She crinkled her brow, lowering her voice in mock-seriousness, and added, “Were they not memorable enough for you?”

A pleasant shiver went through her. “I could stand to be… reminded.”

The table, though small, was not quite small enough. Neither of them moved, and Laura was certain her own gaze must be just as dark and searching as Carmilla’s was, tracing over her features. She almost forgot where they were. Even a blast of cold air as two witches in bright, Ministry robes slipped inside could not distract her.

And then Carmilla murmured something entirely surprising, blinking slow and soft as she twisted the ends of her scarf between her fingers.
“You’re beautiful, you know that?”

There was a difference in the pleasant words of parents and relatives—tinged with pride and joy—and the pure wonder that sang off Carmilla’s tongue, now. She said the words with the sort of shivering disbelief that ached at the edges, her eyebrows drawn up and her smile barely brushing at her cheeks.

All Laura could think—her head fuzzy in a muffled, static-y sort of way, her eyes tracing lines like a skilled paintbrush over the tint of Carmilla’s cheeks and the perfect curve of her nose—was I could never compare.

Her slow-moving brain took too long to respond. Carmilla nodded towards the corner, her expression slipping away from its serenity and back into a trademark smirk, as though what she had just said were not earth-shattering, but mere fact.

Laura was still working through the words when Carmilla prompted: “The gingers are here.”

Finally regaining enough of herself to function, Laura shifted on her stool to follow Carmilla’s gaze.

Perry and LaFontaine were wrapped up in the darkest corner, making out. Their mugs of Butterbeer, brimming and forgotten, sat on the table behind them. Laura spun back to face Carmilla, her eyes wide.

“I so did not need to see that.”

“Well, I wasn’t about to suffer alone,” Carmilla said, with an air of total reasonability. She leaned to the side, making a face as she peered over Laura’s shoulder. “I mean, It’s like watching our professors going at it…”

“Okay, nope. No more visuals.” Laura tossed down another large gulp of Butterbeer.

“I mean, I’m curious, are they like this in the common room? Because that seems very un-Prefect-like. I was fairly certain that Perry thought kissing was illegal, in fact.”

Laura laughed, “Not so much. And, actually, the first week or so after they got together it was uncomfortable to be around them. Which, yeah, I did not expect from Perry. But, I couldn’t exactly begrudge them… I mean they’ve known each other since they were born, practically. It took them long enough.”

“Mm. The extended version of us, then?”

“Ah, yes. Without all of the, well…”

“Hatred?”

Laura laughed. “Yes. That.”

On the table between them, she located Carmilla’s hand, flipping it over and running her fingers over the sensitive skin on her palm. Carmilla’s eyes slipped shut, and Laura swore she heard a low, shivering sound hum from her, one that sounded almost like a purr.

“To answer your question,” Laura murmured, “…I’m having a wonderful time.”

Carmilla’s smile tipped up for a fraction of a second, and then, just as quickly, it collapsed. She went unnaturally still, her fingers clenching as they jumped away from Laura’s touch.
Laura was about to ask what was wrong, her mouth already open and the question on her tongue, before she heard it.

“—vampires. I mean, he’s never going to stop. I imagine it won’t even make the papers, not the way the war is going.”

“Dreadful, Millie, just dreadful. Is Minchum doing anything to round up the rest of them? The ones on the register?”

“Yes, that’s the idea—hard work, though. We’re running short on Aurors we can trust, these days, and you know how everyone is relying on Dumbledore to make the right calls… and he is not exactly on board.”

“Mm. The *Guidelines*, right?”

“Indeed. But these are war times. We need to be practical.”

“Still, Dumbledore’s not an easy one to work around… can’t be wearing well on old Harold, can it?”

“Not a bit.”

The conversation was several tables over, coming through to Laura only in bits, but she knew that Carmilla must be catching every syllable, every vague intonation. Her eyes were dark, focused, and not meeting Laura’s.

“And it was the whole family; you’re sure?”

“All of them. Word is, they defied You-Know-Who… and twice, at that! Refused to come under his service.”

“Chills me, just thinking about it. I went to Hogwarts with their youngest, you know.”

“Oh goodness, yes, he’d have been—what? A year younger than you?”

“Two. I never would have imagined… and *vampires*, at that. Why, I haven’t heard of an active vampire attack in almost a decade. What was that one that made all the headlines? Such a tragedy… and their daughter!”

“Yes, that’s right. The girl lived… the papers said she may have witnessed the whole thing, poor dear.”

Carmilla’s chair fell backwards with a hard crash. Several heads turned, people jumping in their seats, but Laura paid them no mind. She did not wait to see if the two witches had paused their conversation—if they had noticed the disruption—instead, she chased Carmilla out into the chill of High Street.

She had not gone far. Her figure shaky against the grey backdrop of cobblestone and brick, Carmilla clutched her arms about herself as though, somehow, she were finally cold.

“Carm,” Laura whispered, the word as much of a question as it was a reassurance. She hovered her hand beside the other girl’s arm, unsure if touching her would do more harm than good. Carmilla looked ready to bolt at the slightest disturbance.

“I—I have to get out of here,” she choked out. Her teeth were chattering.

Laura let her fingers find purchase, sinking into the fabric of Carmilla’s previously unnecessary coat,
and Carmilla did not pull away. “C’mon,” Laura urged, as gently as she dared, “We’ll just—we’ll go
back to the castle, okay?”

“Laura, I don’t—” she was shaking her head, her voice cracking as she finally settled her gaze on
Laura’s face. Her dark eyes were soft, coppery at the edges, and they were alight with pleading.

“You don’t have to explain,” she said firmly. “I’m here no matter what, Carm. I promise.”

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The Hogwarts library was home to a rather extensive backlog of Daily Prophets. They dated back at
least two centuries, and Laura had perused through them on a number of occasions—at first for
research purposes, purely spurned on by an assignment, but later from mere curiosity and journalistic
spirit.

Though she itched to dig through these archives, now, she steered clear.

Whatever the witches in The Three Broomsticks had been discussing, and the way Laura suspected
it might relate to Carmilla, it was something that she wanted to learn from Carmilla herself. And the
answering gratitude in Carmilla’s smile, when they returned to their classes on Monday without
another word spoken between them on the matter, was more than enough.

As such, Laura was surprised, when she glanced across the Great Hall at dinner on Tuesday, to find
Carmilla lifting her fingers to frame out a familiar question.

She arrived at the Pitch a good ten minutes before seven o’clock, settling into their usual spot at the
head of the Ravenclaw stands, and watched the early stars glimmer to life. The first snow of the year
had come on Sunday. It had been a brief event, only lasting long enough for Perry to call them to the
windows of their dormitory, but it had left the world dusted with a promise of the coming winter.
There was still a thin layer on the frost-tipped field below, even if none remained on the castle towers
or the greenhouse roofs.

Laura was not left to her contemplations long. Only a moment after the chimes finished tolling out
from the clock tower, Carmilla appeared at the top of the stairs. Her hands were buried deep in her
pockets, her eyes hooded under the thick wash of her bangs—they probably needed cutting, soon,
even if Laura liked the look on her—and she bit her lip as she settled onto the very edge of the bench
at Laura’s side.

“It’s a good night for stargazing,” Laura commented, tapping at Carmilla’s wrist until the other girl
relinquished the hand from her pocket and laced their fingers together.

“You know that’s not why, right?” Carmilla asked, her pause just a beat too long.

“Yeah,” Laura nodded. She squeezed Carmilla’s hand just a fraction tighter. “I know. But... you
don’t have to tell me anything, okay? We could just look at the stars.”

Carmilla shivered, taking a reflexive, heaving sort of breath before she shook her head. She returned
the pressure on Laura’s fingers, though, as she whispered, “My mother... she always wanted to be a
member of the Wizengamot.”

There was an ache in Laura’s chest, weighty with the knowledge of how this story would end.

“When she met my father, it was at a convention in Paris,” Carmilla continued. “She was just a
junior Ministry member, then, but she had already impressed her colleagues. I remember, growing
up, everyone always saying she was going to be Minister, someday—it was never something I even
questioned. It was as elemental as the magic in our household, just like the understanding that I was going to attend Beauxbatons, someday.”

Laura’s eyebrows rose at the admission, but Carmilla did not pause, nor acknowledge her surprise. She seemed lost in the words, now. Laura could not have broken such a trance even if she had truly wanted to.

“It was my father’s school, and he had given up so much of France to chase my mother in their youth—it was a whirlwind sort of romance, from the stories they told. They had only known each other for a fortnight, after all, the length of the *Magical Convention of International Cooperation* in 1954. And yet, he gave up his place on the *Non-Magique Coopération* taskforce to open a simple music shop in Liverpool, and they were married in 1956.

“I was born three years later. My grandparents—my mother’s parents—had a manor in Wiltshire, and we lived there with them. My mother’s family was quite wealthy, once upon a time, but that sort of money had been drying up for years, and, really, all that was left was the manor and a trove of artefacts that my grandfather kept stashed in the attic. He’d sell off something, when the need came up… he pawned a beautiful phonograph to buy me my wand.”

Carmilla’s free hand slipped into her robes, extracting the wand in question and twisting it between her fingers. A soft smile played at her lips, her eyes shimmering in the low moonlight.

“It’s not one of Ollivander’s, you know. He prefers only true phoenix feather cores… mine is Augurey. Irish, like the old family: my grandfather’s grandparents. He bought it for me against my parent’s wishes. I was only ten, and he had taken me to Ireland for an evening—also against their wishes—and he told me not to tell them about the gift until I was ready to go off to school.

“They, of course, found out. I remember the row, short as it was. He was always doing those sorts of things, spoiling me when they weren’t looking. I was his favorite, and he was constantly trying to talk my parents into sending me to Hogwarts. I imagine he thought the wand would help matters, in some way or other. And then, just a week later… it didn’t matter. They were all dead.”

Laura’s breath caught, cold in her throat.

She saw Carmilla’s nostrils flare, saw the way her lips pressed together and her chin wrinkled. When she propelled herself onward, there was something lost in her voice. Something missing, something fractured.

“My mother—she had gotten her wish, in 1966. The Chief Warlock had accepted her application, and she was officially a junior member of the Wizengamot. She rose quickly, after that. They put her on the short-list for major cases, by 1970, and she was one of the leading members chosen to oversee the trial of Hogarth Morgan.

“Morgan was charged with the murder of no less than a dozen muggles, and it—it was an easy conviction. No one even spoke in his defense, and the evidence was overwhelming, even without his confession. He was sentenced to execution, and… and my mother’s was the signature of approval on the documentation.”

“Carm,” Laura whispered, for there was a tear hovering on the tip of her nose, a shiny track tracing the path back to her eye.

When Carmilla shook her head, the droplet slipped, falling dark on her sleeve.

“He had a wife, and a coven of sorts,” she whispered. “They came to the manor, that night. At least
five of them. I was in my room when I heard the breaking glass, and the voices, and so I went downstairs to investigate, because I fancied myself brave. I was going off to school in September, after all. Off on an adventure to France... I remember that William was so jealous.”

Laura had never heard the name, had never gotten any indication before today that Carmilla had a sibling. A low, foreboding nausea churned in her gut.

Carmilla’s breath rattled.

“They told me to run. Take your brother, my father said. I still don’t know where I was supposed to go, but it’s not like it mattered... I couldn’t move. They were yelling at me, begging me to leave, and I just—I couldn’t.” Now, at last, she reached up to palm at her cheeks, nostrils flaring. “Daideó was on the floor. I could see him, there, right by his rocking chair. Th-they’d killed him first, I think. I always imagined he must have done something—must have tried to fight back, when they came through that window. My parents didn’t have their wands on them, and mine was locked in the safe until I left for school, but his—his never left his side.”

She shook her head, and her throat bobbed before she lifted watery eyes to find Laura’s. The connection of her gaze was like a jolt of fire. Laura could not have managed words if she had tried; she was fighting to keep her own eyes dry.

“How vampires are made?” Carmilla asked.

Laura nodded. It was an impossible thing to forget, even if she hadn’t been forced to study it in depth for the O.W.L.s.

“I don’t know why she bit me,” Carmilla whispered. “I don’t think I ever will. They killed everyone in the house—my grandparents, my parents, William—but they didn’t... they didn’t bite anyone else. Just me.” Her voice pitched unevenly, pulled taught with a thousand haunting questions, “And then I woke up in the rubble, and Dumbledore was already there.”

At this, Laura’s eyes went wide.

“I don’t really remember any of it. He said I tried to save my family, and he got there in time for the explosion. They were able to catch most of the vampires. Not all. But... most.”

“Because of you?” Laura managed. Her voice was thick, croaking with a mixture of emotions.

“According to Dumbledore.”

It did not sound as though she believed him, but Laura did not press.

In the silence that followed, she reached up to thumb away some of Carmilla’s tears, pressing their shoulders together as if the action could somehow take on more of Carmilla’s weight. She liked to think that today had shifted at least a fraction of that burden; she certainly felt heavy with the knowledge.

“I’m so sorry, Carm,” she said quietly. “I always thought... but I hadn’t imagined.”

Carmilla shrugged, sniffing once more and rubbing her hand back over her drying cheeks a final time. She looked small, now, the way she had looked small on that horrible day in Dumbledore’s office, and Laura could almost see the girl she had been—the one who had watched the whole of her world shatter.

Her hand was cold, but solid as ever when Laura turned it over, letting her fingers draw gentle circles
over the lines in her palm.

“Thank you. For trusting me.”

“I’ve always trusted you,” Carmilla murmured. She pushed her hair back, but she was still peering up through her bangs, when she turned her dark eyes fully on Laura once again. “I just... I’m sorry that I don’t convey it very well. I’ve wanted to tell you. It’s just—”

“It’s hard,” Laura finished, nodding. “It’s not the same, but my mum... it’s not something I talk about, either.”

Carmilla nodded, and Laura leaned forward to press a tender kiss to her cheek, lingering long enough to feel Carmilla’s shoulders relax.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she added, when she had leaned back. “You never do, Carm.”

Again, Carmilla only shrugged, and her gaze danced away. “I did ruin our first date.”

Laura frowned. “Did you think I was upset about that?”

“No, of course not. But…” she let out a frustrated sigh, “It wasn’t how I wanted the day to go.”

“Not my first choice, either. But we’re going to have hundreds more dates... thousands, if I have my way, actually.” Carmilla’s lips quirked into a smile, even as she dipped her head to hide it. “And just... do you remember what you said to me, that morning?”

She waited for Carmilla to shake her head

“You’re all I need, too. Okay?”

The words were not the ones she had planned to say on that Saturday in Hogsmeade, but they were close.

And, under the full blanket of stars, when Carmilla pressed her forehead gently against Laura’s, her eyes shutting as she whispered back, “You’re everything, Laura Hollis,” her words sounded a lot like I love you, too.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry I'm so bad at responding to everyone's comments. I love each and every one of them, and I will work harder to give them the responses you all deserve for being so kind.

Tumblr: jg-firefly
Twitter: jill2theletter

PS: Come check out the SLC
Chapter Summary

There's more than one important event over the holidays. And a number of important things to be said and done.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Christmas of 1975 (Sixth Year)

While Laura was thrilled to be free of Potions lessons, now that she had dropped the wretched class, this came with the downfall of a free period without any of her friends. LaF, Perry, and Carmilla had all advanced on to the N.E.W.T. level, which meant that, twice a week, Laura spent the free period alone in the library with a stack of homework that was not going to do itself.

And there was certainly enough work to keep her occupied. Even having removed herself from Transfiguration, Astronomy, and Ancient Runes as well, Laura was finding her class schedule more difficult to manage than it had been the year before. The expected due dates on sixth year assignments had crept closer together, and most of their in-class work was receiving extra scrutiny. Laura’s failure to master the nonverbal Aguamenti Charm last week had landed her with hours of extra practice, and this was on top of the essay on Unforgivable Curses that was due before the Christmas break for Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Perry was not interested in hearing Laura’s complaints on these matters, and so Laura reserved them for the hours when she was alone with Carmilla. Though she was taking just as many classes as Perry, she seemed far less frazzled by the added workload—a fact that did not go unnoticed by Perry, herself.

“You know I had to pretend to struggle with my Hiccoughing Solution, today, to keep from being stabbed by Curly Sue?” Carmilla commented one evening, when she found Laura waiting in the library after Potions. “I would tell her to drop a class or two, but I don’t think she’d do so well in Azkaban.”

Laura snorted, snapping closed her copy of Flesh-Eating Trees of the World.

“If you suggested that, it would only make her more intense. I’m not sure she’s even sleeping, at this point.”

“I would bet ‘no’ on that one.”

“Well, at least the holiday should do her some good.” Laura shifted her stack of parchment aside so that she could better reach Carmilla’s hand, “And, speaking of the holiday… I should warn you, cheesy sweaters are required. It’s a Hollis tradition.”

“If it’s a Hollis tradition, we should probably leave it to the professional Hollises, don’t you think?”
Laura tapped her on the nose, earning a glower in response. She grinned, “Not a chance, honorary-Hollis. Ooh, and I hope you know some Christmas carols, too. We go out every year.”

“Oh, please tell me that’s a joke,” Carmilla begged, eyes bugging comically.

“Nope! You’re going to be so full of Christmas spirit, you won’t know what hit you.”

“Great.”

Laura pressed a kiss to her cheek, and then returned to the nearly-empty parchment in front of her; the one that was supposed to be her Defense essay.

The holidays had consumed most of her thoughts, in recent weeks. She had had her gift for Carmilla picked out for ages, and had finally purchased it on the final Hogsmeade visit of term—a feat only made manageable by abandoning Carmilla with LaF and Perry for the better part of an hour. It was a regrettable sacrifice, but one that she had made up for with a long walk up the Shrieking Shack and a decent amount of kissing.

(This had not stopped Carmilla from griping. She had been dragged into Puddifoot’s so that LaF could buy some specialized raspberry thyme tea.)

“Do you have practice, tonight?”

Laura glanced up from her entire lack of progress, her quill drying in her grasp, and shook her head. “No, I scheduled the last one for tomorrow.” She frowned, “Isn’t tonight the full moon, though?”

“Been keeping track, have you? It is.”

“And you don’t need to… help?” she asked, her voice dropping carefully, even with the emptiness of the tables around them.

Carmilla had filled her in a number of details, the majority of which had fallen into place while they leaned against the fence that barricaded the Shrieking Shack. Carmilla had only shaken her head, when Laura tentatively asked if she could see this cat-form of hers. It wasn’t safe, she insisted.

That, and Laura had already seen it, once, in a way.

(Neither of them had forgotten the examinations, and her leaping Patronus.)

“No, that has actually been… covered.”

Laura furrowed her brow, head tipping to the side, “What does that mean?”

Carmilla’s laugh was soft, and wry. “His friends have made accommodations.”

“…I don’t want to know, do I?”

“No, you really don’t.”

“Perry would have a heart attack, then?”

Carmilla hummed her agreement, lip twisting up and eyes sparkling, “Oh, without a doubt.”

Despite all of their troublemaking, Laura could not help but see the fifth years in a different light, knowing what she knew about Remus. These were the sort of friends he deserved—the sort of friends that she wished Carmilla had found in her own house, from the very start.
The friends she had made were now nothing more than a dark presence in the corridors, an occasional comment that she knew made Carmilla stiffen with old anxieties.

When Laura had spotted her with Rosier, the week prior, she knew it was just another of these events. She asked Carmilla if everything was alright, that evening, and did not press the matter when she shrugged and said “of course, cupcake.”

At their tiny library table, Laura scooted her chair closer and nudged Carmilla’s shoulder with her own. “So, did you have plans for this evening? Since we’ve determined that the both of us are quite happily free of obligation?”

Carmilla grinned, pressing into Laura’s personal space. She brushed her nose along Laura’s cheekbone, the tip teasing at the soft tendrils of hair she found in her path, and ghosted a kiss against the shell of Laura’s ear.

She shivered, heat gathering in her cheeks.

“I figured,” murmured Carmilla, “That it was my turn to ask you for a date.”

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The Astronomy Tower had been transformed. When Laura pushed open the heavy, wooden door, she had half expected to see nothing but shadows, to have to wait the five minutes that still remained until midnight for Carmilla to make her appearance, but, instead, she found the stones awash in the lazy glow of at least two dozen candles.

“Holy Hufflepuff,” she whispered, letting the door fall shut behind her.

Carmilla had been squaring off the corners of a large picnic blanket (upon which sat a bucket of ice, a fancy-looking bottle of champagne, and two shimmering flute glasses), but, at her wondering exclamation, she hopped to her feet. There was already a smile on her lips, warm and genuine and twinkling its way up into her eyes.

“Hey,” she said, slipping forward through the flickering shadows until she was only a hairsbreadth away. She bit her lip and reached for Laura’s hands, “You’re early.”

“Yeah, Perry and LaF were already asleep, and I didn’t want to wait any longer…” she trailed off, still gazing wide-eyed at their surroundings, “Carm, how did you do all of this?”

The air was warm, which it decidedly should not have been, given that it was mid-December and the grounds were coated with snow. There were a collection of impressively-sized icicles hanging from the tower behind them, and, yet, there wasn’t even a hint of a chill.

“It’s an atmospheric bubble,” Carmilla explained, her expression lighting up as she gestured around them, “It makes this sort of like the greenhouses: taking in heat without letting any out. I set it up earlier, so it could catch the daylight, and then I had hoped the candles would help… is it warm enough, for you?”

To answer her question, Laura slid her fingers back out of Carmilla’s grasp and shucked off her cloak.

“Where did you find the champagne?” she asked, not waiting for Carmilla before she settled herself down onto the picnic blanket. No doubt it was enchanted, too, because it did not feel as though there was still cold stone beneath the thin layer of checkered blue and bronze.
“Ah, now that’s a question you don’t want the answer to, cupcake,” Carmilla teased, even as she dropped down at her side and began to pour them each a generous glass. The liquid bubbled gold, and Laura could taste the aroma that tickled its way into the air around them. “Best to maintain plausible deniability.”

Laura snorted, “So, Slughorn’s private stash, then?”

With a dainty raise of her eyebrow, Carmilla shrugged, “My lips are sealed.”

It was as good as a yes, and Laura knew it. With a roll of her eyes, she took a sip of the drink… and barely contained the arguments that began rising within her as her eyes widened. Things like ‘this was definitely the most expensive bottle, Carm,’ and ‘you’re going to get detention for the rest of your life, Carm.’

Carmilla smiled as though she could read her thoughts, and downed half of her own glass like it were nothing.

When she turned her gaze on Laura, though, there was a seriousness shadowed there, a questioning vulnerability that contradicted her casual mannerisms.

“I have something to tell you,” she admitted quietly.

“Something bad?”

One of her shoulders lifted and fell, “That… depends.” She sighed, and pushed her fingers through her curls with a graceful ease that would normally have made Laura twitch to reach out and touch. Instead, she frowned, and leaned forward encouragingly as Carmilla began, “You remember I quit the team because of Perkins. Because of what he said about you. About us.”

“Yeah, of course.” She wasn’t likely to forget any time soon.

“Well… he’s asked me to come back.”

Laura fell back, resting with her hands splayed out behind her, and scoffed, “Of course he has. The team is falling apart without you.”

Carmilla did not say anything. She was biting her lip, staring down at her lap.

“Carm?”

She shook herself, eyes darting up as she began to nod, “No, yeah, you’re right. I-I shouldn’t go back.”

That wasn’t what Laura had meant at all. As much as she hated Perkins, as much as she wanted to see him suffer for what he had done, she had felt far worse when she sat at Carmilla’s side in the stands during the Ravenclaw vs. Slytherin match the month before. Carmilla had shifted in her seat with every play, her face drawn and her eyes far away as the scoreboard racked against them.

She propelled herself forward, catching Carmilla’s elbow gently.

“You should. If you want to play, then you should get to. Perkins be…” she squared her shoulders, “Perkins be damned.”

A slow smile dawned across Carmilla’s face. “That was very vehement of you.”

“Well, I meant it,” Laura sniffed, “He shouldn’t even be captain… actually, you know what? You
should be captain.”

“How, I don’t think Perkins wants me back badly enough to put that on the table.”

“No, no,” she insisted, her fingers tightening on Carmilla’s arm, “I meant for next year. If you go back to the team, then, I mean… who else would it be? You’re the best. Like… by a long shot.”

The smile that spread on Carmilla’s face was incredulous, almost laughing at her, and before she could say anything in challenge, Laura rambled onward.

“I’m serious. Do you have any idea how good you are? That’s not just me taking credit, either, I swear. Perkins must have had a conniption when he realized what he’d done, and I’m sure practice has been a nightmare trying to wrangle whatever replacement he found—heck, it’s probably worse than me trying to deal with my Seeker debacle—and you *know* how bad that is.”

Carmilla was still just staring at her, not saying anything, her smile maddening.

“What?” Laura demanded, her breath almost a huff. She could feel her cheeks going pink under the scrutiny.

Instead of answering, Carmilla cupped both of her cheeks and slanted her mouth over Laura’s, warm and smiling and filled with a tender appreciation that was not new, but was certainly stronger than ever before.

Laura melted under her touch, her face sinking into Carmilla’s gentle hands. She pressed back with an urgency that erased their smiles; it called more for low hums and desperate, furrowed brows.

One of her hands found its place in Carmilla’s hair, tangling in the shiny, perfect raven curls and scratching gently at the base of her skull. The curve of her neck, the downy hairs that her pinky ran through, felt like coming home.

She did not waste time, tugging Carmilla closer with her other hand fumbling for purchase first in the splay between Carmilla’s shoulder blades and then lower, tracking down to the small of her back. When Carmilla arched into her, her breath hot in Laura’s open mouth and Laura’s tongue gladly tracing its way along the line of her bottom teeth, their chests pressed flush and her shirt rode high.

Laura’s hand found a flash of bare skin, her fingers tracing along it and drawing a shudder from Carmilla—a shudder that she echoed when Carmilla dropped her hands to Laura’s hips.

There was a *yes*, in the soft noise that hummed from Carmilla’s throat, as Laura laid her palm, flat and hot, against the hollow just above her waistband. And, when Laura walked her fingers up slowly, counting the ridges of her spine, Carmilla clashed their teeth together with the force of her agreement.

This was new; new and exciting and wonderful. Laura’s thoughts had gone muddy, wrapped in a haze of *warm, soft, yes*, and an urgent need to be closer to Carmilla. To feel every inch of her, to know her hollows and curves and whether or not she had been lying when she insisted she was not ticklish.

She freed her hand from Carmilla’s precious locks, and pulled away with one last tug at Carmilla’s lips, their noses brushing. She found the string on the front of her bathrobe and pulled it loose.

Carmilla’s eyelids fluttered, her lips swollen and shiny, and she wasn’t breathing as Laura shrugged the robe off her shoulders and left it to pool behind her. Her pyjamas were almost childish, covered with stars and flying TARDISes, but she was not thinking about that. Not when she was shakily
working her way through the buttons. Not when Carmilla’s eyes were so dark that she could no longer see the brown in them.

“Laura,” Carmilla whispered, her voice ragged.

Laura hesitated on the fourth button.

“Do you not want—”

“No!” Carmilla’s head shook frantically. She looked panicked at the mere suggestion, “Merlin, no, Laura.” Her hands twitched at her sides, and then reached out to pull Laura close again, their knees brushing, their foreheads finding each other. “I just—you realize I have no idea what I’m doing?”

Laura’s laugh was soft, tickling at the loose hairs that fell between them, a mixed curtain of black and honey brown.

“Neither do I.”

“But you… you want..?”

Laura nodded at once, more emphatic than she imagined she had ever been. That Carmilla could even question her feelings, right now, almost warranted indignation. She did not let the thought linger, though; watching Carmilla’s eyes, she let herself undo the button she had been hovering over. And then the one after that, and downward.

“You’re so beautiful, Carm,” Laura whispered, her eyebrows knitting together as she melded her lips helplessly against Carmilla’s. “God,” she breathed, barely pulling away enough for the words to escape, “Sometimes, I can’t believe that you’re real.”

Carmilla tilted back on a smile, her fingers trembling in her lap, “You’re one to talk, Laura Hollis.”

Her eyes darted down, following the line of bared skin that fell where the buttons no longer clasped. Laura did not feel the chill she would have expected; there was too much heat running through her, flushing her chest and her cheeks and the tips of her ears.

One of Carmilla’s fingers caught at the edge of Laura’s shirt, her teeth worrying into her lip, “Can—Can I..?”

Her heart jumped in her chest. “Yes.”

Carmilla undid the final button, and ran her fingers curiously over the planes of Laura’s stomach, brushing around the dip of her belly button. Laura let out a low hiss, her muscles jumping at the shivery contact, and Carmilla shifted back in surprise.

“Keep going,” Laura insisted, catching her wrist, “It—that was—just touch me, okay?”
She was burning.

And Carmilla’s fingers were magic. They splayed over her abdomen, her ribs, ghosting just under the sides of the pyjama shirt that was still very much in the way.

“Carm,” she pleaded, just before Carmilla crashed their lips together. Her hand finally, finally, brushed the underside of Laura’s breast, and she groaned into Carmilla’s open mouth, pushing against her until the other girl’s thumb curled up and over her hardened nipple.

She cursed, head falling back and breaking the heat of their kiss, but Carmilla didn’t seem to mind. She cupped Laura’s breast with wondrous curiosity, her palm somehow rough and soft all at once against the sensitive flesh, and her lips tracked a swift, tender line from Laura’s cheek to her ear and then down, running the length of her jaw before landing hot on the column of her throat.

There was no warning.

All at once, Carmilla was gone, tumbling from the safety of their picnic blanket and through the wall of their bubble with a dull pop.

The winter night crashed in around them with all the subtlety of a cold shower, and blinked out the candles without a second thought. Laura gasped, halfway from the shock and halfway from the struggle to catch her breath, and nearly teetered over on her clumsy knees. Her palms scraped at the parapet, when she caught herself.

“Carm?” she called, clawing the wild tendrils of her hair out of the way and spinning.

Carmilla had thrown herself up against the wall of the Astronomy Tower, her back pressed shakily into the stone and a hand clamped, white knuckled and trembling, over her mouth.

Laura scrambled to her side, struggling one-handed to reconnect a few of her pyjama buttons as the other sought out Carmilla’s shoulder.

She was cold—much colder than she had been a minute ago.

Though she tensed, she did not jerk away. Laura took that as a good sign, and settled beside her, sitting on her heels as she searched Carmilla’s tightened features, the wrinkle in her brow, the quiver in her shoulders.

“Was it—was it your fangs?” she asked.

Carmilla’s eyelids fluttered at the question, her gaze lifting only enough to register Laura’s presence, to watch the stroke of her fingers upon Carmilla’s shoulder. Carefully, she nodded.

Laura’s breath caught, and she swallowed it back down as quietly as she could manage, her thoughts racing, latching almost at once upon another question: “Can I see them?”

At this, Carmilla’s eyes flicked up, and this time they stayed. There was a decided frown in them, drawing her dark brows together as they rose halfway up her forehead. When she dropped her hand, her lips stayed pressed together, thin and pale, for several lingering seconds before she let them part.

A shaky breath exhaled its way free, brushing at the still-bared skin of Laura’s neckline.

Laura had seen Carmilla’s vampire teeth only once before, and only in a flash. There had been too much surprise, too much tension and uncertainty. Laura had certainly never thought to ask her to bare them on purpose—the very idea seemed ludicrous. Cruel.
But, they were out, now. They were out, and Carmilla was afraid, and Laura wanted to know this.

She wanted to know all of Carmilla.

There was the part that was nervous about Quidditch, that cared what Laura thought, that studied harder than she would ever let anyone know. The part that wanted to do something with her life, that wanted to read every book ever written. The part that threw back her head with laughter at absurd jokes, that blushed when receiving unexpected praise.

But, there was also the part that needed blood, that flinched on sunny days, that was terrified of hurting anyone. And it was just as much a piece of who she was.

The teeth, when Laura ducked to peer better at them, were not at all scary. Her canines seemed, quite simply, to have magically elongated, falling sharp and pointy to press into her lower lip. They left little pricks, there, as she rested them anxiously in place, her eyes locked on Laura.

Laura cleared her throat, before she rolled back to face her properly, and tipped her head to the side, “Do they… hurt? When they grow in like that?”

Carmilla’s eyes widened. Slowly, she shook her head.

“Do they make it hard to talk?”

A nod, this time.

Laura reached up with the intention of pushing Carmilla’s hair back behind her ears—it had fallen, loose and tangled, in a curtain across half her face—but Carmilla jerked back, her head cracking against the stone.

“Laura,” she whispered, and the name came out odd, garbled around the fangs. The very sound of it made Carmilla cringe, and Laura itched to try again. To reach out to her.

“Hey. Carm, it’s okay,” she said swiftly, “We’ll just—we’ll wait for them to go back. Okay?”

When Carmilla nodded, after an achingly long pause, Laura felt her lungs collect their first proper breath since they had first kissed that night. It felt hours ago, though she knew it was not. The starry sky had hardly shifted.

“Here,” Laura said, suddenly, rolling backwards and collecting their still-full flutes of champagne. She presented one to Carmilla, and then clinked them together, ignoring Carmilla’s incredulous eyebrow raise. “Can’t let this go to waste—Slughorn would be horrified.”

She settled onto the stone at Carmilla’s side, letting their shoulders brush and feeling relieved when Carmilla shifted into her, returning the contact in equal measure.

“That’s Cassiopeia, right?” she asked, raising her free hand to point up at a jagged set of bright stars. Carmilla had shown her, once before, but she had never been very good in Astronomy. She had barely pulled an ‘Acceptable’ on her O.W.L.—and that had only been by the saving grace of Carmilla’s tutoring.

Carmilla’s smile was soft, when Laura glanced to her for confirmation. She reached up to trace her own finger across the canvas overhead, and Laura leaned in to better follow her line of sight.

“And that one is… Perseus?” Laura guessed, furrowing her brow.
She watched Carmilla’s eyes light up with the spread of her smile, and beamed when she took a sip of her champagne.

They traced out a dozen of the constellations, Laura ignoring the chilly breeze as best she could, until Carmilla shifted to pull her head down against her shoulder and murmured, “You must be cold.”

Her voice was clear, soft but unhindered.

Laura shrugged against her, breathing in the cool scent of her shirt. It tickled at her nose, mint and iron and the soapy lavender of Hogwarts-provided hair products.

“They’re gone?” she asked.

She felt more than saw the nod that Carmilla offered in response. Her chin rubbed against Laura’s temple.

Carefully, Laura shifted away to look her in the eyes. “And… are you okay?”

Her eyes softening to a delicate, coppery brown, Carmilla murmured, “Yeah, Laura. I’m okay.”

“With—with everything?”

Laura knew the chill had nothing to do with the way Carmilla’s shoulders suddenly tensed, her arms pulling tighter around her torso.

“Laura…”

“Because, I mean, if you—if you weren’t okay with that, then we don’t have to—I mean, we can go slow, or whatever you want! I just don’t want you to—to base your decisions off of what just happened with your… y’know.”

“I almost hurt you.”

Carmilla said it with a bite to the words that Laura did not doubt was aimed inward. She said it like it was an absolute—like it was an undeniable truth.

“No,” Laura argued just as fiercely, her head shaking back and forth with unexpected fury, “No, Carm, you didn’t.”

Carmilla’s fingers clenched tight over her knees. A frantic tick took up residence in her jaw as she closed her eyes and ground out, “You don’t know, Laura. You don’t.”

“Fine. Did you want to hurt me?” Laura demanded, her stare flashing with defiance.

There was a jolt of horror in Carmilla’s eyes, shrouding them in sudden dark where a moment ago they had been so bright. And then she was burying her head in her hands, digging her fingers through her hair.

“That’s—that’s what you can’t understand! A part of me—fuck, Laura, there was a part of me that did!”

The heels of her hands pressed over her eyes, her frame unnaturally frozen. She could have been a statue, could have easily been made of marble.

Laura gave in to the itch she had been fighting. She caught at Carmilla’s sleeve, and then her arm, wrapping her fingers warm and reassuring there, refusing to let Carmilla shift away.
“That’s not what I asked,” she forced herself to say, the words falling as barely more than a whisper. Her throat was tightening just looking at Carmilla, seeing the fear that was practically dripping from her. “I asked if you wanted to hurt me.”

Carmilla laughed in one quick, humorless burst. When her eyes lifted, they were rimmed red in a way that had nothing to do with her being a vampire.

“What’s the difference? If it’s me that hurts you, Laura, what the hell is the difference?”

“The difference is that I’ll still love you!”

They both froze, a single word echoing between them. It resounded in Laura’s ears, burned where it had parted from her lips.

She had thought of this moment hundreds of times. She had pictured murmuring it on a date in Hogsmeade, surrounded by snowflakes and stopping hand-in-hand for a sweet kiss in the middle of the path. She had imagined pulling Carmilla into her arms after a Quidditch match, alive with victory, and declaring it as the most important thing, the win be damned. She had picked over the idea of taking Carmilla back to the boathouse when they returned to Busbridge next week, bringing a picnic and an extra blanket and saying it on the balcony where they had shared their first real kiss.

She had even had a flash of it, stepping out amidst the candles, tonight. The words had leapt to mind, but stayed firm on her tongue, desperate for the right moment.

Carmilla’s jaw had gone slack, in the silence. When she blinked, her eyelashes fluttering and her lips working soundlessly, Laura regained her voice.

She might not have intended to say the words, but that did not make them any less true.

“I love you, Carm,” she repeated seriously. “And that—that won’t change, no matter what. Even if I get hurt.”

She waited. Waited to see what Carmilla would say, how she would react, if she would run… but there was nothing. The other girl was deathly quiet, and Laura found that she could not bear to meet her gaze. She stared, instead, at a spot of lint on her shoulder, and, when she could not handle the quiet any longer, finally whispered, “You don’t have to say anything. It’s okay, if you’re not—if you aren’t there.”

Slowly, Carmilla shook her head. Laura thought that surely the world had stopped, that time had ceased to move forward, because there was no way her heart was beating, and no way she could still be alive without it—

And then Carmilla kissed her.

It was soft, and gentle, and her lips spoke volumes. There were more emotions than Laura could put words to, in the delicate stroke of fingers at her shoulders. This was not passion or want, or even just pleasure. Carmilla was bleeding her feelings through every touch, every press of her lips.

When she pulled back, there was wonder in her eyes, overshadowing any fear.

“Of course I love you, Laura,” she breathed, her face breaking into the purest, most wonderful of smiles.

She kissed her once more, even with Laura’s matching grin getting in the way too much for it to be anything more than a brush, and Carmilla’s hand came up to catch at the back of her neck, pressing
their foreheads together as she shivered.

“I can’t remember what it was like to not be in love with you, do you realize that? It’s as if you don’t even know the effect you can have… as if you really have no idea how amazing you are.” One hand sliding through Laura’s hair, pushing it back, she pulled away just enough to gesture up at the night sky overhead, her eyes shimmering. “I tell you all of these stories about heroes and constellations, and all I can ever look at is you.”

There was a different sort of heat surging within her, as her heart swelled up into her throat. She almost did not want to unfreeze the clock—she wanted to stay here, in this unbreakable, perfect moment, forever. Carmilla Karnstein, beautiful and brilliant and wise beyond her years, was gazing at her like she had laid out the constellations with her own hands.

Carmilla Karnstein loved her back.

Slow and sure, Laura leaned in to kiss her again.

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Laura’s birthday fell precisely between Christmas Day and New Year’s Eve, a fact that had amounted to very little recognition, over the years. Relatives—the few distant ones that sent things or visited every few years—had always lumped the celebrations together, which meant Laura had a collection of Christmas cards with ‘+ Happy Birthday!’ scrawled in the header alongside some standard, pre-written holiday greeting.

Sometimes there was an extra five pound note, or a tacked on bar of chocolate, but otherwise the event went largely unnoticed.

Dad would hold back a few little things, a tiny stash of boxes hidden in the least Christmas-themed wrapping he had available (which usually meant newspaper), for her to open on the day itself. He would bake a small chocolate cake for them to split, and count out the candles to match her age.

Laura loved it; she really did.

And, as such, she was not expecting much to be different, awakening in the bedroom of her childhood home on the morning of the 28th.

Carmilla was not in bed, when she rolled over in the tangle of sheets.

“Carm?” she called, sitting up and frowning around the tiny room. The blankets in the corner—Dad’s attempt to pretend they were not spending every night curled together in her narrow single—were as abandoned as ever. The door was propped open.

Fighting through a yawn, she found her slippers, tugged on her fluffiest Gryffindor robe, and padded out into the hall and down the narrow flight of stairs.

The cottage was usually still littered with the trappings of the holidays, at this point. There would be red streamers dangling from the rafters, a sprig of mistletoe on the front porch (tied to a set of bells that chimed every time there was a light breeze), and the lights would flick on every night, even after Boxing Day. Laura had told Carmilla, in a teasing stage whisper just loud enough for Dad to overhear, that he would probably leave them up until she returned in June, and that the tree would only be carried out when it was officially too dead to be considered anything but a fire hazard.

The sight of the den, when she poked her head around the corner, drew her to a halt.
Where, the night before, there had been crumpled ribbons and discarded gift boxes, this morning there was an organized room with a freshly vacuumed rug. Even the books had been stacked neatly where they belonged, on shelves that they likely had not seen since their first arrival across the threshold.

And, most jarringly, the tree was gone, replaced by the armchair that usually took up residence in the far corner.

Laura frowned.

“Dad?” she called into the house, drumming her fingers on the doorframe as she waited on a response. There wasn’t one.

She headed up the hallway, her steps creaking the floorboards in all the usual places, and froze, mouth open on a question that never made it past her lips, as she reached the entry to the kitchen.

“Happy Birthday!” Dad proclaimed, blowing loudly on a noisemaker and sweeping her into his arms.

Laura sputtered, returning the embrace on instinct, even as her harried thoughts rushed to catch up with the scene in front of her.

The kitchen had been transformed. Gone were the Santa figurines, the plush snowmen that had resided on the countertop. The lights had been taken down from the door to the porch, and the alphabet letters on the refrigerator had been rearranged to spell out ‘SEVENTEEN’ instead of ‘HAPPY YULETIDE.’

Carmilla was perched nervously on the edge of one of the bar stools, grinning even as she bit her lip. There was a chocolate cake beside her, decorated with strawberries and topped with seventeen shimmering candles.

Dad released his hold, and gave her a nudge.

“Go on, kiddo. Make a wish.”

Slowly, she approached the counter and placed her hand on top of Carmilla’s, blinking up into the other girl’s eyes as the candles danced invitingly.

“You two set all of this up? For me?”

“Carmilla did,” Dad interjected, before Carmilla could so much as open her mouth, “She woke me at four in the morning, trying to drag the tree out the front door. I thought she was a burglar.”

The idea of a burglar trying to steal their scraggly brown Christmas tree, three days after the holidays, was not quite amusing enough to break Laura’s gaze away from Carmilla’s.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

Carmilla shrugged, her cheeks showing the barest of pink, “It’s your seventeenth birthday. I wanted it to be special.”

Still shaking her head, her throat tightening, Laura turned to the cake, thinking Please, let me keep her, as she blew out the candles.

It took her two breaths to get them all, the last few clinging to life determinedly, but, the moment the
smoke curled away, she pressed her lips to Carmilla’s in a brief, Dad-in-the-room sort of kiss.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Dad swept in with a cake knife, grinning as he teased that this would be the only day that he would condone eating cake for breakfast, and they settled together around the small table with their oversized slices, getting frosting on their cheeks and laughing at Dad’s bad jokes or Carmilla’s responsive facial expressions.

“I’ll keep out of your hair,” he promised, when he collected their dishes and began filling the sink with suds. “Just promise to stay out of trouble, and be back before three. I’m making Laura’s favorite for supper.”

“Chicken tikka masala?”

“With Eton mess for dessert.”

Laura pumped her fist, beaming from ear-to-ear, and hopped up to kiss him on the cheek. When she turned back, Carmilla was already holding out her coat expectantly, a bag slung over her shoulders.

“So. Where are we going?” Laura asked, once they were on the porch, her breath fogging out before her as she adjusted the fit of her scarf.

Carmilla, smiling warmly, pushed Laura’s hands aside to correct the scarf herself. Her fingers ghosted over the last sliver of exposed skin at her neck, and then she threaded their fingers together.

“You’ll see.”

The route Carmilla took was familiar, and Laura was not at all surprised when they wound their way past the sign for the arboretum. There was not much to be done on foot—if they wanted to be home sometime that week, that was—and Carmilla had hardly become a massive fan of the downtown scene during their brief stay. She had gotten more than enough of an introduction to the townspeople during their caroling adventure.

(Pretending to be mere friends notwithstanding, Carmilla had glared at the implication that she should actually sing, and had spent the evening as Laura’s silent shadow.)

The lake, when they rounded the final bend, was somewhere on the verge of frozen. There was a pale, sparkling coat drawn over the surface as if brushed there by a painter’s hand, and, peering over it stood the boathouse, dark amidst the frosty tree branches.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” asked Laura. She tugged at Carmilla’s hand.

“Mhm,” Carmilla hummed. She was smiling in that secretive way she sometimes did, a way that said she knew more than Laura. She picked up their pace, her own fingers squeezing back on Laura’s with fresh insistence, and urged her to lead the way through the doorway when they arrived in its shadow.

If Laura had been surprised when she stepped out onto the Astronomy Tower parapet the week before, or when she froze in the doorway of the kitchen that morning, it was nothing on her astonishment at what lay inside the boathouse.

The Christmas lights that had, until that morning, been strung around her cottage, were now draped over the walls of the interior. The floor was covered in an assortment of blankets and pillows—possibly every one that had once taken up residence in a Hollis closet—and there were two empty
mugs waiting next to a Wizard’s Chess board.

Carmilla dropped her bag lightly beside a pillow Laura had not seen in at least a decade, and tugged out a thermos. Unbuttoning her coat in favor of one of the thick, wool blankets, Laura set herself down cross-legged and watched as Carmilla, much as she had with the champagne, poured them each a steaming mug—this time of hot cocoa.

“I’m terrible at this game. You do remember that, don’t you?”

“Hard to forget,” Carmilla agreed, a twinkle in her eyes, “But… we’re going to work on that.”

For the next hour, as the winter breeze tickled branches against the boathouse windows, Carmilla urged her to rethink strategies, pointing out traps she had set up and advising Laura on how to set her own. They went through the whole of the thermos, which somehow managed to hold over six mugs worth of cocoa, and broke into the box of biscuits that Carmilla only revealed after the first grumbles from Laura’s stomach.

“Your Queen is in trouble,” Carmilla commented around a mouthful of chocolate-y biscuit crumbs. She glanced at her watch as she said it—the watch Laura had gotten her for Christmas—and furrowed her brow a bit.

“So is your Bishop,” Laura argued, as she egged on one of her few remaining Pawns. They were stomping rather bravely on the larger piece, and required assistance from a nearby Knight to clear them off the battlefront entirely.

“But if I move here,” Carmilla said, tapping a square and watching her Rook step regally into place, “Then she has nowhere left to hide.”

Laura glared at the board, where her Queen was crossing her arms irritably, tapping her foot with obvious impatience.

“Shush, I’m thinking,” Laura grumbled. She scrounged for another cookie, but only came up with a dusting of crumbs. She ate them anyways. “Alright, I don’t see it, Carm. Show me?”

Long fingers walking over the heads of her miniature army, Carmilla traced out the path she had just cleared for her Bishop, and then tracked back to lay out the route her Knight would take, should the queen attempt a hasty getaway.

“Well, I could take your last Pawn. Over here. Right?”

“Nope, then your King is left open there, which means I would move my Rook here. That would be checkmate.”

Laura huffed out a breath. As she propped herself up on her elbows—for she had sprawled out at some point, buried in a burrito of blankets—she caught Carmilla’s wrist flashing out again.

The watch, which had cost Laura her last bottle of broomstick wax and the vast majority of her pocket savings, was rather hard to miss. The face was a sundial, with a pointer that rose and sank depending on the position of the wearer’s arm, and, with the press of a button, it shifted from time-telling to star navigation. The moment Laura had seen it, the compass-face pointing out the direction of Orion, she had known it belonged on Carmilla’s wrist.

“Why do you keep checking the time?”

“Maybe I just really like my present.”
Laura could not help but smile, even as she shook her head, “We’ve established that. But, you’re obviously waiting for something. C’mon, tell me! It is my birthday, you know.”

“You are the most impatient person I know,” Carmilla said, around a low chuckle, “And, by the way, you should move your Pawn to G7. That will keep my Bishop occupied with the ‘check’ while you make your escape.”

“Ha! Alright, you heard her. G7 it is… not that I’ve forgotten you’re hiding something.”

“Well, we might as well do it now. We should be heading back to the cottage shortly, anyways.” She reached for her bag, and pulled out a small package, wrapped in gold tissue paper. “Happy Birthday, Laura.”

Mouth falling open, Laura let the small gift be set into her hands.

“This wasn’t—I thought this was my present, Carm. I mean, you already got me that charmed camera film for Christmas, and then you set all this up and cleaned Christmas away at the house, and all of that was more than enough! So much more.”

Still, she tugged apart the paper with wonder, and found a small mirror tucked inside. The frame was painted a glossy, Gryffindor crimson, but otherwise it was a fairly plain thing. Her own face stared back at her, eyebrows raised.

When she glanced at Carmilla, she was surprised to find that she was holding a mirror as well—this one outlined in regal blue.

“I got the idea from Potter and Black,” she said. “They’ve got commercial grade ones, of course, and I couldn’t afford that sort of thing… so I had to make do with what I had.” Clearing her throat, she turned her attention down to the mirror, and said, “Laura Hollis.”

Nothing seemed to happen, but, as Laura’s gaze drifted down, she was startled to find not her own face, but Carmilla’s, staring up out of the mirror at her.

“Whoa!”

Carmilla’s reflection smiled and shrugged. “They’re Two-Way Mirrors,” she said, and her words echoed, spoken in double—once from her lips and once from the mirror, “This way, we can talk even when we can’t actually, y’know, talk.”

There was a pressure building behind Laura’s eyes, and she had to press them shut for a moment, her teeth digging into her lip.

“Laura?”

“God, I love you,” Laura whispered, her voice choked as she finally lifted her gaze to peer through watery eyelashes at the other girl. Carmilla was bathed in the low winter light, her hair pushed back and her expression young, and open, and vulnerable. When Laura smiled, she smiled right back.

“I love you, too,” murmured Carmilla. She shifted around the board, her hand going to Laura’s shoulder before running along her jawbone and tangling in her hair.

She kissed her, soft and heady, and Laura felt a thumb stroke across her cheek, whisking away the tears.

“You like it?” Carmilla asked on an exhale.
Laura nodded, sucking briefly on the other girl’s lower lip before she separated them by mere centimeters and let her breath shiver out between them.

“You gave me you,” she said, her throat still rasping ever-so-slightly. Carmilla’s eyes, blinking softly back at her, were her favorite shade of copper and gold. “And you, Carm… you are all I could ever want.”

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to share your thoughts below! Or, even better, come say hi in the Silas Library Club Discord! Find info and the invitation link on our Twitter.
**Apparition**

Chapter Summary

The events of a traditional sixth year carry on, while the war continues to take its toll.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Spring of 1976 (Sixth Year)**

Laura had long ago learned that there were murmurs that traveled through the castle, carrying news with varying degrees of reliability. For years, the majority of the focus had been upon Hogwarts itself: who was dating whom; where to get homework answers or illegal, answer-checking quills; the placing of bets on upcoming Quidditch matches.

It was not until recently that anything of substance had begun to pass through the usual suspects, and not until their return from the holidays that the *Inky Wire* began to make the rounds.

A brilliant someone had developed an enchantment which would reveal a to-the-second live update of the Wizarding Wireless Network on specific pieces of parchment, and Potter and Black could be seen distributing them (for a galleon apiece) on afternoons in the common room. Laura suspected they were not the inventors—she had her eye on JP Armitage, for that, on a tip from Carmilla—but they had at least contributed, and were most definitely pleased with themselves.

Even Perry had been unable to find fault. There were no explicit rules about selling goods to other students—after all, the notice boards were cluttered with signs for textbooks and used school equipment (two galleons for an annotated copy of *Home Life and Social Habits of British Muggles*, or three sickles for a broken set of brass scales) and it was not unheard of for students to invent mundane little charms and sell the products to their classmates (Laura had purchased a stone that had been charmed to hop and croak like a frog, her second year, off of a clever seventh year Hufflepuff.) The most she did was mutter under her breath about how they were *taking too many risks*, when they held up their wares during that first week, shaking their half-filled bag of coins.

The trouble with the *Wire*, as many had begun calling it in open conversations, was that it was all-consuming. Though Perry had not purchased a copy, nearly every other student had, and they sat next to textbooks in classrooms or tucked under the corner of plates during meals, one eye constantly scanning for new details. Even Laura had obtained one, when Remus forced his friends to part with a page for half of their usual rate, and she found it hard to look away when the broadcasts were active.

It was in this way that the whole of the sixth year History of Magic class knew what was happening, in the final week of January, when Eugene Goff fell out of his seat with a strangled cry.

At the board, Professor Binns stuttered to a halt, his ghostly form rotating to face the room. His pale eyes were unable to locate the distraction before there was another; the classroom door flew wide, and in it stood a harried Professor McGonagall. Her hat was missing, her hair frazzled and not entirely contained to its usual bun, and she took a careful breath through barely parting lips before she called his name.
Laura, who had seized Carmilla’s hand under the desks, felt the world go icy, the blood thrumming in her ears as Eugene stood to follow McGonagall into the corridor. He left all of his things behind, his hands trembling at his sides and his eyes wide yet somehow blank.

*Clarice and Horace Goff killed in Durham during confrontation with Death Eaters. More details to follow.*

It was the sort of thing Laura had been terrified of seeing, and the sort of thing that had kept her reading, regardless, always grateful when the names were entirely unfamiliar, always relieved when the only information was a suggestion of movements or an identification of another enemy agent for public awareness. Some days the only news had been code, written as weather reports or with words that did not line up with the sentence, and Laura knew that neither she nor her classmates were the intended audience.

The flurry of discussion that followed Eugene’s departure was not capable of being quenched. Chairs squealed as they were turned towards their neighbors, and Laura caught a number of white faces and glimmering eyes. Even the Slytherins, clustered together, were shifting with discontent.

“It doesn’t say *which* Death Eaters,” LaF mumbled, clutching their parchment so tightly that it wrinkled in a dangerous sort of way at the edges. The message, only ever two lines long, came and went on a loop, repeating information about movements to the north and something about a fire heading to the Ministry before coming back to the Goffs without any of the promised details.

Laura had still not released Carmilla’s hand. The other girl lifted their joined fingers and set them on the desk, her thumb stroking, and it took Laura an extended moment to realize they had been released early. Binns was gone, having vanished through the blackboard, and some students were beginning to take their leave in worried clusters—the Slytherins first among them.

“You okay?” Carmilla murmured.

The very fact that she could not form words suggested she was not, in fact, ‘okay,’ but Laura nodded regardless.

She had no real right to be upset, after all. She was not close with Eugene—they had attended classes together since they were eleven, but they had only spoken the odd word to one another; him offering encouraging words on the days of Quidditch matches and her laughing at jokes he shared to the table during dinner.

What she was feeling was not pity or sympathy: it was fear.

This was not the first time such a thing had happened at the school. In mid-autumn, LaF and Perry had returned ghost-faced from their Transfiguration lesson with word that Alice Clark, a Ravenclaw, had been pulled from the class. Word had spread like wildfire that her mother had been murdered by Lestrange and a few unidentified Death Eater recruits. Alice had not returned from the holidays, and her friends said that she was in Spain with her father.

Not long after, a second year Hufflepuff had lost grandparents to an attack on a Ministry outpost, and, following with barely a week’s pause, a seventh year Ravenclaw was informed her father was missing in action. Most recently, and with far different responses, a fourth year Slytherin’s uncle was identified as a Death Eater.

And now Eugene’s parents were dead.

“We’ll see you later,” said LaF, tapping Laura’s shoulder to get her attention. Her gaze jumped from
where it had been locked sightlessly on her and Carmilla’s clasped hands.

Perry was on her feet, swaying slightly, and LaF was already snaking their arm around her. They did not acknowledge Laura’s agreement, their focus on their girlfriend’s blank expression as they ducked out the door.

The room was nearly empty. Only a few students remained, huddled with their friends, things laid out on desks, voices hushed in private conversation.

“They’ll be fine,” Carmilla promised, with a light brush of fingers across Laura’s cheek. Her eyelids flickered at the grounding contact, and she let a breath slide from her lips. “I mean, their parents aren’t in Durham… are they?”

“No. LaF’s are mobile right now, and Perry’s are still at the Ministry, trying to stay inconspicuous—someone needs paper pushers, right?—that’s what she says.”

“See? They’ll be okay.”

“That’s the thing,” Laura insisted, pulling back from Carmilla’s touch to look at her properly, her head shaking, “Is anyone going to be okay? There was that blast in London last week that the muggles think was just a gas explosion. Half of Diagon Alley is shut down from threats. And people—people keep dying, Carm, and there’s no way to predict who it will be, next!”

Carmilla’s eyes softened, but, when she went to reach for Laura, again, Laura leaned back and continued, dropping her voice urgently, “We leave school in one year, and…and the world is still going to be at war. You know I haven’t heard from Danny since she left? I have no idea if she’s alive or dead, and she was always the one saying she didn’t know what would happen next. That’s us, now, Carm. We aren’t going to get to find jobs and figure out if we want to live together, and if we’re apart for even an afternoon I’ll always be wondering if they’ve gotten you—”

“Laura!” Carm caught at her arm, stilling her long enough for Laura to focus on the swirling panic in her dark eyes. She blinked, her throat bobbing. “I’m scared, too,” she whispered, “Okay, Laura? I—I’m scared, too. But you can’t focus on that. If you try to worry about everything all at once, you’ll go crazy.”

“How can you not?” Laura choked. Her throat had gone tight, aching with the weight of a thousand thoughts, and she could not seem to stop her head from shaking.

There was no easy answer; she knew it even before Carmilla shook her head.

And so, she worried.

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Eugene had not returned to Gryffindor Tower, by the time Saturday rolled around and with it the arrival of two events Laura—and the majority of her fellow sixth years—had been eagerly awaiting. The morning was set to be their first lesson in Apparition, while the evening would host the first Quidditch match of the new term.

“Is Carmilla not taking the class?” Perry asked, her pale eyes following the Ravenclaw’s disappearing form after breakfast.

Carmilla had eaten with them, but pressed a quick kiss to Laura’s lips before muttering a parting ‘good luck’ and heading on her way.
Laura swallowed her last gulp of orange juice and set the glass back on the table heavily. “No; she said it was too expensive. And then something about preferring brooms, anyways.”

Though Perry bought this with ease, nodding pleasantly and dabbing honey off of her lips, LaFontaine frowned in quiet contemplation. Laura felt her pulse kick.

The lie had been Carmilla’s. Apparently, vampires did not need to practice in order to Apparate, but their methods were a bit more obvious than those of ordinary magical folks. It would not do to have Carmilla popping about the Great Hall in dramatic puffs of smoke. That was the sort of thing that aroused suspicion.

Whatever LaFontaine’s internal debate was, it did not part their lips. The trio finished breakfast, Perry distracted them with a flustered checklist of homework that needed doing and essays that needed revising, and then they drifted into the Entry Hall to wait for their lesson.

The melancholy that had settled over the castle had dissipated, if only for the day, and, for the first time in what felt an age, there was laughter and gossip and friendly bits of rule-breaking corridor magic that Perry pretended not to notice.

Laura checked her Wire parchment one last time, before the door re-opened on a Great Hall that had been swept clear of tables and benches and instead filled with rows upon rows of wooden hoops.

A tiny wizard that Laura recognized from the examiners for their O.W.L.s stood upon the threshold, clutching his wand and grinning pleasantly up at their eager faces. His name, he reminded them, was Wilkie Twycross, and he would be supervising their training, with the assistance of the Heads of Houses.

McGonagall, Flitwick, Sprout, and Slughorn had indeed spread themselves across the front of the hall, where the staff table normally rested. At his introduction, they began to pace through the rows of students, ensuring they were each positioned in front of one of the hoops.

“We will start with the Three D’s of Apparition!” Twycross announced crisply, once all chatter had died into eager silence. With three flicks of his hand, shimmering gold words appeared in thin air, hovering to the left of his head: Destination, Determination, Deliberation.

He made them chant these several times, nodding along with a pleased sort of smile. Slughorn nodded encouragingly at Laura—though it could easily have been aimed at LaFontaine.

“All right, now, wands out, everyone.” This was an unnecessary command, seeing as each and every one of them was already grasping their wands firmly at their sides, but Laura raised hers with the rest, a nervous thrill coursing through her. “You will focus on these Three D’s as you attempt to Apparate for the first time. Your professors are here to assist, should you have any questions or mistakes. Do try to take your whole selves along, with particular attention on your limbs! An eyebrow is easier to reattach than a leg!

“First, you must focus upon your destination! That would be the hoop in front of you. Second, visualize yourself occupying that space. Fill yourself with determination to be within it. Finally, turn in place, pushing your way into nothingness with deliberation.”

A few students had turned in place as he was finishing, and he raised his wand hand imploringly, “Not yet! Only upon my command!”

McGonagall, who had been beside one of these such students—a Slytherin with an upturned nose and shaggy hair—began scolding him. The other heads of houses shifted forward, watchful eyes
beginning to sweep the room. Laura got a strong sense of anxiety from each of them, though their faces remained impassive.

She could not help but wonder what they had seen in this class, in years prior. There had been a lot of warnings about *splinching* in the pamphlets that had been circulated before the class, and none of it had sounded particularly pleasant. When asked, Carmilla said she had never experienced such a thing. Laura had found that a relief, having seen enough of the illustrations. She did not like the idea of Carmilla without a limb… or Carmilla in pain of any sort.

There need not have been concern, however. No matter how *deliberately* any of them turned, no one so much as budged an inch that they did not move with their own two feet. Laura did her best to contain her laughter at seeing the normally prim-and-proper Perry spinning in place like a reddened top, her hair frizzing out and her lips mumbling a chant of the Three D’s.

Twycross was unfazed by their lack of progress. He closed out their hour session with words of encouragement, and then, in quiet but hopeful tones, asked Professor McGonagall if he might stay for the Quidditch match that evening.

This reminder stirred equal parts excitement and anxiety in Laura’s stomach. It was always different, when she would be a player rather than a spectator, and doubly so when it was a match against Ravenclaw.

She had been pushing her team with extra exuberance during their frosty practices, nearly doubling the length of their sessions and only getting away with the late hours because of McGonagall’s soft spot for Quidditch. For once, she felt confident about their odds. Ravenclaw, of course, would be riding a new high with the return of their star Chaser, but Laura was still counting on the rest of the team being out-of-sync.

Her only real concern came in the form of Rosie Tuttle—Gryffindor’s new Seeker and a disaster waiting to happen. She was practically a Bludger in human form, rocketing about the pitch with alarming speed and very little agility. More than once, the second year had plowed into one of Laura’s other players, disrupting practice and creating unnecessary tension, and Laura’s pocket money was at an all-time low, with the amount of sweets she’d had to purchase to appease the Chasers.

(The only saving grace had been in Carmilla teaching her how to raid the kitchens—something Laura had been careful not to let slip to Perry.)

Even with her lack of grace, though, there was no denying that Rosie had an eye for the Snitch. She had the potential to be great, and Laura made this clear in her final speech before the match that evening.

“Allright. We’ve worked hard for this,” she said, as she surveyed them all in their scarlet robes, “We’re as strong a unit as Gryffindor has ever seen, and we’ve got the sort of chemistry that Ravenclaw can only dream about. Today, we’re going to exploit that—show them what it means to cooperate. Pass to each other like we’ve been practicing—never stay still. Double-team them, isolate them. Pearce, Carter, keep the Quaffle away from Karnstein. And if you hit her in the head, we’re going to have words because *that is a foul*… not just because she’s my girlfriend.”

She waited for their nods of agreement, grateful not to be challenged on this point. LaFontaine looked determinedly at the ground.

“And, if she makes it to the hoops, I can handle her,” Laura added pointedly. “Now, Rosie, stay clear of the team. Use your eyes—stay high or stay low, and let the Chasers operate on their own.
You’re going to be the fastest player on the field, so use that. Don’t get into the fray unless you’re sure the Snitch is in there. And, once you catch it… well, trust me, you’re going to be a star.”

Rosie beamed, her gloved hands clasping tighter on the handle of her shiny Comet 260.

They followed Laura out onto the pitch, to rousing applause from the whole of the school. Dumbledore himself was seated in the teacher’s box. Across the field, Perkins was strutting ahead of his entourage in bronze and blue. When they met in the middle, Hooch ordered them into their usual handshake, and then, before Laura could get a proper look at Carmilla, the whistle was being blown and her thoughts were overtaken by the game.

She shot to the Gryffindor hoops, feeling far more comfortable amidst them than she had in the sea of Apparition hoops that morning.

Carmilla had gotten first claim on the Quaffle, after a quick bout of tips and near-catches from the initial toss, and Laura watched her progress as she listened to the commentary from seventh year JP.

“Karnstein heads for the Gryffindor goalposts, and she’s pursued by Potter and Brown—Brown is relatively new to the team, of course. Had a solid start last year, decent scoring stats—and Karnstein dodges a Bludger from Perkins with an excellent bit of flying, if I do say so myself… and she shoots…”

Laura misread the shot. She chose the right hoop, knowing Carmilla’s feints with an innate sense she could not have taught had she tried, but the Quaffle went high instead of low, and pinged off the rim and past Laura’s reaching glove.

“She scores!” JP roared, to the approval of his fellow Ravenclaws. They raised their banners as they cheered.

Potter had gotten hold of the Quaffle, as it fell towards the field, and he shot it almost immediately to Brown, who returned it to him, who shot it to the waiting Reeves.

“And Reeves scores one for Gryffindor in turn. He’s another new face on Hollis’s team, and not half-bad, though there’s really no making up for the loss of Copeland and Lawrence, is there?”

Laura pinched down her personal disappointment with pride in her Chasers. They reclaimed the Quaffle before it had made it halfway back to the Gryffindor side in Darby’s arms, and, with another clever bit of passes and feints, scored once more. When they took possession for a third time, working off a Bludger hit from Carter, JP nearly swore into his magical microphone.

“And Gryffindor takes it AGAIN, because APPARENTLY Yeller’s gloves are coated in butter. Maybe this time Weatherholtz will block it, if he’d just go left instead of—NO, NO WRONG WAY!”

Laura snorted to herself, watching the scoreboard tick up: 30 - 10

Her smile vanished before it fully got a chance to settle. Carmilla had knocked aside Reeves on a direct path to Laura—and got past her again.

This time, she was the one cursing, and she did not miss the grin Carmilla flashed at her as she circled the hoops before giving chase to Brown, despite the sun in her eyes.

It was an excellent evening for Quidditch. There was no denying that, even as Carmilla put another three past her in the ensuing hour. The air was crisp with freshly laid snow, but not painful against her cheeks, and the skies were clear and without threat of further storms. They were not provided the
advantage that Laura had hoped—she had been training the team in every weather scenario imaginable, and making use of the recent snow to prepare in the case that the game would take place during such an event—but it did not seem to matter. Having only afforded Ravenclaw thirty seconds of a lead, they had not fallen behind since. By the time the game entered its third hour, still without even a flicker from the Snitch, they had pulled ahead by seventy points.

“With two brand-new Seekers going head-to-head, we can’t help but wonder if this game will ever end,” JP said, during a particular lull in the action. The ball had gone back and forth several times now without scores, fouls, or Bludger hits. “I’ve gotten confirmation from Madam Hooch herself that the Snitch was indeed released, so it’s safe to say it is out there somewhere…”

The Ravenclaw Seeker passed behind Laura, just then, his face drawn in concentration. Like Rosie, Neal Walsh was a second year and brand new to Quidditch. The loss of Jenna Martin had hit Ravenclaw hard; it was really no wonder Perkins had gone begging for Carmilla to return. The score deficit would be at least 150 without her, by now, and the Snitch would not even be a potential saving grace.

Watching her Chasers fail to make yet another goal, Laura waved her arms at Madam Hooch until she heard the satisfying shriek of the referee whistle. The team thundered to the ground on her heels, gathering about and looking decidedly worse for wear. Melanie immediately went to work sorting out her windblown ponytail, while James dug through his own mop and scowled at the ground.

“We’re losing focus,” Laura said flatly. It was not news to any of them. “We have a nice lead, yes, but we need to keep at it if we want the Cup. There’s still plenty of room for anyone to take it. Potter, you’ve been favoring Reeves with your passes, and Carmilla’s figured it out. And Reeves, you’ve been aiming for the left hoop every time.”

“Right, sorry,” he said. “I’ll switch it up.”

“No, no. Aim for it again. I don’t care how badly you do it, either. They’ll be expecting a switch-up after this huddle, and I want them to lower their guard again. Waste a shot if you have to; it’ll throw them for a loop when we come back.”

The commands felt simple, easy, borne on the wings of countless practice sessions. LaFontaine grinned at her, as she prepared to take off once more, and shot her a thumbs-up from the back-up line. Even Carmilla’s challenging eyebrow raise in her direction, as the Ravenclaws broke from their own cluster, could not fluster her. She stuck her tongue out in return, and earned a laugh.

It would not even matter, she thought with wonder, if Perkins was bothered by the long-distance affection. It would not matter if he saw, if he cared… because Carmilla was in charge of her own destiny, just like Laura. She was on top of things, at long last.

And that feeling carried, when, fifteen minutes later, Rosie sent every player diving out of her path as she pelted after the Snitch. She had it clamped in her glove, raised high over her in head in triumph, before Walsh even knew what was happening.

Laura pelted to her, excitement practically vibrating from every pore, and tackled her in a midair hug that was immediately amplified as they were hit from all sides—the Chasers and Beaters joining in as they chanted her name in rhythm with the Gryffindor audience.

They had a real chance; it was no longer just fantasy, planning, and wishing… Gryffindor might actually pull this off, for the first time in Laura’s Hogwarts career…

She raised a fist in the air as she broke from the cluster of robes and warm bodies, and heard a boom.
of voices turn their chant into the Gryffindor fight song. By the time the words had faded out, cut off by the changing rooms and replaced by the hoarse whooping and congratulations bantered back-and-forth between her teammates, Laura was red-faced and grinning from ear-to-ear.

“Hell of a game, Captain!” seemed to come at her from every angle, accompanied by claps to the back and high-fives.

In the fervor, she had only managed to unlace one of her boots before the interruption.

“Mr. Pearce,” came a familiar voice, ringing through the small space with an edge of uncertainty.

The room stilled with Quidditch gear strewn about and broomsticks leaned on benches, eleven faces turning to find Professor Dumbledore standing in the entryway, his blue eyes locked on Davie.

“I am afraid I must speak with you.”

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Not even a Hogsmeade visit could cut through the tension that leached through the castle alongside the chill of mid-February, as the news of Davie’s sister’s death reached even the first years. Still, there was an attempt made, as the corridors were decked with valentine’s hearts and singing cherubs, seemingly overnight. Little bowls of chocolates appeared beside their meals on the Saturday morning that lined up with the holiday, and any conversation that was not devoted to Death Eater movement was tied up in dating plans.

When Laura had broached the idea of doing something official, Carmilla had hummed and suggested that she already had plans in mind—plans which she refused to share.

“C’mon Carn, what are we doing?” Laura asked, for the fifth or sixth time that morning, when Carmilla tugged her by the hand in a fight against the flow of couples down to the village.

With a finger pressed delicately to Laura’s lips—an action that sent a thrill down her spine—Carmilla murmured a simple “shush” at her and continued on her way.

They wound through the castle, up a number of flights, and, for a moment, Laura thought she was being taken to the Astronomy Tower. But Carmilla pulled them away from the correct staircase just as it began to shift away, and directed them instead down a seventh floor corridor and into the space directly in front of a massive painting of a man trying to teach a collection of trolls ballet. It was not going well for him.

Laura frowned, and turned to find Carmilla pacing with deliberation, her lips moving but no sound coming out.

“What are you doing?”

Carmilla raised a hand, not pausing her movements or halting her silent speech. And then, a moment later, as she spun on her heel at the end of her third lap, Laura jumped at the materialization of a door in the wall opposite her.

“Whoa.”

Carmilla beamed and pulled it confidently open, ushering Laura in ahead of her.

The room beyond was entirely unfamiliar. Laura’s only certainty was that this was not meant to be Hogwarts—the bricks were red and cracked, the floor hardwood with dips and divots from years of
footprints, and the air felt distinctly warmer. If she had to have guessed, she’d have said it was abruptly summer, for the fireplace was dark and shadowed with old ashes, and the light drifting through the pale, fluttering curtains was bright and enticing.

There could not be windows here, though: they were in the center of the castle.

Mouth open and eyebrows scrunched together, Laura turned back to Carmilla. She was shutting the door behind them—a door which, on this side, appeared to be that of a home, rather than that of a classroom. She clicked a lock into place, and then shoved one hand into her pocket and gestured around with the other in a way that said well, here we are, without offering any real explanation.

“What is this place?” Laura tried.

She had wandered further into the room, taking in the strings of faerie lights and the photographs on the walls. At first glance, they seemed to be muggle-made, being landscapes rather than portraits, but, upon closer inspection, she could see the waves moving in one that featured a shimmering beach, and tree branches waving in another that showcased a roving countryside.

“It’s meant to be New York,” came Carmilla’s voice, soft around the edges, and the words paused Laura in her perusal of the books stacked high on the shelves beside a squishy green couch.

“It’s… what?”

“New York. As in the city. In America.”

“I’m familiar,” Laura stammered. Her eyes darted to the windows, again, and Carmilla grinned and crossed the room for her, tugging aside the curtains to reveal a distant skyline.

It was New York, if the pictures Laura had seen all her life were anything to go by.

“How?” she asked. “We… we can’t Apparate out of the castle. Dumbledore only lifts the charm on the Great Hall, and only on Saturday mornings…”

“Technically we’re still at Hogwarts. This is the Room of Requirement.”

Laura was feeling more lost by the moment, because the city on the other side of the glass looked very real—like she could pull open the latch and hop down the fire escape and be there.

“The what?”

Carmilla’s smile said she had expected this. “The Room of Requirement,” she repeated. “It’s not well-known; don’t worry. I doubt your friends would know where it was, even if they had heard of it.” She settled onto the couch, and, after a moment of stunned processing, Laura joined her.

“So, we’re still at Hogwarts. And this room is just… here. Pretending to be New York.”

“Pretending to be whatever you need it to be,” Carmilla corrected. “If you needed a place to hide, for instance, it would offer one.”

“You’ve used it before?”

Carmilla eyed her, teeth digging lightly into her lip as she nodded. “Dumbledore showed it to me, my first year. It’s always been a… refuge of sorts. If I needed to get away from things.”

She did not need to explain that it had been a hideout when she was low on blood. Laura nodded solemnly.
“Why New York?”

“Actually,” Carmilla lounged back on the couch, testing the springs and kicking her legs onto the coffee table, “It’s not usually like this. It’s usually just… isolated. Safe. This was something I came up with more recently.”

“For today?”

“For you.”

A low warmth settled in Laura’s chest.

“Most people would just have gone to Puddifoot’s, you know.”

“We aren’t most people,” Carmilla reasoned, and then: “Do you like it?”

Laura angled herself across the couch, tilting Carmilla’s head with the brush of fingers along her cheekbone, and kissed her soundly.

“Very much,” she murmured.

///

It was March, by the time there was any real progress in their Apparition lessons. A few students had managed to travel several inches to one side or the other, and Laura had managed to pop in and out of the exact same space twice, but the closest anyone had come to their hoop was when Perry landed with one foot on the rim and accidentally kicked it up into her hip.

“Better than a splinch,” LaF had suggested, when their girlfriend was done muttering under her breath and soothing the bruise with a few silent spells.

And it was indeed a splinch which caught the attention of the class, that fifth Saturday, when Dale Perkins vanished with a loud pop and returned with a shriek. The whole of him that had traveled was inside the bounds of the hoop, though he collapsed instantly upon arrival. His trainers sat alone, a meter away, and Laura caught the distinct shine of blood before the professors descended upon him.

Lucinda O’Hare, who had been practicing beside him, threw-up, immediately clearing a wider ring about the incident, and a moment later McGonagall was ordering everyone from the room and calling an early end to the class.

The Entry Hall was loud with re-tellings of what had just occurred, as anyone that had been near enough was eagerly providing a play-by-play for those who had been in the back. By the time they had distanced themselves enough from the throng to stop hearing recitations of “the bones were just sticking up out of his shoes, mate! Just standing upright!” and “did you see the stumps?”, Perry had gone very green and Laura did not feel much better. Disliking Perkins was one thing, but this was another.

A majority of the class had poured onto the grounds, dispersing across the snowy lawns to join snowball fights led by the younger students, or to simply make their way down to the path by the lake, and it was in this direction that Laura meandered, now, with LaFontaine and Perry in tow.

She had hoped to find Carmilla here, as the other girl had mentioned spending her Saturdays catching up on reading while Laura was busy with Apparition, but her usual spots were empty, or occupied by snogging fifth years, and there was not much else to see except for the distant figures of James and his friends helping Hagrid clean off his hut while Lily Evans—perched on a low tree
branch with a thick book on her lap—pretended not to watch.

“That was not how I had hoped that lesson would go,” Perry sighed, once she had cleared a patch of grass and pulled a picnic blanket from thin air for them to sit upon. “I really thought we’d have made more progress. This is the halfway point, after all. We’ll be taking the test before you know it.”

“Well, as long as they only ask us to move a hair to the left, I’ve got it down,” said LaF. They tossed their bag down and began pulling out books without being told. “Might as well get this over with... how many inches did Slughorn want, Perr?”

“At least thirty. Which is perfectly reasonable, you know, so there’s no need for that face. I’ll have trouble condensing, with all that we’re expected to cover... there are at least three chapters on Veritaserum in our book, and I pulled a few Wizarding Law resources as well. He did say to be thorough.”

Laura watched them begin and then set to work on Kettleburn’s assignment on Thestrals. She thought, rather unpleasantly, that she would at least have less trouble than her classmates... given that she was the only one that had been able to see the creatures.

All in all, it was an unfortunate way to spend a Saturday afternoon. Laura tried her Two-Way Mirror several times, but only got a view of the inside of Carmilla’s bag. There was no telling where she was.

In fact, she did not see her girlfriend at all until they had packed their things away and begun the walk back to the castle for lunch. LaFontaine nudged her, hard, and pointed.

Leaning against one of the many archways, Carmilla was surrounded by a semi-circle of green and silver scarves. Laura recognized Evan Rosier at once, and several of the others. They were all of the Slytherins with Death Eater ties—the ones that were either on the fast track to joining Voldemort’s army, or had family members already linked to his name. Even Snape was there, and Sirius’s younger brother, Regulus.

The moment Laura moved to head in her direction, LaF caught her by one sleeve, and Perry by the other.

“Wha—hey! She needs help!”

“That’s a fast way to get yourself killed, L,” LaF insisted. “She’s got it. Look.”

Carmilla had just spat something rather venomously, though Laura was too far away to have guessed at the words themselves. Rosier flinched back, hand twitching towards his wand, but, as LaF had suggested, the encounter appeared to be at an end. Carmilla slipped past their shoulders with the grace of a cat, her expression positively stormy as she adjusted her bag and bolted into the castle.

Laura, frozen between her friends, could only stare.

“Well,” said Perry, her expression perturbed and her lips pressed thin, “I wonder what all that was about.”

Laura wondered, too. When she settled herself beside Carmilla at the Ravenclaw table for lunch, she half-expected to hear the story straight from the other girl’s mouth. Had Laura just ran into such a crowd, after all, Carmilla would be the first person she would tell.

Carmilla, though, kissed the corner of her lips in greeting, offered her a jelly biscuit, and proceeded to read a book of twelfth century poetry without commentary.
This was not an uncommon occurrence; Carmilla spent the majority of their time together, when they were not sneaking about after hours or otherwise occupied, reading. She had a never-ending rotation of books, working through everything from muggle classics to ancient wizarding history written in ancient runes. Normally, Laura was content with her little smiles or the way she played with her fingers over the lines on Laura’s palm, and, on a particularly good day, she would find that she was the only thing that could draw Carmilla back into the land of the living—her voice rousing Carmilla’s dark, curious gaze when no one else’s made a dent.

“Carm?” she asked, when the tables had worn thin of even the latest of the lunch crowd, and the closest thing they had to an eavesdropper was a fifth year at the opposite end of the table, clutching her coffee mug and rocking in place as she read over O.W.L. notes.

Carmilla hummed in response, her fingers tapping along Laura’s knuckles but her eyes still skimming through the words. She turned a page with a gentle crinkle.

“What did Rosier want?”

The page, thin and delicate, nearly see-through, almost ripped. Carmilla’s head jerked up.

“What?”

Almost as soon as their gazes had connected, Laura had dropped hers. She traced the line of a wrinkle in her skirt, worn there from where she had left it dropped unceremoniously on her floor the night before in her attempt to fish her favorite pyjama bottoms from her trunk.

“I saw you talking to him. And the others.”

She heard, more than saw, the way Carmilla’s lips parted as she swallowed. “It was nothing. We used to be friends, and he’s an ass, so I didn’t reciprocate. Don’t worry about it.”

The bite in those last four words, pushing them across the line from friendly suggestion into angry command, set Laura’s teeth on an unpleasant edge.

“But… he wanted something, then?”

“I told you, it was nothing.”

“Was it about me?”

Carmilla’s book snapped shut, and her expression had gone paler than usual. “Do you not trust me?”

The unexpectedness of the question, the anger Laura had not heard from Carmilla in years, dropped like a stone into her gut, tearing a chilly path through her lungs on its way.

As if she had realized what she had done, as if she had felt the icy rush echoing back at her, Carmilla’s eyes went wide and soft in an instant. When she set her book down, it was with exaggerated care. She rested the tips of her fingers on the cover, biting her lip.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I know you do.”

Laura registered that this was about the time when she was supposed to be angry. She had seen enough disagreements, had heard enough drama from friends and classmates, to recognize that she would have every right to storm off in this moment. A part of her—the part that felt the heat behind her eyes—wanted to.
She cleared her throat past the lump that had gathered there, as jagged and bitter as a chunk of coal, and managed a soft, “I was just worried.”

“Shit. Laura, I know, I just…” she released a huffing, frustrated breath, “I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t appreciate being bullied, and you… you always want to fix things. But this isn’t something you can fix.”

Laura worked her tongue around the word for a moment. “Bullied?” she whispered.

Carmilla’s eyelids fluttered shut. “It’s nothing, really. Please, Laura, promise me you won’t do anything stupid. They aren’t targeting you, right now, but they’ve tried before, and I—”

“They what?”

She could practically hear the curses running through Carmilla’s head as her jaw tightened.

“It was years ago, okay? And they lost interest quickly, so there’s no need for a new spotlight—”

“What exactly did they try to do?”

Carmilla’s eyes, open once more and blinking back at her in a losing battle, hardened with resolve.

“Rosier knew you were sneaking out to practice spells with the gingers. He was going to lock you in the Vanishing Cabinet and see what happened to you.”

Laura’s mouth fell open. “And he… what? Changed his mind?”

This seemed unlikely. Especially with the way Carmilla’s lips twisted and her gaze twitched away once again.

“I warned you, and then you stopped taking such stupid risks, so it worked out.”

“You warned me? When did you—”

A memory fizzled into brief, flickering life, like the temporary surge of a struck match. Carmilla, rushing into the classroom. LaFontaine shooting insults. The mad dash back to Gryffindor Tower, unsure of what they were trying to get away from.

“—oh.”

Carmilla made a faint sound of acknowledgment, half-sigh and half-grunt.

“We weren’t friends, then.”

“No,” Carmilla agreed, “We weren’t.” On the heels of a fresh sigh, she traced a line down the curve of Laura’s thumb. “Laura, just… please, promise me you’ll stay out of it?”

Reluctantly, Laura nodded.

It was not until late that evening, listening to LaF and Perry bicker about the ethics of truth serum versus physical torture in interrogations—LaF thought ethics were fuzzy-edged when it came to Death Eaters, while Perry insisted that it set a bad precedent—that Laura realized the conversation could be considered her and Carmilla’s first fight.

And that Carmilla had never actually told her what Rosier wanted.
Chapter End Notes

Come say hi on tumblr: jg-firefly or twitter: @jill2theletter

OR come chat with all of us over in the Silas Library Club Discord, where you can interact with authors, share your work, and discuss the latest Carmilla fics. Check out our twitter to find your invitation!
We Could Be Happy

Chapter Summary

Major life events are happening, as the end of sixth year looms...

Chapter Notes

Chapter title inspired from "You Could Be Happy" by Snow Patrol

Spring of 1976 (Sixth Year)

Somehow, despite all the assurances she had heard about the O.W.L.s being the worst time one would experience at Hogwarts, Laura found the final months of sixth year to be more trying than ever.

The last of the Apparition lessons had arrived on the final Saturday in April, along with the offer of extra practice lessons in Hogsmeade for students who were old enough to take the exam immediately. Laura, having splinched a finger and a bit of her ear in previous lessons, and still not finding consistency in her target ("Destination!" she could hear Twycross insisting, even in her sleep) reluctantly handed over one of her last galleons and added her name to the list.

“I barely see you enough as it is,” she complained one evening in early May, tracing the outline of Carmilla’s hand on the table between them. “And I don’t count this.”

“Studying not good enough for you, cupcake?” Carmilla teased. She turned another page in her book, and Laura scoffed.

“Last I checked, only one of us was studying.”

Carmilla shrugged. She had a series of parchment scrolls laid out across the library table they were hogging—it was large enough to seat at least four, and they had gotten a number of glares from fifth years—and she was busy reading a book that Laura was certain had never been assigned as mandatory coursework.

The cover read Die Geburt der Tragödie in shiny golden script, and, when Laura had asked her how she understood German, she had shrugged and said something about how ‘that was the fun.’

Were Laura not so caught up in trying to understand the material from her own courses, she would have asked for more details. Instead, she devoted half of their study time to watching Carmilla surreptitiously over the top of her notes. The gist seemed to be that she was inventing a spell to translate the text for her, a process which involved a lot of scribbling, digging through Latin texts, and miming wand movements.

Laura set aside her Charms notes and tried to read over Carmilla’s shoulder, her head tilting as her
eyes crossed. The text swam slightly on the pages, every now and again a word in English jumping to attention and then shifting back into nonsense.

“Progress?” she asked.

“Not much,” Carmilla hummed, her brow furrowing in frustration. She set the book flat, turning it to face Laura more directly, and placed an index finger on a line at the top of the page.

“Anyone who demonstrates how, according to Socrates, the mystagogue of science, one school of philosophy after another, like wave after wave, comes to an end, like—”

The rest fell away into the foreign tongue, and, when Laura blinked, what little she had understood was gone, too.

Carmilla scowled. “It doesn’t seem to want to stick.” She ran her wand along the spine, mumbling an incantation under her breath that sounded something like, “Scripta Recreant Anglicus.”

The words shimmered again, and then a thin trail of smoke began to rise from the line Carmilla’s wand had traced.

“Fuck!” she hissed, tapping at it again, speaking so quickly that Laura could not follow the charms she was using. The smoking stopped, and so did all traces of the translation spell.

Carmilla slammed the book shut.

“What is this?”

Madam Pince had descended upon them, peering down over her hooked nose with beady, furious eyes. Laura nearly fell out of her seat, but Carmilla merely glared back.

“We’re being quiet.”

“Wands away! There are no wands next to my books!” Pince squawked, her cheeks blotching as she motioned at Carmilla’s hand. Even when Carmilla shoved the offending item back into her robes, though, Pince did not budge. She was searching their table, hunting for a reason to kick them out, and Carmilla did not bother letting her get to one. Sighing, she shoved her things into her bag—starting with the book that had nearly caught on fire a moment ago.

Laura suspected she did not want a lifetime ban from the library, and she felt similarly. She could feel Pince’s vulture-eyes on them all the way through the double-doors and into the corridor beyond.

“There go my plans to study in there tonight,” Laura sighed, kicking at a crack in the worn stone and almost tripping in the process. “How soon do you reckon she’ll forget about that?”

“Probably never,” Carmilla scoffed. “I’m fairly certain she’s still holding it over me, how I knocked down a whole shelf of poetry in second year.”

Laura laughed in one a muffled burst, one hand flying up to cover her mouth and the other sliding smoothly into Carmilla’s grasp. “I can’t believe I ever thought you were some scary badass.”


They had rounded a corner, and she took a menacing step towards a cluster of first year boys that were all grinning suspiciously over a shared piece of crumpled paper. They flinched, one of them actually yelping, and the paper was shoved into someone’s pocket as they scampered away.
“Carm!”

“They were up to no good,” she insisted, lip quirking. “Anyway: point proven.”

“Yes, good work frightening the twelve-year-olds. You’re terrifying.”

Carmilla’s shoulder shoved into hers, knocking her off balance, but their linked fingers brought her right back into the other girl’s side.

“You love me.”

“Well, you got one thing right,” Laura sighed, tilting in to press a kiss just at the corner of her lips.

She was about to turn Carmilla’s cheek, and possibly press her against the next wall—the corridor was nice and deserted—when Carmilla went stiff and released her hand, a chilly distance falling between them that had her reeling.

When she looked up, she found Avery approaching, Regulus Black slouching along in his wake. The older boy was ranting about something, his posture harsh and his lips drawn into a snarl, but he went silent just before he came into Laura’s earshot. His gaze locked onto her.

“Watch your neck, mudblood,” he sneered, elbowing his way harshly between her and Carmilla. Regulus followed, eyes still downcast and shoulders hunched.

Laura did not dare breathe until they had vanished around the corner.

She was used to insults and threats—especially from Slytherins, and especially when the Quidditch Cup was on the line—but there was something specific there, something about the way Avery’s eyes had flashed, that had the blood draining from her face. When she turned to Carmilla, she found her girlfriend not looking much better for the encounter.

“I hate him,” Laura ground out, crossing her arms harshly in an attempt to draw some warmth back into her limbs. “I hate all of them.”

Normally, she would expect some teasing comment about how Carmilla did not think Laura had a hateful bone in her body. Today, though, Carmilla stuffed her hands into her pockets and shifted up her shoulders almost defensively.

“You can’t do anything, Laura.”

She had promised, and she did not plan for that to change. The reminder, though, only served to prod at the fire that Avery’s words had lashed into her veins.

“I won’t,” she snapped, with far more venom than she had intended.

There was a lengthy silence, the chasm Avery had carved in his wake showing no signs of closing. But Carmilla’s eyes had gone shiny and uncertain, her jaw loosening instead of clenching, and Laura dropped her arms in favor of shoving a hand through her hair and drawing in a long breath.

“C’mon,” she sighed. “Let’s go study on the grounds with the others. I’ve only got a few hours before practice.”

When she took Carmilla’s hand again, tugging her along, it was a solid minute before the other girl fully returned the grasp.

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The Apparition licensing exam took place on the second Saturday in May, which meant the vast majority of the sixth years who had participated in the class were of age and the waiting area in Hogsmeade was crowded with nervous seventeen-year-olds.

Laura hovered beside LaFontaine and Perry, trying not to think about how inconvenient it would be when she had to have her dad drive her into London for another attempt during the holidays. Perry, meanwhile, was occupied chanting the Three D’s under her breath, while LaFontaine merely looked green.

Carmilla had promised she would meet her in the Three Broomsticks after she was finished, and they would either celebrate or do their best to look pitiful for free Butterbeer from Rosmerta.

“Good thing I’m gonna need the pity drink, then, seeing how I don’t have any money,” Laura had joked.

All Carmilla had done was scoff and tell her that it would not matter either way.

Laura was fairly certain it would.

“Hollis, Laura!” Twycross’ squeaky voice chirped over the hum of anxious energy.

“Er, here!” she cried. Vaguely, she heard LaFontaine croak out a ‘good luck’ as she departed, but she was too caught up in the sudden swirling of her gut to pay much attention to anything, even the little explanation speech Twycross gave her as she was shown into the testing space.

They were on the edge of the village, not far from the Shrieking Shack, and there was a series of hoops set up along the lane. It was quiet here, away from the Hog’s Head, and the students who had gone before her were nowhere to be seen.

“Did you get that, Miss Hollis?” asked Twycross.

Laura jumped. “Oh! Um, no, sorry.”

His smile was kind. “No worries, just try to relax and remember your training! All you need to do is travel through each hoop in order. At the end, if you have brought your whole self along, you will be able to Apparate at your leisure!”

She took in the exam field. There were three hoops, each marked with a floating, smoky number. A panel of judges awaited behind the third.

Numbly, she nodded.

“We are on a schedule, of course!” Twycross reminded her, with a peppiness that was nearly Perry-like.

She was probably holding up the line, which did not help the surge of panic rising hotly from her chest into her throat.

Destination, Determination, Deliberation.

If only this were like producing a Patronus. She had plenty of recent memories she could have pulled from—there had been no further encounters with unsavory Slytherins, in recent days, and the night before there had been a rather lovely make-out session in the Room of Requirement. Laura was still shivering with the memory of fingers tracing across bared skin, stopping just short of final boundary lines.
This was not the time for such thoughts, though.

Gripping her wand with white knuckles, Laura turned in place. She heard the echoes of the *pop* that had accompanied her disappearance and her return, and caught herself on wobbly knees, just inside the edge of a hoop. Neck craning, she caught sight of Twycross standing beside the starting point. She was in the first hoop, even if it was barely.

The second hoop was further away, but clearly visible. It was in a lone patch of grass, surrounded by spring-softened mud.

Laura turned again, and found herself once more within the bounds of the hoop. She let her head catch up with her, the spinning falling away into clarity, and did not give herself long enough to check for splinches. It was almost over, and then she could get back to Carmilla and they could compete to see who could drink their Butterbeer faster…

She popped into the third hoop.

It took her a moment to register that the applause—short and polite—had come from the judges, and not just the ever-pleasant Twycross. Laura did not move from her spot, dead center in the final hoop, as one of the witches came over to give her a brief, clinical once-over.

“Very nice,” she said in a throaty, age-worn voice. “Good group this year, then, Wilkie. It was Hollis, yes?” she added, turning her piercing, golden gaze on Laura.

“Uh, yes,” she stammered.

“Very well, then, you may go.”

She must not be properly understanding. Not leaving the hoop, she turned to look back at her route. There was no trace of lost fabric or missing shoelaces, and, when she reached up to pat her hair, it was all still present and as un-styled as it had been when she rushed a brush through it that morning.

“I—what?”

“There is no need to look so surprised, Miss Hollis,” Twycross chortled. He ushered her out of the hoop with a flurry of his hands. “Now pop off like the others, eh?”

Laura blinked at him.

She had *passed*.

She had passed, and Carmilla was waiting in the Three Broomsticks, and Twycross’ words suddenly made sense. A grin spreading wide on her face, Laura turned one final time.

The squeezing, claustrophobic sensation did not seem nearly so bad, all of a sudden. She snapped abruptly into the loud rush of bodies around the bar inside the Three Broomsticks, a wizard she had nearly landed upon letting out a small shriek. Madam Rosmerta rolled her eyes, never wavering as she twirled a rag about the inside of a clean glass.

“It is not polite to apparate *inside* an establishment!” an elderly witch snapped, grabbing her drinks and swishing away with a *harrumph*.

“Sorry,” Laura offered to the wizard, who did not appear to speak English and darted off with spindly hands clutching his hat.
“You’re like the fifth one in the hour; I’m surprised everyone hasn’t gotten used to it, by now,” said a voice to her left.

Laura spun, finding Remus Lupin settled on a bar stool with a half-empty mug of Butterbeer in front of him and his friends clustered behind.

“Cheers, Hollis,” Sirius offered, sliding his own mug in her direction with a wink.

“Watch it, Black. That’s my job.”

Laura had not even gotten the chance to scan the dingier corners of the bar for her girlfriend. Carmilla leaned on the stool beside her, eyes already alight with pride, and rapped her knuckles to call Rosmerta.

Pettigrew positively pouted—he had been trying to order for heaven only knew how long—when Rosmerta resumed flirting with a pretty blonde at the far end of the bar immediately after filling Carmilla’s request for two bottles of Butterbeer.

“C’mon,” she said, tugging Laura down from her perch with an insistent grip about her wrist.

“I was going to wait for LaF and Perry, you know,” Laura told her, even as she willingly fell in by her side out on the main paths of Hogsmeade. Carmilla’s grip had slid down to her palm, threading their fingers, and Laura gave their joined arms a pleased little swing. “I passed,” she added with undisguised delight, when Carmilla merely shrugged to the first statement.

“I knew you would.”

Laura did not bother disguising her scoff. “You couldn’t have. The odds were very much against it, I assure you.”

Carmilla’s hand tightened around her own, her head shaking as she pulled them to halt just beside the secondhand book shop. She seemed to contemplate the sign for a moment, and then led Laura inside and among the cluttered shelves and the solitude.

The only person in the shop was the elderly owner, and she offered a friendly little trill of welcome and immediately began suggesting new arrivals to Carmilla, with the familiarity of many past visits.

Laura could not help but grin as the witch listed out a number of poetry volumes, most of them in French, and the books in question fluttered out to join them like hovering birds.

“I can find it myself,” Carmilla promised her. Still, she plucked the tiniest of the books from midair and stroked a finger down the spine. “But I’ll think about this one.”

The witch left them be, returning to a back storage room. Laura could hear boxes rearranging themselves and the low stutter of a wireless tuning to Celestina Warbeck.

She turned to Carmilla.

“Going to read me poetry?”

She was mostly teasing—though Carmilla had been known to read softly to her, when the evenings ran long and there was a book handy between them (which was common, as Carmilla seemed to have an infinite supply of them)—but Carmilla actually tipped her head in thought before replying.

“Perhaps later.”
“And what do you have planned for now?”

Laura surveyed the shop, taking a slow draft from her hardly-touched bottle of Butterbeer. She was hardly opposed to shopping with Carmilla, even if the majority of such trips lacked the actual purchasing component, but this was not what she had expected from the evening.

As if in answer, Carmilla pulled her through the stacks, hand tracing lines into the dust of the shelves as she scanned titles, clearly looking for something specific. Laura let her search without interruption. It was not until they had rounded a corner and found themselves in the very back of the tiny shop that she stopped short and hopped up on her toes, extracting a thin book from the top shelf.

She paid for it without letting Laura see the cover, and the little poetry book as well—though Laura noted that the witch charged her far less than the asking price on the both of them—and then they were back on the sun-warmed street. Carmilla took them down towards the Hog’s Head, and then past and up the winding path to the fence surrounding the Shrieking Shack, where she stopped at last, pressed her back against the worn wood, and presented the book to Laura like a gift.

Laura recognized it at once. She was far more familiar with muggle fairytales, but she had become acquainted with those of the wizarding world through LaF and Perry, and had spent any number of days perusing their childhood bookshelves while staying with them that summer. This one, in particular, she remembered Carmilla reciting from memory one day by the water during their holiday.

_The Paper Swan_ was hardly as popular as the tales by Beedle the Bard, but it existed in the wizarding world in a way it could not have in that of muggles, being that it was a romance between two women. Perry had confessed that it had been her favorite before she began reading the more adult collections of Sera Sender—a recommendation Laura had happily followed.

The premise of the fairytale was simple enough: the lonely princess was kept within the confines of her castle, expected to marry a prince and eventually rule, but longing for a life of adventure and true love. She wrote a note wishing for such things, and folded it into a swan, releasing it from her window to the moat below. The following night, she found it had returned, the paper as alive as an actual bird, and it unveiled a letter in response. The exchange continued in such a way, until the princess wished to be with her mysterious correspondent. She was told it was not possible, for she would not like what she saw, but she persisted, until the responses simply stopped coming and her collection of swans fell still in her chamber.

A handsome prince came to call at the castle, presented as the perfect suitor. He was wealthy and set to lead his own kingdom, and he brought with him gifts of wine and jewels, and a captured Halfling creature—a girl with webbed toes and sharp features and white feathered wings for arms. He claimed the creature to have been terrorizing a nearby village, and to be a hero for stopping her.

There were some earlier, grimmer versions where the Halfling was killed, for the princess chose her stifled life of safety—and faced a life of misery as consequence—but, in the version Carmilla was now pressing into her hands, she lived, and they ran away together.

“I found a copy in the library last week,” Carmilla said by way of explanation, when Laura raised her curious eyes from the pages. “I hadn’t actually read it in years.”

“You… bought it for me?” Laura clarified. She was still feeling rather lost.

Carmilla nodded, a pale blush rising as she scrunched her nose in trademark embarrassment. “There’s actually something else, as well. I was trying to figure out a way to protect it—to keep anyone from guessing our plans—and this gave me an idea.” She tapped the book with her index finger, her black nail polish smooth with evidence of a fresh coat.
As Laura watched, openly curious, Carmilla slipped a hand into her bag and extracted something with the utmost care. When she held her palm out to Laura, the blush across her cheeks only deepened. There were two perfectly folded paper swans, made out of thick, yellowed paper with decorative purple trim.

They looked regal, and they moved with a grace that should not have been possible from their construction. When Carmilla tapped at them with her wand, a charm ghosting across her lips, they unfurled obediently to reveal two identical rectangles.

Tickets, if Laura were being more specific.

Carmilla answered the question before she could ask: “I asked Dumbledore for some help, and he came through. These… are a way out of England.”

Printed in shimmering gold was the destination. New York, New York, USA. There was no port of departure, no dates, no information at all except a very official looking seal.

“You… want to run away?”

Carmilla bristled ever so slightly. “I want to get you and your dad to safety,” she said.

Laura glanced again at the tickets, her brow furrowing. “Me and my dad…”

“Yes. This way, if anything happens, you can get out. It’s guaranteed passage, any way you want to go. You can get past any muggle authority with just a wave of these papers, and you’ll present them to the consulate in New York to work out your residency status in America as refugees.”

“Carm… how are you getting there?”

The way Carmilla’s gaze dropped answered the real question that was buzzing in Laura’s mind. There was so much to take in about what she was saying, but the rest seemed miniscule in comparison.

“My way is… complicated. Dumbledore says it will take him more time.”

There was a sinking, sucking sensation in Laura’s gut. “And what? I’m supposed to take this and run, and leave you behind? Alone?”

“I’ll catch up. And besides, this isn’t even immediate, Laura.” She was shaking her head, a familiar panic beginning to churn behind the dark of her irises. “I thought… after we leave Hogwarts… this would be a safe path to take. A way we could be together, without the war, without you having to worry all the time…”

“I’d still worry, Carm. All of our friends will be here!”

“Your dad would be safe. You could be with him; you could be sure of that.”

Laura fell silent. It was the best point Carmilla had made thus far. Of everyone, she worried the most for her father. LaF, Perry, all of their friends at Hogwarts… they had magic on their side. All of them were at least equipped to protect themselves, and were rather good at it, too. Her dad was a capable muggle, but a muggle, nonetheless. In the family, there was no denying that she was the one with the self-defense training, and that, if anything happened, especially if he were faced with the magical world, he would be relying upon her.

“I’m not going without you,” she said firmly, even as she allowed the tickets—which had become
swans once more—to hop neatly into her palm.

“But you will go? If I can, too?”

There was still the lingering thought of LaF and Perry, of her team, of every friend she had known before or still attended class with now.

“I’ll think about it.”

“And… if I’m not in the equation?”

Laura’s stomach dropped to somewhere that was surely outside of her body. The ground felt less than solid, and she wanted, more than anything, to insist it would not happen, that she would not allow it to happen, but instead she found a question slipping free on a sudden, broken whisper.

“Do you think something is going to happen to you?”

Carmilla’s jaw tightened. She did not look Laura in the eye as she murmured, “It’s just a precaution.”

For once, Laura’s desire for answers lost to her fear.

She did not push further.

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In the two weeks leading up to the final Quidditch match of the year, Carmilla attended nearly all of Laura’s practices. With the Ravenclaw season having long closed out, dashing all hopes of their victory with it, no one could complain that she was there for anything other than support—something she doled out with snide criticism she insisted was ‘constructive.’

“You’re too nice to your players,” she insisted, when they were alone in one of the late evenings that Laura found to spare. Studying had taken over much of her life, these days, even if Carmilla was effortlessly acing all of her lessons. It was rare that they found time to just be with one another, without a pile of textbooks setting both a physical and metaphorical wall between them.

“I have to encouraging, otherwise they won’t even want to do well!” Laura argued.

“Was Lawrence ‘encouraging’?”

Laura rolled her eyes. “Danny was… motivating in her own ways.”

“That was a ‘no’,” Carmilla scoffed.

For a moment, Laura watched the slow movement of a wispy cloud, so thin that it barely smudged the constellations beyond its veil. A slow, sly grin worked its way across her face before she bumped Carmilla’s shoulder. “You know, I don’t remember asking for backseat coaching… but, I think it’s sweet just how badly you want to see me win.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Carmilla insisted, her eyes glinting with a smile that just barely teased the corner of her lips. “I just don’t want to see Slytherin take the cup.”

Still, the morning of the match, Carmilla was the only non-team-member that joined them for their pre-breakfast drills, and she lingered by the changing rooms far longer than any other fan would have been allowed. The stands had begun to fill, and nearly the whole of the team was gearing up, when Laura had to send her to her seat.
“Don’t scare the Ravenclaws with all your cheering for the wrong team, now,” Laura hummed against her lips, lingering in the shadows of the doorway and knowing she was pushing on time.

This time, she offered no counter, no teasing. “You deserve this, Laura,” she promised, on the edges of a final kiss, and then she whisked away.

Laura was still caught in the ear-buzzing, world-softening aftereffect of Carmilla’s lips on her own when LaFontaine nudged her arm and brought her crashing back to reality.

“Pretty sure you’ll get an even better kiss after we win, Cap,” they teased. “But for that you’ll have to, y’know, actually attend the match.”

“Er, right,” she stammered, stumbling into the cool of the changing room with their stifled laughter following behind.

The team was in good spirits, chattering amongst themselves and laughing while they made final adjustments to their boots and gloves, a few of them grooming broom twigs or shining handles, and Laura could not help but take one more lingering moment on the outskirts of reality, watching the brightness—the hope—on all of their faces before she hurried into her own uniform. Even Davie seemed more like his old self, despite Melanie’s constant glances in his direction, and Laura found herself lacking the usual jitters that accompanied her pre-game pep talk.

“Alright, team! This is it: our last match of the season. And, for some of you, your last game at Hogwarts.” There was a pause as she locked eyes purposefully with Alec and Melanie, the only seventh years on the team, and she appreciated the almost hungry desperation that lingered in both of their expressions. Like her, they had never taken home the trophy. “We need ninety points. And I know that doesn’t sound like much, but it won’t matter if Hufflepuff gets the Snitch before we do.

“This is going to take a full team effort. Rosie, the most important thing is getting that Snitch. The moment you catch it, we win. Beaters, we’re working on the prong strategy. Just like in practice. Chasers… just score nine goals. As quickly as possible.”

She surveyed her team, each member listening with rapt attention and barely contained energy.

“I hope you guys are ready. Because we’re going to win this.”

The room exploded with their cheers of agreement.

Potter was practically skipping, as they crossed the pitch to meet Madam Hooch at the center of the field. The Hufflepuffs arrived a moment before them, looking deathly solemn, and Laura could not help but relate more to them than she did to the eager, bouncing teammates at her back.

The moment she was in the air, she was plagued with the reminder that everything rode on how well her players performed tonight. How well she managed to Keep was useless, when the yearly point total mattered more than the team they were facing. The best she could do was return the Quaffle as quickly as possible, keeping it in her Chasers hands and trusting them to do their jobs.

And she did trust them.

James, Devon, and Alec were a well-oiled machine. They had gone from fumbling in practice, from running straight into Bludgers because they could not get their formations down, to running plays even she could not defend against.

Within the first ten minutes of the game, they racked up thirty points, and they were going for a fourth when Rosie saw the Snitch.
It all happened very quickly; one moment Laura was watching a rather slow play, with players calling to one another and a relatively high awareness of the Bludgers (one of them zigzagged past her on a bad shot from Warner, the other was heading straight up into the sky on a deflection from Carter), and the next there was a streak of crimson cutting through the center of it all.

Potter dropped the Quaffle, which went immediately into the hands of one of the Hufflepuff Chasers; the Bludger that had shot past Laura zoomed back into action and nearly took out Pierce; and the Hufflepuff Seeker dodged into the chaos, ramming into Rosie’s shoulder right as her hand reached forward.

It was just enough. Her broom spun, throwing her upside-down and then right-side-up again, and in those precious seconds the golden ball had whisked itself off to freedom. Laura could see the Hufflepuff Seeker cursing as he dodged about in search of it, but Rosie merely went back to her post, taking a wide arc of the field with her head cocked to the side in that odd way that Seekers did. Like they could see things the rest of the players could not.

The groans from the audience rolled easily into cheers, as Gryffindor reclaimed the Quaffle and scored once more, and Laura allowed herself one sweeping glance of the stands while she waited for the Hufflepuffs to work out their scoring plan and make it to her end of the field.

For once, she could not find Carmilla amongst the Ravenclaws. Even after she located the team, all clustered together in blue, there was no sign of her girlfriend.

At least in the Gryffindor section, Perry was easy to find. She had made it out to the game with very little convincing, today, and she sat in the very front row with a little crown of gold flowers on her head and a flag clutched in one hand. Laura would have been more touched if she thought the appearance was for her benefit, rather than LaFontaine’s, but it did not matter either way, because Laura’s attention was rapidly pulled to the girl sitting at Perry’s side.

Laura’s jaw dropped.

Carmilla was wearing what appeared to be Laura’s own scarf—despite the warmth of the day—and she was holding a flag that put Perry’s to shame. There was a giant, charmed lion on the thing, which seemed to be roaring.

It took the sudden shouts from the crowd—and Carmilla raising a hand to hurriedly point—for Laura to remember the active play. She dodged to block the Quaffle, sent it hurriedly into Devon’s arms, and then proceeded to carefully avoid looking at the stands. No matter how light her heart felt, no matter how much the thoughts of *I didn’t think I could love her more* were leaping to mind, this was not the time to lose focus.

But, god, somehow she did love Carmilla more.

They scored twice more, during the first hour of the game, with Hufflepuff only making it past her once, and their seventh goal came courtesy of a foul for inappropriate language from one of the Hufflepuff Chasers.

*Two to go,* Laura thought helplessly, her fingers drumming along the broom handle as she tried to keep her eyes on the Seekers, the Bludgers, and the Quaffle, all at the same time.

They were moments away from an eighth score—Potter swerving expertly towards the left hoop, though Laura knew he would really aim it in the top corner of the right—when Madam Hooch’s whistle blew for the first timeout of the game. Even the stands erupted into complaint, mirroring Laura’s own under-her-breath mutterings, as the Hufflepuffs gathered on the pitch.
Laura dropped to the base of her hoops, landing heavily in the mud and waiting for the team to join her. Rosie was last, having been high above the pitch and about as far away as possible, and she began to babble immediately.

“I know I almost had it earlier, and I’m sorry, but it really takes advantage, y’know, when you lose the eye contact with it, and I—”

Laura seized her shoulder, squeezing it until the younger girl had fallen into bashful silence.

“It was a good play,” she promised. “Don’t get in your own head.”

Rosie nodded dutifully, and Laura turned her attention to the rest of the team.

“Alright, so they’re trying to throw us off by calling this timeout. I’m not sure what they’re hoping to achieve, but if they want a longer, slower death, then so be it. We’re not going to let that get in the way. That’s some good work out there with the Bludgers, you two; keep it up. Reeves, you’re flying a little too close on the beta formation, so spread out a bit for this next pass. I think if we—”

“Captain.”

She blinked, not used to being cut off mid-speech, especially when things were going well, for a change.

Rosie was staring across the pitch with a deep-set frown, her pale gaze darting from the huddle of canary-clad players to a spot somewhere over their heads. As Laura followed her gaze, she saw that several of said players were also looking up, seemingly at the same spot as Rosie.

“Oh fuck,” she breathed.

Hooch was gesturing for them to prepare for flight, and Laura’s heart was somewhere in her throat, her thoughts rushing ahead, picturing how this scenario was going to play out.

_Two goals._

“Get there if you can,” she ordered Rosie, before spinning to the others. “We have possession. Score immediately, and then get possession back. We don’t have time to get the Bludgers, so, Carter, Pierce, go with Rosie. Be human Bludgers.”

Hooch was stalking towards them, her whistle blowing in short, warning bursts, and Rosie’s gaze had not once left the invisible spec on the other side of the pitch. Her eyes darted to follow its movements, but the thing seemed determined to stay on optimal Hufflepuff ground.

Laura swallowed, and kicked off.

No one seemed to be breathing, in the whole of the stadium. Across the crowd, enough people had picked up on what was happening to share with their neighbors, and it was safe to say Laura had never seen a more tense hand-off. Hooch passed the ball to the last player in possession—Potter—and he clutched it between his fingers with pale determination as the timer on the scoreboard wore down.

The moment he heaved it, Laura lost track of what was happening. The only thing she knew for certain was that he had scored, because a bell rang out and the scoreboard kicked up (80 – 10; they were tied for the Cup with Slytherin). The rest was chaos, as a whirl of non-Seekers all made bids for the Snitch at once.
At least one of the Hufflepuffs must have been instructed to focus on the Quaffle, and thereby keep Gryffindor from their victory, because several seconds into the fray, with nothing on her mind except a desperate plea for Rosie to emerge with her fist clutched around the tiny, winged ball, she spotted a yellow blur breaking towards her.

He was alone, and she caught his shot with ease, but there was no one to throw the Quaffle back to. Potter was being harassed by a Bludger, and the other two were caught up in the insanity that was chasing the Snitch. By some miracle, Hooch had not yet called a foul—perhaps because she, herself, could not distinguish what was happening.

It was a long way across the pitch, and Laura could not say she had ever traveled more than a few meters outside of the Keeper’s zone during a match. Doing so was irresponsible, on a normal day: it left the goalposts open and vulnerable, and it also put her in the crosshairs of every Beater on the pitch, because there was no foul for hitting an inactive Keeper who willingly left their safety net.

As of right now, though, there were no Beaters. In fact, there was only one frightened Hufflepuff Chaser between Laura and the opposite goalposts.

She didn’t pause to think.

Vaguely, she could hear JP Armitage shouting something into his magical microphone, though she could not make out whatever the words were. She was picturing another day, the ground laden with snow and a bite of frost in the air.

She vaulted the Quaffle, and it soared past Carmilla’s left leg, just clearing the edge of the hoop. Carmilla recalced it with a flick of her wand, chin jutting out defiantly.

“I’m not a Keeper,” she griped.

“And what, you think I’m a Chaser?”

There was a play she had read about, a few months prior, in *Quidditch Weekly*. It was called the ‘Grundle Switchback,’ after Alicia Grundle—one of Laura’s all-time favorite Harpies players—and it involved the Keeper swapping places with a particularly versatile Chaser. The idea was that, one: it confused the opposing team, and two: it allowed for quick returns and removed the risk of an interception.

Laura was not sure this was its intended purpose, but the point was that she knew how this fit into the rulebook.

More importantly: there was nothing against a Keeper scoring.

Serena Stoker, hovering uncertainly in the center hoop, went wide-eyed just a second too late. The Quaffle soared from Laura’s outstretched hand, cutting clearly through the left hoop without obstruction, and the roar of the crowd nearly made her ears pop.

Somewhere on the far side of the pitch, Hufflepuff had just claimed the Snitch.

For the drawn out length of the following ten seconds, Laura tried to comprehend the scoreboard, as magical lettering rolled out HUFFLEPUFF WINS over a final tally of 90 – 160, and then she was being hit full force by the weight of every Gryffindor player. LaFontaine and the other back-ups were there, and everyone was screaming at once such that Laura could not make out a single word, nor dare get one in, herself…

But then the board shifted into full clarity, reading out GRYFFINDOR TAKES THE CUP just as
those same words echoed in Dumbledore’s voice throughout the pitch. Their final point total of 590 drew itself in gold as a lion’s roar drowned out everything else.

Still, it seemed surreal, and not quite possible. When they collapsed onto the grass, arms wrapped around one another in a tangle and broomsticks in uncomfortable places, Laura kept expecting someone to take it back, to say there had been a mistake and they were going to have to share the glory with Slytherin after all…

Except Dumbledore was striding towards them, the Cup glinting silver in his hands, and he was smiling with a familiar warmth. When he was close enough that the huddle of players had been forced to clear a space for him, Laura could see a twinkle behind his half-moon glasses.

“Well done, Miss Hollis,” he said softly, before he pressed the trophy into her grasp.

Laura gaped at him, something that incited the faintest of chuckles, and he leaned forward almost conspiratorially.

“If I am not mistaken, I believe that this is the moment when you celebrate.” He tipped his head towards James Potter, “If you would?”

Potter beamed, and then threw his fist in the air and shouted, “GRYFFINDOR!”

“GRYFFINDOR!” echoed the stands, and Laura barely had a moment to truly feel the weight of the Cup, to fully recognize the reality, before she was swarmed by her classmates. Dozens of hands reached to touch the cup, to clap her on the shoulder or fight for an eager handshake.

Someone was taking loud photos with an ancient muggle camera, the flash sending up little puffs of smoke, and as one particular cloud cleared away she saw Perry bounding into LaFontaine’s arms. Which could only mean…

Soft arms circled around her waist, tugging her back flush against a familiar chest, and a quiet voice hummed, “I knew you would do it.”

Laura laced their fingers, her smile almost painful as she craned her neck to see her girlfriend better. She barely noticed as Sirius Black slipped the Cup out of her grasp and hoisted it over his head for a fresh round of cheers, because Carmilla’s lips were on hers before she could even meet her eyes, and the rest of the world—celebrations and all—ceased to exist.

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There was no question, when it came to Carmilla attending the party in Gryffindor Tower that evening. In fact, Laura barely parted from Carmilla’s side in the aftermath of her victory. They rode the wave of crimson back to the castle, with Laura beaming under cheers of her name and Carmilla’s hand warming the soft spot at the small of her back all the while, and meals were skipped in favor of the stolen feast that took over the common room.

By the time evening actually fell, the commotion showed no signs of lowering. Perry had slipped away for the safety of the library, after a brief, albeit unnecessary, apology, and many of the younger students had gone off to bed at the insistence of other Prefects. When McGonagall made an appearance, looking rather flushed with her own celebrations, but still stern despite it all, the wireless was switched off and the party dissolved into a quieter collection of drinking games and snogging sessions.

“Hey,” Laura said, running the backs of her fingers down the bared line of Carmilla’s arm. She nodded at the discreet flask in the other girl’s arm, “How much have you had?”
“I’m full,” Carmilla hummed quietly. They were alone, at last, standing quite close to the porthole and without any further demands for Laura’s autograph. Her eyes glinted with teasing as she nodded at Laura’s Firewhisky. “But I could do with some of that.”

Laura laughed and handed over the glass, watching as Carmilla tossed it back.

With one final glance over her shoulder at the dwindling excitement (several fifth years were asleep in the chairs around the fire, and the table that had once been overflowing with food and drink had been left a mess of sticky crumbs and empty plates), Laura drifted her fingers down to hook into Carmilla’s own, and pulled her up and through the porthole.

“Sneaking around after dark with the school’s Quidditch hero… to what do I owe such an honor?” Carmilla teased.

Their footsteps echoed soft on the stones. Every window they passed showed an impossibly dark sky, the moon hidden away, and Laura was undoubtedly in the lead, for Carmilla’s curiosity was painted plain on her features with each turn.

“I don’t know if it’s an honor… I do this quite a lot, you know.”

“Ah, true, I have heard that. Bring along anyone I might have heard of?”

Laura’s lips twisted as she worked to contain her smug grin. “Just the prettiest girl in school. You probably know her.”

Carmilla laughed, the sound short and yet somehow melodic, and she let herself drift in close at Laura’s side, a hand tucking aside her hair as they made their way down a flight of stairs. Laura could not hide her shiver when Carmilla slipped close to her ear, lips practically brushing the sensitive skin.

“Smooth, cupcake.”

They had reached their destination, and Carmilla seemed to realize it only seconds before Laura loosed the twine of their fingers, taking up the required pacing to reveal the door to the Room of Requirement.

“What are we doing here?” she asked quietly, once Laura had shut the door behind them.

The glow of the city outside the false window was far brighter than that of reality, illuminating the familiar apartment, and Laura knew that Carmilla’s question was not unreasonable. They had not been back here since Carmilla had presented the tickets, and the avoidance was blatant enough for both to recognize.

“I’m still not going without you,” Laura said, raising a finger warningly. “And I’m still going to worry about everyone we leave behind—you can’t do anything about that. But, well… if I don’t have to worry about you? If we can be together, and build the sort of life we’ve talked about?” She bit her lip as she let her head bob in one decisive movement. “Then… that’s what I want.”

“New York? With me?” Carmilla echoed. There was no denying the disbelief that tremored in her voice. Her gaze strayed, bouncing between Laura and the space around them. Laura had not asked the room for much, but it had complied beyond her dreams. There were an alarming number of candles.

“Only with you,” Laura agreed. “And my dad, obviously. Which, by the way, I can’t believe you put so much thought into this. And I’m still not sure how he’s going to feel about the whole idea, or
when to spring it on him, since he doesn’t exactly know that there’s a full-fledged secret war going on…”

“He’ll go if you do,” Carmilla promised. She was smiling, now, eyes shimmering with dozens of flickering reflections. “And… I’ll ask Dumbledore for an update, before we leave for holiday.”

“We’ve got our whole seventh year,” added Laura. “That… that’s plenty of time, right? Especially for Dumbledore.”

Carmilla nodded, eager and bright and with a hopeful conviction that suggested she believed it to be true. She was beautiful, and before either of them could ramble on—especially herself—Laura was surging forward to kiss her, whisking their joint smiles away in favor of sinking into the sensation.

She roved her fingers up and into the curving arches of Carmilla’s shoulder blades, the territory familiar and yet as wonderful as ever, and parted her lips in a pleased hum when Carmilla’s fingers traced through her hair, nails gently scratching the back of her scalp.

They dropped onto the couch, Laura falling first and Carmilla hurrying after, and shirts were quickly discarded in a rush to catch up with where they had last left off. This was far more comfortable than their most recent venue, after all, a throw pillow bent into the curve of Laura’s back rather than the hard benches of the Quidditch pitch, and Laura was not one to waste time when it was afforded to her.

Carmilla ran her tongue along the outline of Laura’s teeth, slipping deeper to taste her at the same time as her hands wandered down to their favorite spot along her spine, and this time Laura moaned, their lips parting just briefly enough that she was urged into pressing her own down another path.

Leaving goosebumps in her wake, she followed the sharp curve of Carmilla’s jaw up to her earlobe —where she paused and tested the flesh with her teeth, just to feel the victory of making Carmilla actually whimper—and then continued down her neck and sought out the spot on her collarbone that had made last time so rewarding.

“Fuck,” Carmilla hissed, and a second later she was tugging Laura back up by the nape of her neck to kiss her thoroughly.

One of Laura’s hands, caught between as their chests came flush, traced along the line of Carmilla’s bra, and that was all it took for the both of them to go still, echoing off of one another as their foreheads pressed together and their gazes locked.

“Carm…”

They had teased at this line for months. Had drifted along its borders, toeing the water and drawing the map as they went. When Carmilla drank beforehand, her fangs rarely made an appearance, and, when they did, there were only soft reassurances before they fell into reading, or napping, or watching the stars.

“You’re sure?” Carmilla breathed, the words hot against Laura’s skin as Carmilla chased them with a searing kiss.

Laura was well-acquainted with the heat that was curling low in her gut, with the tingling on her lips, with the trembling in her fingers. She wanted to kiss Carmilla senseless, touch nothing but her, feel nothing but her.

The question was Carmilla’s version of a yes—though she planned to hear the actual word quite shortly—and Laura offered her own in the form of an outstretched hand, pressing herself up onto
shaky legs. Never breaking their gazes, Laura stepped backwards, begging against every clumsy
instinct her body possessed, until she was sinking into the embrace of the untouched bed, the white
of the sheets catching every shadow, every warming glow of the candles.

With a nervous bite of her lip, a wonderful little flush of excitement across her cheeks, Carmilla
followed.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for sticking with me. Please don't be alarmed if there's not an update next
month; I'm really trying to get ahead so I can post the rest on a much more rapid
schedule. There are things coming that shouldn't be left on a thirty-day-cliffhanger, and I
really want to do all of you lovely people justice for coming along on this journey.
Sometimes There's No Good Way

Chapter Summary

The school year is finally coming to a close, and surely this means everything is finally going to go Carmilla's way.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for bearing with me over the extended wait! And THANK YOU for all your kind words in the meantime. I love each and every comment, and just knowing you guys are out there reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Spring of 1976 (Sixth Year)

Carmilla was certain she had not fallen asleep like this—she remembered tugging Laura close, the bare of her girlfriend’s back pressed perfectly against her chest, nose burrowing into soft, golden hair—but, as she faded out of a dreamless sleep and into reality, she found that it was her own back pressed into Laura, and Laura’s arms encased about her midsection.

The blankets were heavy, warm in a way that was lovely, though not quite as delicious as the heat leaching out of the body behind her, and she could not have regretted the rearrangement if she had tried.

Something about the way she had shifted into wakefulness must have brought Laura along as well, or else she had been awake already and enjoying this as much as Carmilla was, because there was a tiny, contented sigh, followed by a slow kiss into the crook of her shoulder.

“G’morning,” Laura mumbled.

She let her arm line up with Laura’s, tracing her fingers. “Mm. It is.”

Laura shimmied closer, her grip tightening as their legs intertwined.

“Wow,” she said, her voice clearer and tilting in a way that meant she was smiling, even if Carmilla could not see it, “It must be, if the queen of grumpy mornings is saying so…”

With one more kiss to that spot on her shoulder—and Carmilla swore it melted straight through the flesh and down to her bones—she unlatched her arms and climbed from the bed, tugging on a bathrobe as she went.

Carmilla rolled to lay spread-eagle, watching her progress into the tiny kitchen through sleep-hooded eyes, and grumbled out, “Now you’ve ruined it.”

Laura laughed, but did not turn from her mission. She began rummaging through the kitchen, commenting aloud on their breakfast options and expressing her appreciation for the Room’s
thoughtfulness. Apparently there were enough supplies to feed a small army, and they were not going to be venturing down to the Great Hall.

This, at least, Carmilla could get behind.

“Is this what living with you will be like?” she asked casually, once Laura had assembled a mountain of toast and eggs to share between them (and arranged all of it on a tray, because Carmilla had no intention of leaving the sheets.)

“I expect you to cook at least a little, Carm,” Laura teased, shimmying back under the covers at her side and chomping on a piece of toast. “Even if you don’t technically need to eat.”

With those words, a little wrinkle carved its way between her brows, and her knife paused midway through its jam-spreading duties.

“Have you done much research on vampires in America, anyways? Like… will it be as easy to get blood, over there? Are there restrictions and things we should be worried about? I know the States are like… weird about wizarding security and things and they have all these odd customs we’ll have to get used to, but our situation will be a little different than what I’ve read about for immigration, you know? I suppose Dumbledore could help; he’s been there, after all…”

It was hardly surprising that her mind was going to these places—Carmilla had expected this long before Laura actually agreed to the plan, in all honesty.

Instead of answering, she caught one of Laura’s waving hands and stilled it in her lap, running her fingers over the tender lines of her palm. She lifted it just enough to press a kiss to the soft skin.

“How about, instead, we focus on how nice right now is?”

Laura opened her mouth as if to argue, and then snapped it closed, a blush hinting its way over her features. Carmilla had always loved the way it started in her ears, the tips burning crimson before the palest of pinks even glimpsed her cheeks, and she reached up without hesitation to tuck a few strands of hair behind a reddened lobe. Laura bit her lip as she met her eyes, and they both released a breathy laugh at the same moment.

“Last night…” Laura started.

Carmilla kissed her in response, tasting strawberry jam and fluttering her eyes shut. She had meant it to be chaste—a simple agreement to Laura’s implication about the wonders of the night before—but it morphed hurriedly from a mere lyric into a full-blown ballad.

It was Laura who pulled away first, her breath unsteady and her lips still coming back for several more pecks.

“I love you so much,” Carmilla hummed.

Laura was already glowing with the morning, warm gold to Carmilla’s midnight silver, but she somehow burst with full on sunlight at the words, her smile spreading wide and her next kiss sloppy as a result.

Her grip was firm on Carmilla’s arms, holding them both steady. “I love you more,” she insisted.

“Impossible.”

“Hey, now, I won the Quidditch Cup yesterday. Nothing is impossible, anymore.”
“While that might be true, cutie…” she reached up to tap Laura’s nose, smirking, “You won’t win this one.”

Laura’s pout was as adorable as ever.

Carmilla nudged at their rapidly cooling breakfast. “C’mon. I suppose, if you’re going to keep up with that absurdly detailed study schedule Susie Homemaker put together… we’ll need to finish this.”

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Studying had never been much of a concern for Carmilla. Sixth year exams, like the O.W.L.s before them, were only on her radar in how they affected Laura, and, normally, she would not have treated the time any differently than the rest of the schoolyear. Her classes, her textbooks, her coursework… they were all an assembly of knowledge that was meant to be shared in exams. She would know the material regardless of how she was expected to present it for the approval of her professors.

She had accepted, a long time ago, that this was not the case when it came to her classmates, and especially not when it came to Laura.

Between every exam there was more to review, and somehow the pieces of the puzzle that Laura was missing always seemed to be the most crucial. It did not help that Perry was constantly bugging Carmilla to compare answers, panicking about semantics and definitions and all of the things that Carmilla found most annoying.

“Stop worrying about the wording,” Carmilla sighed one morning, halfway through exam week, catching Laura’s quill between her fingers to still its rapid-fire path across the parchment. “Professor Flitwick doesn’t care if you can word-for-word regurgitate his lessons.”

“I don’t know how else to memorize this,” Laura argued. She shoved a hand through her unkempt hair, a scowl dug firmly into her brow.

“That’s what I keep trying to tell you. Don’t memorize everything. Here, tell me what needs to happen to get wine from water.”

Laura scrunched up her face. “Uhh… well, the first step…”

Carmilla’s head shook. “No, no. Pretend it’s not for the test. Just talk to me.”

The scrunching did not clear, but Laura started hesitantly, “Well, wine is fermented grape juice, so you need to transform the water molecules into the right mixture of ingredients with the back-sourcing charm… and it has to be aged.”

“Right, so now you can go into more detail, which is the part with some actual memorization. You can flesh out your steps with the recipe percentages for whatever type of wine you’re making, and you can add details on the aging process and how long the time-loop needs to be. Then you can finish it off with something like… you know, ‘put it in a bottle and serve chilled with cheese and crackers.’ Flitwick loves stuff like that.”

“You make this sound far easier than it actually is.”

“It’s easier than reciting straight from a textbook.”

Laura sighed in a defeated sort of agreement.
“You’re going to do fine, Laura. But, unfortunately…” she turned her wrist, the sundial shifting automatically with the movement and using the library’s shadows to point out her dwindling time, “I need to leave if I don’t want to miss Ancient Runes.”

Laura grumbled, but pressed a firm kiss to her lips and called a “good luck!” after her as she wove through the tables.

Ancient Runes, as Carmilla had anticipated, was not a particularly challenging exam. It was perhaps trickier than Herbology or Transfiguration had been, but it paled beside Arithmancy. Her version of ‘studying’ had been to flick back through the textbook—a task which had rapidly bored her with its repetitive familiarity—and she found herself doodling on the backside of her exam paper long before her fellow students had reached the halfway mark.

She caught a few glares from across the room, and she was certain that Perry, one row behind her, had begun writing at double-speed as soon as she realized Carmilla was drawing Quaffles instead of runes.

None of this was particularly bothersome, as far as she was concerned, if it weren’t for one particular set of eyes that began boring into her during the final ten minutes in the hour glass.

Rupert Wilkes did not look away when she met his stare, and, though she glared back with as much iciness as she could muster, the edges of a very real fear began to coil in her chest. The only reprieve was that, this time, Laura was not with her.

She had done her best, in recent days, to pretend everything would be fine when the year came to a close. Avery and Rosier, after all, would be leaving Hogwarts, and they were arguably the most dangerous of the burgeoning Death Eaters within the school walls. Once they were gone, she could focus on solidifying her plans, and she and Laura would be outside of the war-zone before any of Voldemort’s minions could truly get their claws into her.

All the way in New York, it would no longer matter what the Death Eaters knew.

When they were released from the classroom, Carmilla tucked herself between a group of chattering Hufflepuffs and a few of her own Ravenclaw classmates, and let them carry her through the corridors and into the Great Hall.

It was not yet time for lunch, and Laura would be traipsing across the grounds to her Care of Magical Creatures exam, now, and so Carmilla did not fight against the destination. Instead, she claimed a spot at the Ravenclaw table, pulled out her newest book of poems, and picked up where she had left off, hunching over the table to scribble a note in the margins whenever inspiration struck her.

Having very little personal money, she had to be particular with what luxuries she chose to purchase, and, for Carmilla, this largely meant funding a small but precious literary collection. Perry had been scandalized to see her inking the pages of Hogwarts: A History one evening, but she was unrepentant. All of her books shared their stories with her thoughts—either etched into their own paper or added in scraps of tucked parchment that stretched their spines. There was one copy of The Vienna Letters—the collective correspondence between two witches in the 1500s—that was fat with the sort of sappy comments Carmilla would rather die than have seen by another set of eyes.

Laura, once, had asked her what she wrote about.

“Ideas, memories, things I want,” she had offered with a shrug. “...You.”

The blush she had been rewarded with was well worth the admittance.
Remus offered a greeting on his way to grab a quick bite to eat—for lunch options had materialized without Carmilla noticing—but he did not stick around to chat. He looked as dead on his feet as could be expected of any mid-O.W.L.s student, and he was not alone in his misery. Potter lacked his usual cocky grin, Black resembled an Inferius, and Pettigrew appeared to be fresh off a bout of tears.

Carmilla was ready to pay them no further mind—she had never been one for butting into Remus’s business, regardless of how he might butt into hers—when there was a blur of brilliant red and she was suddenly confronted with the far-too-close face of Lily Evans. She was aware enough to recognize that nearly every head in the room had turned in their direction, a slow stream of whispers rising to life.

“This isn’t your table,” Carmilla said flatly.

Laura might like Lily, but Lily had never liked Carmilla, and the feeling was mutual.

“You sit at mine all the time,” Lily retorted, but she lacked the usual sniff of superiority (the sort Carmilla disliked in Perry, as well), and she carried on without waiting for a response: “I just wanted to say I was sorry.”

That was interesting enough for Carmilla to tuck back the corner of her page and shut the book entirely.

“Oh?”

Lily sighed. “Yes. I’ve recently found that I put my trust in the wrong person, and I think it’s safe to say that Laura’s judgment is better than mine. So, I apologize for how I might have treated you.”

“And?”

It was clear that she was not finished, hedging on some final declaration. Her gaze kept darting over Carmilla’s shoulder, in a very Slytherin direction.

“And… I wanted to warn you.”

Carmilla shifted her gaze away, surveying the nearby tables with a subtlety that no human—not even one as observant as Lily Evans—could pick up on. She delicately plucked a sausage off the platter in front of her, fork tines barely breaking the skin, and popped it into her mouth.

“Hm. About what, exactly?”

“Severus seems to think that you’re a vampire.”

She would have choked on the sausage, were that possible. Instead, her throat clenched uncomfortably around the bite, her lungs stilling in the lengthy pause while she urged it free.

And then she glared.

“That’s a rather serious accusation,” she snipped.

If Lily were afraid, she did not show it. Her eyes were as clear as ever, her head tilting ever-so-slightly to the side as she regarded Carmilla with the sort of intense gaze that only came from pure curiosity.

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“I think you should reconsider this conversation.”
Lily, apparently, took these words as confirmation, because she nodded. “Maybe, but I think you deserve the warning. He’s not the only one that knows, and I’m not sure what any of them plan to do with the information.” Her expression was grave, her voice low. “Nothing good, I’m sure. And if Laura gets caught in the middle—”

“Stop.” Carmilla lips had curled into a snarl, animalistic in her fury, and, for the first time, Lily shrank back. The moment would have been satisfying, had Carmilla not been wrought with a new tension. “Do you think I’ve not considered all of this? That I am unaware of exactly what is at stake? That I’m not terrified of what might be coming?”

Lily gaped, silent, and Carmilla clenched her jaw as she released the fork from her grasp. The metal had twisted, melted itself into the arched outline of her palm. She’d probably have to take it, destroy it. Hide the evidence.

“I know what they want,” she admitted, her voice quiet. The attention she had drawn was drifting slowly back to private conversations. “I know, okay? And… and I’m doing my best.”

She did not know why she felt the need to make that clear. But, for just a sliver of a moment, Carmilla could not help herself. She was doing her best. She had made every plan, had looked at every angle. There was nothing to do, now, but to wait, to trust in Dumbledore.

“I’m sorry,” Lily murmured. “I just wanted to help.”

Carmilla shrugged. An apology of her own might have been appropriate—she could recognize good intentions, even when she did not appreciate them—but she said nothing more. Lily stood, shifted across the hall, and sat a few spots to the right of Laura’s usual place at the Gryffindor table.

The low quantity of blood that was still working through Carmilla’s system thrummed unsteadily behind her ears.

When she dared to raise her eyes again, breaking from a spot on the cover of her untouched book, she found exactly what she had feared. Several pairs of sharp eyes stared back, Slytherin badges glinting in the candlelight.

The year closed with far more ceremony than Carmilla typically participated in. With their Quidditch victory, Gryffindor had pulled ahead for the House Cup as well, and so the Great Hall was decked out in magnificent crimson and gold for the End-of-Term Feast. Halfway through the meal, Laura had snuck to her side and tugged her by the arm until she came to join the celebrations at the other table, and they overstayed their usual welcome long after the other students had cleared out for a final night in the dormitories.

LaFontaine, apparently, had raided Zonko’s during the last Hogsmeade weekend, and they had a seemingly endless supply of trick crackers, which materialized to great enjoyment as the evening carried on. As these were prone to exploding—leaving the user covered in soot, or, worse, glitter —there was hardly a clean spot on the table. Even the cheap prizes had received a healthy dusting, and Carmilla was now the proud owner of several inedible, gold-coated chocolate frogs.

“You seem happy,” Laura hummed into her ear, after someone had released an array of Firework Balloons and prompted an intervention by Professor McGonagall. The display was still going off, up amongst the hanging candles, and it lit up the starry ceiling in fantastic color.

She glanced around, from Perry (pleasantly buzzed on Firewhisky and charming the napkin rings to
polish themselves), to Potter and his friends (fighting over the final exploding cracker), to LaFontaine (arguing passionately about the expected outcome of the next Quidditch World Cup with a few of Laura’s other teammates), and then tugged Laura in closer against her side. The side of her face was warm, when Carmilla used the back of a finger to slide her hair out of the way before placing a kiss along her cheekbone.

“Well, I am,” she said.

The Slytherin table had emptied hours ago, and every moment from now until their arrival in Busbridge would be overseen by any number of witnesses. It was over; she had made it through the year without any bloodshed, and, more importantly, without any shrapnel finding its way to Laura. All that was left before them was a blissful holiday, which would, if her luck held, involve many more mornings (and nights) like the ones she had grown accustomed to in recent weeks.

Carmilla did not think she would ever tire of waking up with Laura in her arms.

“Happy right now?” Laura emphasized, “Here?”

She gave the table another survey, and then shrugged. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

There was no denying that Laura’s friends—as odd and infuriating as she had once found them—were charming in their own ways. And, despite everything, to some degree they had approved of her relationship with Laura. They treated her like she belonged, even in little moments like this, even when her Ravenclaw blue so clearly indicated that she did not.

Laura’s fingers slipped through the very ends of her hair, drawing along the natural line of the curls, and then she smiled lazily up into a slow kiss.

“I love you,” she hummed.

Carmilla’s chest swirled with the low, familiar heat of a fresh-poured cup of tea, and she could still taste the strawberry of their dessert from Laura’s lips.

“Mm. Love you too, cupcake.” She glanced to Perry, who was now resting a cheek in her palm, mumbling complaints at LaFontaine (who had thoughtfully removed the remainder of the Firewhisky from her possession.) “Do you think Raggedy Ann will notice if I slip into the wrong Tower tonight?”

“Well, she noticed the other night, but she was polite enough not to say anything to your face.”

“But not to yours, I’m betting.”

Laura laughed. “Oh, she wasn’t direct, per se. But she was disappointed.”

“Ah. Is that a ‘no,’ then?” She swirled the dregs of her water with a slow purposefulness, watching the ice clatter about. “I suppose it is greedy—I’ll have you all to myself all holiday.”

Laura’s fingers threaded with hers, her face coming close enough that the other girl’s nose nudged along her cheek, not quite going in for a kiss. “If it’s greedy, then I suppose I’m just as guilty. Besides, Perry wouldn’t notice if the whole of Slytherin crashed our common room, at this point.”

Carmilla tapped her lightly on the nose, earning a satisfying little squeak of surprise. “I like the way you think.”

The evening was wrapping up at a slow but certain pace. Dishes had begun disappearing in a
suggestive manner, the candles dimming just ever so slightly, and the only professors still present were McGonagall and Dumbledore; the latter of whom was perched in his usual seat, staring in their general direction with an unreadable expression. Carmilla found the press of his fingertips a tad too familiar—a tad too tense—and she looked away with a sudden, inexplicable gnawing in her stomach.

The feeling was gone as quickly as it had come, for Laura’s fingers were insistent upon her own, and the next moment they were treading sleepily through the corridors with their friends trailing behind… and Gryffindor Tower felt as familiar as a second home, when she had Laura tucked neatly against her chest, the scent of her hair lulling her into easy dreams.

Everything, for once, was impossibly simple.

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She had always found the final breakfast of the term to be an odd affair. The chatter was excited in a different way than it was at the End-of-Term Feast, for the high of celebration had faded in the dewy air of morning, but there was a lingering sense of endings and beginnings merging together.

Carmilla had always hated this day. It meant she was returning to London, to the unpleasant hollow of the orphanage, and that the counting of days was at its peak—an infinite stretch of sunrises between her and the world she belonged to.

Now, she was to board the Hogwarts Express with expectations instead of hopes, with the knowledge of exactly who would be in her compartment, and who she would see in the days which followed. There would be no sleeping in closets or in hidden rooftop archways, no hiding of her possessions or panicking at the stretch between letters.

Laura did not even try to hide the fact that Carmilla had slept in their dormitory, when they got dressed that morning. Perry pretended she was not there, even when LaFontaine actively conversed with her, and Carmilla did her best to hide the smirk this inspired—a venture at which she failed when McGonagall herself offered parting words in the common room and did not complain at her presence.

In fact, she seemed relieved, and she pulled Carmilla aside to speak with her in private.

“Miss Karnstein—Professor Dumbledore wishes to speak with you before you leave for the station. Please do not dally at breakfast.”

She nodded, seeking Laura’s hand immediately as the flood of Gryffindors clambered one after the other from the porthole.

“You get detention?” LaFontaine joked.

“It was nothing,” said Carmilla, throwing an easy shrug off one shoulder and giving Laura’s hand an extra squeeze. “C’mon, creampuff, if we don’t hurry they might be out of sticky buns before you can get yours.”

“Don’t even tease, Carm.”

Dumbledore was not at breakfast, his space at the professors’ table conspicuously empty. He had been vanishing more and more in recent days—no doubt organizing against Voldemort—but he had always made a point to be present on this final morning. Today was the last day at Hogwarts for seventh years, after all, and the last opportunity to see all students until the following term. Every other professor was present, their table frequented by a flood of students popping up and down for
last conversations or advice, everyone looking very odd in a mixture of uniforms and muggle clothing.

Perry, for instance, was done fully up in her Gryffindor robes, complete with her Prefect badge, and she made at least three trips up the tables to show a section in her notes to Flitwick or Sprout, asking for final thoughts, while LaFontaine was wearing a faded Beatles shirt under a denim vest. They looked an odd pair, when they finally stood to collect their things from the dormitory.

“You should go with them,” Carmilla told Laura, nudging her shoulder. “I’ll meet you in Hogsmeade.”

“What did McGonagall say?” she demanded, the patience she’d clearly been working through over the course of the meal finally breaking.

Carmilla ignored the churning in her gut with another shrug. This one did not flow so easily, and she dug a hand through her hair rather than meet Laura’s curious gaze.

“Dumbledore wants to see me. It’s probably just about… supply arrangements.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’ll be quick.”

Laura pecked her on the lips, bouncing up and sending her hair jumping over her shoulders. It glinted caramel in the glow of morning sun from the ceiling. She beamed at Carmilla, and then turned and dashed off in pursuit of her friends, any concerns hidden well.

Carmilla slung her bag over her shoulder and trod in the opposite direction. The castle was bustling with activity and crowded with trunks and owl cages, but her route was devoid of the action, winding to Dumbledore’s office and well away from any of the dormitories. She found the gargoyle waiting without encountering a single soul along the way, and boarded the staircase as soon as it appeared to the pronouncement of her name.

Familiarity with Dumbledore’s office came with her unique circumstances. Laura had admitted, many months prior, that she had only ever seen the place on that evening of terrible reveals, and Carmilla had recognized that it was probably a truth for most of her classmates—at least, the ones that stayed out of real trouble. She imagined Remus would have still known this corridor and the waiting, twinkling rooms above, even without his condition.

The headmaster was waiting behind his desk, his glasses set upside-down on top of a short stack of books to his side and a furl of papers laid out like blueprints on the cleared mahogany surface. His fingers were spread over the thin, spindly contents, tracing with barely enough pressure to brush a shadow into the parchment.

“Carmilla,” he greeted, and gestured palm-up to the seat across from him. She took it.

“Good morning, Professor.”

He did not make efforts to hide the papers from her, and, even upside-down, she could see that her first instincts had been correct. They were indeed blueprints, laying out what appeared to be a complex floorplan of rooms and passages.

There was something off about the smell of the office, as a whole—where normally she was used to an undercurrent of smoky vapors from the various silver instruments with unknown purposes, mixed with the soft flower of candles and what she was certain was potpourri, she could pick up something
deeper, richer. As though he had just had a guest very recently in this room. There was something familiar in the scent, even as it made her nose scrunch in distaste.

“"I am terribly sorry to be pulling you away," he promised. He took his time picking up his spectacles, smoothing a piece of purple cloth over the lenses before perching them upon his nose. "I am afraid that this could not wait."

"Is it about my… my blood supply?"

His head shook fractionally, and she did not miss that his eyes had failed to connect solidly with her own since her arrival. His glasses taken care of, his focus had turned to his own hands as he pressed them together, lips thin.

The feeling was back, lurking low in her gut.

"I do not wish to ask anything of you, Carmilla." His sigh was papery, old in a way she sometimes forgot he could be. Even with the grey of his beard and the wrinkles on his brow, Dumbledore always seemed impossibly sprite. He continued, softly, "Times, it would seem, have given me little choice."

Carmilla curled her lips inward, tracing moisture back into the cracks, silently urging him to just look at her. "What do you need to ask?"

He tapped at the papers, smoothing away imaginary lines.

"There are rumors—credible, sourced rumors, which I have no choice but to believe—that there is an attack on the way."

"An... attack?"

Dumbledore never spoke of such things with her. She knew he was working, that he had an organization, that he was the one thing that Voldemort feared. It was true that she knew him better than most other students, but that did not change the fact that she was sixteen—that she was a ward and a charity case. Not a confidant.

His nod was solemn. "Voldemort is growing impatient with working in the shadows. He intends to claim power in a way he has yet to dare. This is the layout of Chequers."

"Chequers?"

"The country house for the muggle prime minister."

The pieces clicked into place. "Voldemort is going to kill him?"

"Not personally, no. I do not believe Voldemort would consider most muggles worthy of that particular honor… but, yes, he will be killed, along with anyone else on the estate."

"You're going to stop it, then?"

"I am going to try, yes. And that, most unfortunately, is why I needed to speak with you this morning."

The chair felt stiff underneath her, and she shifted uncertainly, tracing her fingers back and forth over the velvet of the arms and leaving stripes in her wake.

"What would you need me for?"
Finally, icy blue eyes met her own, a depth of sadness in them that she could not have fathomed. A terrible shiver cut down her spine even before the words had left his mouth.

“Lilita Morgan is working for Voldemort.”

Carmilla was falling, surely. Sitting upright in this plush chair, her feet on the ground, she was somehow falling.

“She will be approaching you this evening.”

“She… she can’t.”

“I am afraid that she can.”

“But Laura,” Carmilla stammered. “She can’t—I’ll be with Laura.”

“You do not have to be. I have made alternative arrangements.”

Everything was spinning. She had not heard that name in years—had avoided it explicitly for this reason, to prevent the terrible, aching panic that was roiling up through her insides, eating her alive.

“What… what sort of arrangements?” There was a tiny, helpless flicker of hope. “N-New York?”

His gaze had gone away, again, scuttling back to the papers, to the press of his fingertips.

“Unfortunately, no. I have been unable to secure your route to America.”

“How am I avoiding her, then?” Her voice came out small, foreign. The voice of a frightened eleven-year-old, crouching in tattered blankets, shadows curling closer. She had known the answers, then, and she knew them now.

“You might not be.”

Carmilla’s throat was tight, heat building behind her eyes. She could not have looked at Dumbledore if she wanted to.

“And Laura?”

“Laura will continue back to her cottage. There is no indication that they are interested in her, as of yet, and it will be best to keep her out of their sights.”

She swallowed. “What about me?”

“You have two options,” he said. “For the first, I have arranged transport as far as Paris. Beyond that, I have contacts who can help you remain in hiding for as long as constraints will allow. When the war is over, you will be able to return.”

“Could Laura come with me?”

“That would be her choice. However, she would have to join you immediately. You would leave today, and you would have no contact with friends… or with family. You would be constantly on the move, and, I must warn, there would be no guarantee for either of your safety.”

Putting Laura in danger was simply not an option, and, if the gravity of his tone were anything to go by, Dumbledore knew this just as well as she.

“What’s the second option?”
His head turned.

Carmilla smelled the guest before she saw her, the scent she had detected earlier growing insistent and undeniable. Danny Lawrence stepped from the adjoining chamber, wearing what appeared to be some sort of tactical robes, her wand gripped in her hand like an extension of her arm, even without any sign of impending danger.

“The second option,” Dumbledore began calmly, “Is to help us prevent a tragedy.”

Chapter End Notes

Brace yourselves, and maybe go back and refresh on the prologue... because I remember promising angst. And I never break a promise.

Update plans: You'll see me again at the end of September, and then if all goes to schedule... every two weeks from there.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!