The Scourge of Salvation Hill

by AnalogueInterfa3e

Summary

Months after their exciting adventure in Florence, ex vampire and centuries old Countess Carmilla Karnstein and her lover Laura Hollis are finally ready to reconnect with the world. A home to call their own, a large bank account and a wedding to plan, their future has never seemed brighter.

But danger seems to have a way of finding them both, even when they aren’t looking for it. When they are approached by a desperate mother searching for her missing child, the two find themselves yet again embroiled in a dark mystery and this time in a place unfamiliar to them both.

With children’s lives at stake, Carmilla and Laura must contend with dangerous foes and personal demons in order to unravel the truth behind the mysterious disappearances at Salvation Hill High School before it’s too late.
Six Days Ago

Lexi’s boots squelched hard on the wet grass as she ran under the night sky. The moisture had soaked through the leather of her shoes and into the thin socks underneath. The sodden socks numbed her feet, and she stumbled again and again, getting water on her hands and all over her shirt and pants. Drenched as she was, the breeze hit her like a frost, causing goose bumps to crop up on her arms.

She panted out heavy breaths throughout, though she could barely hear them over the oppressive all encompassing noise of croaking frogs and chirping crickets. Sometimes she’d feel one of them on her hands when she fell. Either smooth, slimy rubber that slipped away as fast as she felt it or a sickening crunch of tiny body parts that stuck to her palms until she wiped them off on a trouser leg.

It was like the world around her had decided to be a guardian angel of the tough love variety, doing everything it could to convince her that she should be running in the opposite direction.

Don’t go this way, Lexi. Go back home. You won’t like what’s at the end of this particular midnight run.

She didn’t need the world to tell her that though, she could work it out for herself just fine. She hadn’t been running as fast as she could because she was being chased or that she needed to get to her destination immediately.

She was running as fast as she could because every second it took her to get to where she was going was one more second to let fear persuade her to stop and turn back.

She kept going. Picking herself up every time she fell and visualising the faces of the friends who needed her when the fear threatened to win out and send her back home. Back to a warm bed where nothing had ever hurt her and a mother who would do anything to keep her safe. She thought of them all, but one face in particular stuck in her mind. Abigail. She couldn’t let anything happen to her. Not without telling her how she felt. A dark voice in her mind openly questioned whether it might already be too late for that, too late for all of them. She willed it silent and went on.

Finally, she made it to her destination. A small, decrepit building of rusty metal surrounded by tall grass and covered in overgrown moss. She found its door in the darkness and kicked it open. The door screeched as it moved, loud enough to hurt her ears as she ventured inside.

Instead of the hard metal she expected, the ground was soft and wet. The moss was growing inside the building as well, covering the ground and the old machinery it housed.

She had been right. This must be the place.
Trying to spin that as a positive and not a terrifying confirmation of being in mortal danger, she squinted into the darkness, looking for a staircase to the building’s underground level. It had been on the old blueprints she’d dug up before coming here.

She found them after a few moments and trying as hard as she could to act rather than think, she made her way down.

Things got a great deal worse downstairs. Here there wasn’t even a hint of metal such was the growth of vegetation. Water dripped from the wet moss on the ceiling, and the ground resembled a miniature swamp complete with a circular pond of dirty water and green lilies.


If they were here, she couldn’t see them, and they didn’t answer.

But something else did.

Out of the pond, a figure slowly emerged, displacing the water and green lilies. Humanoid in shape and when it emerged fully it stood with a grotesquely hunched back. Its black eyes shone through the darkness, full of menace.

Lexi stood rooted to the spot, fear robbing her of the ability to move or speak. The thing in front of her moved forwards out of the pond, revealing a little more of itself in the low light of the room. Though room didn’t seem like the best way to describe where she was now anymore, regardless of what any old plans said.

Despite its closeness, the darkness robbed her of the sight of its visage. She could see that it was larger than her and that it was wearing an assortment of rags as clothing.

A cricket landed on its shoulder as It made its way to her in a stumbling gait, awkward but not slow.

Lexi tried to will herself to move or failing that, to at least start breathing again. She found that she could do neither.

It reached out a hand towards her.

Present Day

Mr Frodo, after his long adventure, had returned to the Shire.

In her mind that was the best way to contextualise how she was feeling right now as Laura relaxed in the familiar surroundings of her childhood home. The wooden table she’d sat at virtually every day of her life before she left for Silas. Complete with the old scratches she’d trace a finger over absentmindedly while eating breakfast and circular coffee mug stains so dug in they might as well have been part of the table from the beginning. The brown, fluffy couch in front an archaic boxy television that should have died a decade ago. The fireplace she’d huddle as near as she’d dare during the winter. So near that once or twice her homework grades had literally gone up in flames.

It wasn’t only what she could see, there were sounds too. The chirping of birds that used to swoop dangerously close above her head on the way to school, barking dogs that always wagged their tails
at her happily when she walked past. Even Mr Taylor’s rusty lawnmower across the street sounded exactly how she remembered it.

It was like her father’s home was a picture she’d left when she travelled to Silas, completely unchanged sans a slight fading of the paints.

Well, it might not have changed in her absence, but her return may have added a little something extra to the picture.

“Laura? You there?”

She blinked and turned away from the window to the back garden she’d been looking through while on her chair, a fluffy brown mass matching the old couch, towards the voice.

That was probably a mistake if her intention was to try and refocus on the conversation she’d zoned out of. On an identical chair next to her Carmilla sat in her usual languid manner. If she sunk any deeper into the cushions, she’d probably become invisible, the black leather of her clothing and the brown leather of the couch becoming one. She was looking at Laura, a small smile on her face that otherwise reflected the question she’d asked.

The mistake was that now she was going to have a lot of trouble looking away. A big part of her wanted to keep staring. She had lost track of how many times she’d had to fight the urge to blurt out something along the lines of “God you’re beautiful” or something equally embarrassing while in Carmilla’s presence. Her current tactic, when such an urge needed to be fought, was to simply move things past the verbal and straight onto… other things.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t fight the urge in that manner right now. They weren’t alone in the room.

Some seconds ticked by as she gazed at Carmilla’s face. The smile grew a little wider, and Laura realised she’d been caught out already.

A snicker came from the other side of the room.

“Perhaps she has other things on her mind?”

Laura shook her head a little and brought herself back to the present.

Three people sat on the couch facing Carmilla and her. The snicker had come from Mel Callis, an intense looking woman with a personality that somewhat mirrored Carmilla’s in its aggressive sharpness if not quite in wit and charm.

“Other things? Yeah, that’s okay Laura this stuff kinda bores me as well. If one of the bros had told me that I’d be helping out with stuff like this, I’d have told them they were going crazy from mushroom spores or something. Oh wait, didn’t that happen once?”

The owner of the clueless voice was Kirsch, the product of some mad scientist taking the body of a pro athlete and slamming the brain of a puppy dog into it for a bet. At least that seemed like the best explanation for the man or dude-bro in front of her.

“Mushroom spores? Nobody told me anything about mushroom spores, spores are a new thing for me. When did this happen? Did you get any on you? You know what, I think I have something for that, stay right there.”

“Dad stop,” Laura said. Raising a hand at the third and final voice from the couch as she did so to get him to sit back down. “It was ages ago, and I was fine. Someone may have gone out of their way to
The last part she said coyly as her eyes darted sideways. Carmilla kept a poker face, but Laura didn’t need an outward sign to know that she would have appreciated that. Anything positive Laura could say about Carmilla in front of her dad was very helpful considering what she and Carmilla had confided to him a few days ago.

Her father, bald and portly, complied and sunk back down into the couch. He sat on the right most side of the couch, next to Kirsch. Her father always did that when guests were around. An annoying rogue spring lay under the right side cushion that would poke the unwary with glee.

Putting oneself in danger to protect others, a trait she could recognise as one he had passed down to her. If only the dangers she’d faced in this past year were as trivial as a couch spring.

Since her arrival at Silas University, she’d faced vampires, monsters, ancient Sumerian Gods and a literal attempted apocalypse. Then a few months later she and Carmilla had been drawn into a plot involving an ancient mask capable of controlling minds, hidden somewhere in the city of Florence. In the end, they had needed to survive monsters and armed goons alike to keep it out of evil hands.

Considering all that, a lot of these past six months had been a time of much-needed recuperation. Most of which had been spent at a cottage she had found with Carmilla soon after defeating Inanna, Carmilla’s ‘Mother’ and ancient Sumerian Goddess. The cottage had been a perfect find, allowing Carmilla and her to spend some time alone in comfort and peace rather than the mind numbing terror that had become the norm at Silas.

If Laura was honest, she wished they were there right now so nice the place had become. During the aftermath of their latest adventure in Florence, Laura had acquired a substantial sum of money for their efforts, courtesy of a woman Laura still wasn’t completely sure whether to call friend or foe. With it, they had transformed the cottage from an abandoned ruin into a lavish home for the pair of them.

But isolated as it was, they couldn’t stay there forever without it feeling a little like hiding. When Laura had brought up the idea of spending some time at her father’s home, Carmilla had agreed.

“Taking me home to show your dad?” she’d said in her usual drawl.

“Come on, it’s not like that, and you already met. He likes you, I’m sure of it.”

“I hope so, considering we’re telling him what we’ve decided.”

After arriving a week ago, they had sent invitations to their old Silas friends. Laura feeling that now would be a good time to try to reconnect after their time apart. She hadn’t said this to Carmilla or her father, but deep down she knew she’d rather do that here and not the cottage. The cottage had become something special for her and Carmilla as far as she was concerned and she wanted to keep it that way at least for now. Mel and Kirsch had responded to the invitation positively. Others had not.

The conversation continued.

“Probably D-Bear,” Kirsch said, confidently swinging and missing. “She was always protecting people.”

Mel rolled her eyes, and Carmilla’s expression soured.

“Yeah, she did,” Laura said, smoothing the moment over and throwing him a bone. Then, to move
things along, she asked.

“What were we talking about exactly again?”

“Silas,” Mel responded. “Kirsch and I have been helping to get it up and running again.”

“I’m still surprised any of you decided to stay after Mother was stopped and you were free to leave,” Carmilla said. “I imagined something along the lines of rats leaving a sinking ship kind of exodus.”

“Well your lovely comparison of rats to us Silas students aside, we Zetas don’t give up easily.”

Carmilla snorted at that.

“You do realise that those trivial divisions were something Mother made up to keep you in line easier right?”

Mel opened her mouth to retort before Laura broke in with a placating gesture.

“I think we can all agree on how awesome Zetas are. Like when you gals fought Vordenberg’s goons and the way you all stood up to Inanna as best you could—”

“Couldn’t actually help us fight her though, too tired or something if I remember correctly,” Carmilla drawled unhelpfully.

“So, there’s nothing but big, big Zeta fans here. Team Zeta all the way, right guys?”

The two men in the room nodded and gave the verbal assents clearly required of them. Carmilla began to shrug before a look from Laura changed that shrug to a begrudging nod mid movement.

She hadn’t expected to play peacemaker quite as much as she’d needed to since Mel and Kirsch arrived. The recent months spent alone with Carmilla had taken the former vampire’s edge off so to speak, and Laura had temporarily forgotten that how she interacted with her was most definitely not how she did with others.

At the cottage alone with Laura, Carmilla had been almost impossibly sweet and romantic. Had Laura been handed any more flowers she’d probably have gotten hay fever and she’d been given more gifts than a corrupt politician being lobbied at by shady corporations. Carmilla never stopped, candlelight dinners, breakfasts in bed, walks through the beautiful countryside of Styria. It was as if Carmilla had a billion romantic ideas bursting to get out after being stifled for so many years of pain and suffering.

It wasn’t only the grand gestures that Laura appreciated though. In between the dinners and the walks and the gifts, the two had become so comfortable together, often lying in bed or somewhere comfy for hours on end, simply enjoying each other’s company. Laura was certain this kind, and romantic woman was the girl before the vampire, the Countess of yesteryear.

So when Mel and Carmilla had started clashing almost as soon as their guests had arrived, it was only then that Laura fully remembered that Carmilla rarely showed that particular side to anyone but her.

Laura could almost see the thorns springing back up around Carmilla as soon as the number of people not Laura she needed to interact with increased from zero to, well, not zero. The change was stark. Her low tones now tinged with more than a bit of condescending passive aggression and her body language that of an irritated cat waiting for the chance to escape. It didn’t help that Mel wasn’t the type to take that kind of hostility lying down or that Carmilla had very little patience for people
who bored her… like Kirsch.

“So the school is back up and running? Like taking in students and having classes?” Laura asked, looking to keep the conversation civil.

“No, not yet,” said Mel, throwing one last glare at Carmilla before turning her eyes to Laura. “We’re still trying to attract non-char grilled teachers and parents willing to send their kids to a university that might or might not still be a death trap.”

“We’re making progress though,” Kirsch said, perking up. “Silas is actually pretty cool without all the evil stuff. Like, good classrooms and labs and dorms and stuff.”

“It’s got state of the art facilities,” Mel clarified.

“Yeah! Guess that Dean Lady was loaded. She must have had a fortune to pay for everything.”

“I can’t believe that anyone would send their kids back there after all that happened no matter how good the facilities might be,” her father said. “If I could go back in time and send Laura somewhere else, I’d do that in a second.”

Laura let the conversation continue for the three on the couch without input from her. She was glad that they were no longer sniping at each other, but she found herself strangely indifferent to current events at Silas.

Carmilla noticed and leaned towards her to speak in a sotto voce.

“Thought you’d be more interested in the school you fought so hard for.”

Laura turned to look at her before responding and almost fell into the trap of staring too long again.

“Yeah me too, I guess in the end I cared more about the students and staff more than the school itself. Whether they get it running again or not, everyone is still safe regardless. Just doesn’t seem that important anymore.”

“Well, at least I’m not the only one that’s bored then.”

“I’m sorry, this is my fault. I dragged you here to deal with all these people. I miss the cottage.”

Carmilla shook her head.

“No it’s me that’s being difficult, and I wanted you to do this, or stuff like this.”

“Yeah, I remember the conversations. Don’t isolate myself, don’t become a dark loner like you. This is me getting on that.”

“So you do listen to me sometimes,” Carmilla said. “Guess I forgot that you doing that would mean me dealing with people as well.”

“C’mon, they’re not so bad.”

“Well, one keeps talking about something I care nothing about, and the other is like if a frat boy athlete had his brain transplanted with a puppy.”

“Wow, I had those exact same thoughts, and they sound so much meaner out loud. Oh, my God, I think you’re infecting me with your dark and broody ex-vampire thoughts.”
The last sentence came out in a chuckle, and she took a playful slug at Carmilla’s shoulder. Carmilla clasped a hand over the fist as it connected and began to massage the back of it with her thumb. A few moments later and their hands were together, happily intertwining between the chairs, everyone else in the room forgotten.

There would have been a time long ago when she’d be more annoyed with Carmilla over stuff like this. Back when she had been far more tightly wound. Time and experience had mellowed her in that regard. That and an acknowledgement that being combative and full of cutting wit that spared no one’s feelings was as much a part of Carmilla as the sweet and romantic side she shared with her. Ultimately, she’d fallen in love with both sides.

Plus if she was honest, Carmilla really did just say a lot of things Laura thought herself anyway. It could be hard to chide her for a social faux pas when she was struggling not to smile and laugh.

Their eyes met and the moment stretched, she felt herself pulling closer, leaning over the chair. Carmilla did the same. God, how could she make something as simple as fingers caressing her hand feel so good?

“Of course, the way I hear it. There is maybe something pretty exciting for the love birds happening soon as well,” Mel’s voice cut across from the couch.

Laura blinked and jumped a little, snapping out of the bubble she and Carmilla had entered. She took a moment to process what Mel said and then looked at her father, eyes blazing with accusation.

“Dad!”

He held out the palms of his hands in front of him, mimicking the placating gesture Laura had made earlier.

“I’m sorry, I’m just so excited, it popped out before I could stop myself. My little girl is getting married!” he said, his face gleeful.

The night of Carmilla’s proposal in a small garden outside the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital would be a memory forever etched into her mind. The two were recuperating after their hectic Florentine adventure that had left them both exhausted and covered in injuries. She would always remember how beautiful Carmilla had looked under the moonlit night sky, the sound of the chirping birds in the garden, the feel of the soft grass they had lain on for hours afterwards staring up at the stars. But most cherished were the words Carmilla had said to her, lovingly effusive and making it very clear how much she wanted to be with her.

“Or choose anyone to be with. That’s the first real choice I want to make as a free woman.”

Although right at this moment Laura was more recalling the memory where she and Carmilla had told her father they wanted to keep the engagement between themselves for the time being.

“We told you in confidence,” she said, shaking her head.

“Yes, because it came as such a surprise,” Mel said and rolled her eyes. “Who could have guessed something was going on between you two?”

“Congrats, it’s really cool, you know, what you’re doing,” Kirsch said. “Right on, you know I got a bro whose mother is a wedding person…”

He prattled on for a while and Laura tuned him out. It seemed she was doing that a lot recently. She’d invited them, but now they were here she was struggling to stay engaged. Just like it had been
her idea to come back to her father’s home but outside of an initial enjoyment of finding and remembering her childhood things, the experience was falling a little flat.

She didn’t want to admit it, but Carmilla was right, she was bored.

The fact rankled, it didn’t make any sense. She should be enjoying this. The months of peace and quiet a welcome change to the incredible dangers she and Carmilla had faced both at Silas and then in Florence. The amount of times they had almost died in the past year was more than she could count. Surely for any sane and rational human being, a break from that would be welcomed.

She knew to a degree she did welcome the break, particularly after she had finished recuperating at the cottage. No, it was definitely when they had arrived here when she had started feeling restless. That word used to describe the danger they had been in, *incredible*, was a perfect descriptor. Vampires and ancient Gods at Silas, an underground tunnel complex inhabited by gargoyles and a hydra in Florence, yes she’d been through danger, but there had also been such wonder and amazement and now, well…

Imagine if Harry Potter had to go live as a muggle at the end of the series, would he be happy to be out of danger finally or sad at having to go back to a regular life?

“We haven’t made any concrete plans other than it's happening yet,” she heard Carmilla say in a restrained tone that Laura knew meant she didn’t like the course of the current conversation but was trying to remain civil. They must have started making wedding suggestions, the exact thing they had wanted to avoid people giving them.

“Somewhere private might be a good location. Considering you two are apparently a little famous now,” Mel said. “Couldn’t believe it at first when I saw you two coming out of the burning Uffizi on the news. But then I thought about it more, and it made sense. I guess bad stuff will always keep following you two around won’t it?”

She’d almost managed to forget about that final wrinkle to their time in Florence. During the chaos of their battle with a man named Gustav and his cadre of Corvae goons at the Uffizi Gallery, Carmilla had seen fit to carry her mostly unconscious body straight into a crowd of people to find an ambulance. Laura had needed to get used to seeing her face on TV every once and a while since.

“It got a little crazy over there,” she said, seizing the opportunity for a change in topic. “But it’s not like we’re rock stars, I think most of the world has forgotten us by now.”

“Uh huh, I guess that cottage doesn’t have a television or the internet in it yet. Otherwise, I don’t think you’d be saying that.”

Laura put that in the back of her mind. She really hoped Mel was wrong. Famous was not something she really wanted to be right now, and she doubted Carmilla would handle having people come up to her in the street very well.

Her father stood up, announcing it was time for him start cooking lunch, and Carmilla snatched at the opportunity to get out of the room with a rather uncharacteristic offer to help.

Well, at least it’s got to the stage where she considers spending time alone with Dad a lesser of two evils in some situations.

That abruptly left her alone with Mel and Kirsch. There was an awkward silence as they all tried and failed to keep the conversation going.

“I thought the ginger duo would be here as well,” Mel said after a few previous fumbling attempts at
a topic fell flat.

“Yeah, I invited them but didn’t receive a reply. I know they left Silas. I didn’t want to stalk them to find exactly where they are now.”

“Right here in Canada right?” Kirsch supplied. “At least that’s what they said.”

“Oh,” she paused for a second. “I didn’t know they were here, or that they were talking to you two,” but not me apparently.

“Not much, a call or two,” Mel said after throwing an annoyed look at Kirsch. “Mostly so they can find out what’s happening at the school.”

“Yeah, they both seem to think me and Mel are doing all the rebuilding ourselves,” Kirsch said. “But to be honest half the time all we’re doing is standing around and waiting to see if we have enough money for stuff.”

The footage the two had filmed of her and Carmilla in the pit back at Silas flashed unbidden across her mind.

“Yeah, you two seem pretty good at standing around and waiting,” Laura said without thinking. She had to catch herself from bringing her hands over her mouth. She couldn’t believe what she’d said. The words had slipped out without conscious thought. There was a pregnant pause as she scrambled to think of a way to smooth it over. Could she play it off as a joke or pretend she misspoke?

“I uh, I mean that uh, sorry I-”, great now she was babbling.

She braced herself for a furious tirade, but strangely Mel didn’t appear angry. Instead, she seemed almost embarrassed. Like Laura, she struggled to get words out.

“Hollis, look, I actually had something I wanted to say. I should have said it a while ago but-”

A shout came from the kitchen, her father.

“Hey Laura, is this another one of your Silas friends? A teacher maybe?”

“Teacher?” she repeated, confused. “I didn’t invite any teachers.”

She strode past the couch and the wooden table behind it towards the kitchen. As she entered it, Carmilla and her father were staring through a window that looked out from the kitchen to the front lawn.

“Doesn’t look like anyone I recognise,” Carmilla was saying.

“Well, maybe Laura knows her,” her father said.

“Knows who?” she asked and nestled up between them to take a look.

A woman was walking across the street towards the house. She had her head down, and her hands ran anxiously through short black unkempt hair. The house was clearly her destination, but she seemed hesitant to get all the way to the front door. Every few steps she’d stop for a moment to bite the tips of her fingers before shaking her head and moving on. Laura couldn’t be sure, but it looked like she was talking to herself.
She wore dark baggy clothing that hung off of her, making her look somewhat frail. She was definitely middle aged. Laura guessed early forties, which explained why her father had thought teacher over student.

Laura didn’t recognise her, but it was plain that the woman was in distress. Laura turned and started to make her way to the front door.

“Laura, wait. We don’t know who she is,” Carmilla said.

“It doesn’t matter, she’s obviously upset. Let’s go find out why.”

By the time she’d gotten to the door, Carmilla was firmly at her back and the woman halfway across the front lawn. She looked up at the sound of the door opening, giving Laura a good look at her face.

Large and shining green eyes were the first thing she noticed, standing out against the lack of colour on the rest of her face. Exhaustion and desperation were etched all over her, every facial muscle a plea for help.

She started to speak and almost choked for a second, before swallowing hard and trying again.

“Hello, are you Ms Hollis? Ms Laura… Laura Hollis?” her voice had an unexpected hint of a southern twang to it and she over-enunciated her words, overcompensating for her anxiety.

“Yeah, that’s me, hello,” Laura went with a smile as she spoke, trying to inject as much kindness into her words as possible. This woman clearly needed a hug, literally and metaphorically.

“Oh thank God. I mean, a pleasure to meet you Laura, Ms Hollis, whichever you prefer,” she stared at Laura for a moment. “Gosh, so young, I didn’t realise from the pictures. Maybe this isn’t a good- I don’t know…” she trailed off.

“Laura is fine. How about you come inside, we can talk in here.” Laura extended an arm out, beckoning.

The woman nodded and hurried towards them. Once she was through the door, they found her a chair around the wooden table and sat her down. Her father went off saying something about tea and Carmilla, arms crossed, hovered behind her.

“Okay so you know me, hi, that man was my dad, and this is Carm,” she gestured to Carmilla.

“Yep,” Carmilla said.

“How about you start with your name, work from there?”

The woman took another swallow before speaking. Laura got the impression of someone anxious not to say the wrong thing. Whatever she was looking for in coming here, she must have been desperate for it.

“Mary, Mary Kellan. I also know who she, who you are,” she nodded at Carmilla. “Carmilla Karnstein. I saw you both on the news, the Uffizi attack, you were both there. Also, other places.”

“Other places?” Carmilla asked in a harsh tone. “What do you mean other places?”

She blanched, and her eyes went wide.

“I don’t mean, not like as in, I’m not a stalker! I just really needed to talk to you. I thought maybe you could help, no one else will. I… I-”
“Okay.” Laura put a hand on her knee to steady her. "Take a breath. We were doing well for a
second there, when you said your name. Then we got a bit lost again. How about you go back to that
and start over.”

The woman took another breath.

“Right, okay. So as I said my name is Mary Kellan. I came here looking for the both of you. It’s
about my daughter Alexander. Lexi, she prefers Lexi. She went missing a week ago, and I’m asking
for your help to find her.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi there,
I had planned to start uploading this a little later to get a couple more chapters up my
sleeve, but the bts footage of the Carmilla Movie has put me in a very excited and
Hollstein loving mood. So I've decided to start uploading now.

Hopefully I can keep to something of a schedule and I sincerely hope this story is
enjoyable to those who read it.
The Kellan woman ate ravenously from the plate of sandwiches in front of her, crumbs falling down her face and onto the table as she did so. Some of them dropped in a mug of tea under her face. She didn't seem to notice, intent as she was in devouring as many of Mr Hollis' sandwiches as she could.

“They really are quite good,” she said through a mouthful to Mr Hollis when he passed by with another plate.

After spending some time here, Carmilla rather doubted that. More likely the woman was just starving. It didn’t take much of a look, or smell for that matter, to see she wasn’t taking good care of herself.

Her clothes had probably been worn for at least a few days straight and her hair, while short, was a mess. The way she devoured the sandwiches in front of her suggested to Carmilla that she hadn’t eaten for a while. On a casual glance, she might have appeared a vagrant, but little things belied that.

She wore a pair of small white earrings that while modest, were not something a homeless person would go three seconds before pawning off. Her baggy clothes stunk of sweat, but were well made and branded. Her teeth were white, and her nails were well kempt.

Carmilla was not in the habit of trusting strangers to their words, yet what Carmilla could see matched up well with what Kellan had said. She looked like a middle aged housewife who had been through a very rough week. A mother with a missing child fit the bill.

But why had she come to them to find this errant daughter of hers? And how had she found them?

She wished they would get to those questions already. But she knew once Laura had sat the woman down that wasn’t going to happen. Harshly interrogating pleading women in distress wasn’t really something in the Laura Hollis playbook. Instead, she’d opted for a soft approach, giving Kellan food and kind words of comfort.

She would never criticise the kindness at the core of Laura’s being, well, mock it in jest every once in a while perhaps, but she really wanted to start getting some answers. She’d become edgy, pacing back and forth behind Laura and taking glances at any windows to the outside. Wryly noting that treating the arrival of what appeared to be a harmless lady in distress as a reason to look out for danger, could probably be classified as some serious paranoia.

Although, if she was honest, getting into a fight may have been preferable to enduring more inane conversation with a couple of dull scrubs.

God, they had been irritating. Boring her to tears and getting on her nerves with one’s incessant love of Amazon woman and the other challenging her every statement. If only Mel had fought her Mother back at Silas with as much passion as she verbally fenced with her, maybe she’d actually have been useful.

At least they had slinked away right after Kellan had shown up. Leaving as soon as there was a sign of trouble, imagine that?

Or perhaps it was her that was the problem. They seemed to get along with Laura and her father well enough. She didn’t exactly have the best track record in getting along with people. A centuries long lifetime tended to drastically narrow the field of people one considered worth their time.
She’d had the pleasure of spending the last few months alone with the one person currently in that field, and it had been bliss. A kind of happiness she’d always hoped for deep down but never expected to be possible for her. The time spent together, the complete lack of danger or cares, endless opportunities for Carmilla to show her love and affection. It was almost ironic how alike it was to what one might imagine a heaven to be, considering that without intervention from an Ancient God, she’d have been in whatever afterlife there was centuries ago.

It couldn’t have lasted forever. Well, the being with Laura part she dearly hoped would, but staying at the cottage isolated from the world was a status quo that would ultimately hurt Laura in the long run. She was far too young to withdraw from the world entirely.

Far too young and far too brilliant. A casual glance might only see a struggling college journalism student with middling grades, but Carmilla knew better. She had seen someone who had stood up to the scariest, most powerful beings in existence to fight for what she believed in and had ultimately gone toe to toe with them thanks to a dogged determination and a quick thinking intelligence that didn’t shut down in a crisis.

Yes, being centuries old meant very few people stood out to her, but the flipside to that was the few or in this case the one that did shone like a beacon.

She’d fallen in love with a hero. A small, struggling, dorky hero.

Kellan finished the plate of sandwiches. She’d been shovelling them in on autopilot, and her hands scratched sadly on the ceramic of the empty plate for a few seconds before snatching for the tea mug. Laura gently started asking questions again.

“Okay Ms Kellan, so you’ve come to us because you’re daughter… Lexi?” she paused and waited for Kellan to nod. “Is that right so far?”

Kellan nodded again.

“Yes, we live together in Savannah, Savannah Georgia.”

“Georgia? Wow, that’s a long way south, it must have been quite the trip to get here.”

*Yes, and how did you know to come here?* Carmilla toyed with asking the question out loud, but Laura probably wouldn’t have appreciated it in the middle of her gentle approach.

“Well the plane trip passed in a bit of blur, I was here before I knew it.”

That seemed to surprise Laura. She probably hadn’t realised like Carmilla had that Kellan wasn’t quite as penniless as she currently appeared.

“Your daughter Lexi, when did she go missing?”

“Six days ago,” Kellan’s speech started to pick up pace again. A freight train gathering momentum. “She’s seventeen, five foot four, she’s got dark hair like me and also my eyes, everyone says she has my eyes, she’s got a light frame, she never sits still to eat enough I always tell her that, she needs to eat more and, and she has a freckle on her right cheek, I have a picture—”

“Okay.” Laura stopped her again with a hand on her knee. She took the picture Kellan pulled out of a pocket with her other hand. “Let’s take it easy with that for a moment. Before you decided to come all the way here, did you… go to the police?”

Kellan’s eyes narrowed angrily.
“Of course I went to the police, what do you think I’m some kind of crazy person? I’m not crazy. This is the last thing I could think of, everything else I’ve tried hasn’t worked, and it’s because nobody is listening to me!”

Carmilla took a step forward involuntarily, instinctively preparing to intervene in case things got violent.

She didn’t need to. Laura put the picture on the table, raised her hands slightly and spoke.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend. And I’m listening. We’re all listening to you now. You live with your daughter in Savannah, and she went missing six days ago. What happened next?”

The anger left Kellan as quickly as it came. She pressed a hand to her face, rubbing her eyes. Carmilla noticed how dark and puffy they were.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped. It’s just people have been asking me the same questions and telling me the same things over and over again. Always that same tone of voice, the one you would use on some mental patient.”

She took a shaky breath and looked to Laura.

“I drive Lexi to school every day, I’m a teacher there myself, so that makes it easy. But six days ago she wasn’t coming out of her room in the morning, so I went up and checked on her. I got the door open, and she wasn’t there. Her bed was still made. I don’t think she slept in it that night. Her running shirt and pants were gone, at first, I thought maybe she’d gone running for some reason but,” she shook her head.

Mr Hollis came back into the room. He took a seat at the table next to Laura.

“When you went to the police, did they find any sign of her at all?” Laura asked.

“No, they found nothing, they’re useless. They didn't find anything for those other poor kids either.”

“Other kids? There are other kids missing as well?”

Kellan nodded.

“Lexi is the fourth in two months, all from our school.”

“Four kids in that short a time, from the same place?” Mr Hollis said. “Surely they’ve got an army of detectives there by now. It would be crazy not to.”

Kellan looked at him, the expression on her face suggesting she’d been waiting for someone to say that for quite some time.

“Yes, it is. It is crazy! You would think that. I went to the police station every day asking why they weren’t doing more. They wouldn't give me a straight answer. Platitudes and ‘we’ll call you when we know more’ that’s all they gave me. One of the detectives, a nicer one told me they wanted to do more but refused to tell me why they couldn’t.”

She turned back to Laura. Carmilla could tell she felt most comfortable talking to her. That wasn’t uncommon. There was an open, honest kindness to Laura that people instantly responded to. Carmilla had noticed it at Silas and then again in Florence. In fact, she was sure at least half the city had fallen in love with her by the time they left.
“I was just thinking about having her stay home, I’d already banned her from going out after evening. She would always go out on these late night runs. I thought she’d be okay at the school as I’d be there to watch over her. But I never thought she’d leave in the middle of the night with everything that was going on.”

“Do you have any idea where she might have been going?” Laura asked.

Kellan licked her lips. “No I don’t know where she would have been going, but I can guess why. The other kids who went missing were all Lexi’s friends, her.” She paused for a moment. “Only friends as far as I was aware.”

“All the missing kids were friends with each other? Did you ask Lexi if she knew anything?”

A sob burst from Kellan at Laura’s question. Tears slowly trickled down her face.

“I did, and I didn’t listen to what she told me, not really. Just like nobody has been listening to me now.”

“She told you something you didn’t believe,” Carmilla said. “So you rejected it out of hand.”

It was a hunch, but a confident one. Kellan confirmed it with a nod.

“It sounded crazy, and now that I’m saying it, I sound crazy. At first, I just thought it was her being young and scared for her friend, but then the Turner’s boy also went missing and then Abigail, gosh, she and Lexi were so close. I thought maybe she was lying about something, that maybe they had gotten into something bad and were afraid to tell me. I… I may have accused her of that before she went missing as well.”

“But now you think whatever she told you might have been the truth, might be real,” Carmilla said.

“I learned some things and saw… some things.”

“What did your daughter tell you Ms Kellan?” Laura asked.

“She said,” Kellan paused. “She said that she thought her friends were being taken by something, as in a thing, a creature not a… human being. She also thought people at our school were involved, she said she didn’t know who.

“It was crazy! I had to wrap my head around the idea of there being some kind of kid stealing conspiracy at our school, the school I’d taught at for years. Never mind accepting that, what, there was a monster doing the abducting? I couldn’t accept that as true.”

That last part came out in a sob. Carmilla recognised regret pretty well, and it was all over Kellan’s face.

“I didn’t believe what my daughter was telling me and accused her of hiding something bad from me. Now she’s missing, and the last thing that happened between us is me not believing her.”

Carmilla couldn’t see Laura’s face from behind her, but she didn’t need to. This was exactly the kind of thing that would get her attention, innocent young people in danger, a sad crying woman filled with regret asking for aid. It didn’t help that the woman was probably quite pretty underneath the unkempt hair and stinking clothes. Add in some mystery to solve, and it was essentially Laura Hollis branded catnip.

“Laura,” she started, caution in her tone.
Laura held up a hand.

“I know, Carm.”

Laura kept her eyes on Kellan.

“I am so sorry about your daughter Ms Kellan. But I really need to ask how you knew who and where we were and why you thought we could help?”

Kellan bit her lip and looked down at her feet for a few seconds. She’d been worried about this question, Carmilla surmised.

“Like I said, I’m not a stalker. After Lexi went missing I was desperate and my late husband, he passed away a year ago, was an analyst at the NSA—”

Alarm bells started ringing.

“Okay, here we go again,’ she said more forcefully. “Laura, we’ve been through this before. Do you remember the last time a woman came to us saying they were associated with a spy agency?”

“Yeah, I do, but—”

“This has trap written all over it. Crying mother, kids in danger, what’s the bet she says she just happens to have a large amount of money to offer us for our help to put a bow on it.”

“I can pay, I can absolutely pay you!” Kellan piped up. “I don’t have a great deal, but I’ll do anything to make it up to you if you agree to help. I will make it right, I swear.”

“No, there won’t be any of that. We would never accept that.” Laura said.

She didn’t raise her voice, but the conviction in it was clear. On that point at least there would be no argument, Carmilla knew.

“She’s not Okoye, Carm. We knew she was kinda shady right from the start. Are you honestly telling me you think she’s like Okoye?”

Carmilla couldn’t, despite her unease nothing Kellan had said or done so far had rung false to her.

Her silence was answer enough for Laura, who focused back on Kellan.

“Sorry for that, we had someone come to us before pretending to be a cool spy person. They turned out to be, well, let’s just say she was lying about that part at least.”

“Oh my husband wasn’t like that, a ‘cool spy person’ you said. Ryan sat at a desk most of the time. It wasn’t as if he was ‘James Bourning’ around the world or anything.”

Laura gave out a little chuckle but didn’t comment.

“I have his old I.D. right here. I’m telling the truth I swear,” Kellan went to her pockets again and pulled out a small plastic card, handing it to Laura.

“We probably should have asked Okoye for something like this before, would have been smart,” Laura muttered as she handed it to her father and then to Carmilla.

It looked real enough, a smiling man in a suit next to the appropriate words. Though, Carmilla was no forgery expert.
“Fine, but what does this have to do with your missing kid?” Carmilla asked.

“Right, well, Ryan used to bring some things home from work when things got busy. I doubt that was technically allowed but he didn't get in trouble and after the…after he passed, he had a few things in a box in the garage that nobody came for.”

“What kind of things?”

“Documents mostly, I knew better than to ask too much, even if he was low level. But after Lexi went missing, I thought maybe there might be something in there that could help. Spy tools or, I dunno, maybe people I could contact for help. You have to understand I wasn’t thinking straight, I was just doing things. Actually, this is the clearest I’ve been thinking for quite a while.”

Carmilla realised she might have been a bit glib about Ms Kellan’s health earlier. The woman may have actually been literally starving before Mr Hollis gave her those sandwiches. Her story was starting to come together for Carmilla now and for Laura too apparently, as evidenced by her next words.

“There was something to do with us in that box, wasn’t there?”

Kellan nodded.

“There was a whole folder on you two. It had your pictures, and I recognised you from the news, that thing at the Uffizi. The things that report said you did. Something about these videos they found.”

“I swear Laura those videos ‘you just had to make’ are going to be the death of us,” Carmilla said.

“Hey millennial here, apocalypse or not, I’ll die recording myself in the hope it gets good views online.”

The videos Laura had somewhat feverishly made over the course of her time at Silas had been helpful at the time in garnering support from Silas students, as well as probably being somewhat therapeutic for Laura to throw her fears and doubts at a camera. But it seemed they were causing them nothing but troubles now, with it being clear the videos had found their way into the hands of a number of spy agencies as well as Corvae, an evil corporation they had run afoul of twice now.

Kellan was looking at them both. Carmilla detected something that looked a lot like wonder in her eyes.

“Did you two really do what the report said you two did? Stop an apocalypse? Save the world?”

“I’ll answer that question in a moment,” Laura said. “As soon as I think of a truthful answer that doesn’t make me sound like someone with a giant ego.”

“Yep, pretty much. Saved all of you, you’re welcome,” Carmilla said.

Kellan's eyes went wide.

“Then this kind of thing must be right up your alley. You stopped an apocalypse for Christ sakes, what’s one little monster in Savannah compared to that?”

“That’s why you came to us specifically? Because you thought we were what, experts in monster hunting?” Laura asked.
“Well aren’t you? Who else would be more qualified? Not the police, that’s for sure.”

Perhaps if Kellan knew just how lucky Laura and herself were to be still alive, she wouldn’t have said that. She did have a point though. It wasn’t as if there were professionals for dealing with what Kellan and her daughter suspected was going on at their school.

Laura let out a big breath.

“Carm, I need to talk to you, alone.”

She started to get out of her seat. Kellan leaned forward and placed both her hands over one of Laura’s.

“Please, you’re my last hope.”

Laura nodded to her and gently moved her hand away.

“I just need to speak to Carm for a moment. We’ll be right back. Dad, can you stay here with her?”

After her father gave his assent, Laura looked at Carmilla as she turned and made for an exit to the room. Their eyes met and Laura’s confirmed what Carmilla had been sure was going through her mind.

Holding in a sigh, she followed Laura out of the room.

Laura led her through a door to the backyard. It was modest but well maintained, a freshly cut lawn of grass and a small garden filled with potted plants taking up most of the space. A clothesline stood proudly in its centre, its pole base and white racks making it look like a plastic tree with spider webs instead of branches.

A day into their stay here Mr Hollis had shown Carmilla an old video of Laura as a child spinning around that same pole while singing terribly off key. She’d spun around endlessly despite the laughing protestations of a woman’s voice Carmilla didn’t recognise until she dizzily stumbled and fell on a shaggy dog twice her size. The dog had done its best to arrest her fall, and she’d ended up on the ground next to it laughing as it nuzzled her. Carmilla had grinned through the whole thing like a fool and the memory of it now momentarily raised her mood.

Back in the living room, she heard Mr Hollis start to speak before shutting the door behind her.

“So you liked the sandwiches huh?”

Laura leaned back against a grey fence between the next door neighbours, her eyes on Carmilla. The sun was in front of her, and the way it shone down on Laura’s blonde hair was breathtaking. She was a truly a vision out here in the sun wearing her blue plaid shirt. Carmilla had wanted to get her outside all day once she saw there wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

The suburb was full of life, birds flying lazily in all directions above, a lawnmower in the distance and what sounded like an ice cream van coming up the street being chased by laughing children.

Of course Laura grew up here, it’s like Stepford sans the brainwashing… probably.
“So,” Laura started. “To recap. Kids go missing at a school in Savannah, daughter tells mum it’s some kind of monster, then daughter goes missing as well, and mum freaks out. She looks through some documents of her late spy but not in a ‘double oh seven’ way husband, and that leads her to us. Now she wants our help to find her daughter. Is that what you got as well?”

“Yeah, that’s what I got.”

“Wonder why she came here? There’s no way she knew we were visiting right at this moment.”

“Well, it’s not like we’re in an address book at the cottage. She probably was hoping your dad could contact us.”

That took Laura aback. She paled slightly and swallowed hard.

“Oh no, do you think others might do that? I mean Kellan seems harmless, but what about other people who might want to find us?” she bit her lip worriedly.

Carmilla wished she had a good answer for her. She didn’t so instead, she went for comforting.

“We’ll make sure nothing bad happens to your father, we’ll work something out.”

Anyone who hurts him hurts you. So they’d be on a shortlist for a great deal of suffering.

Laura accepted that with a nod. Her brow then furrowed, she was worried about this conversation Carmilla could tell. She needn’t have been, Carmilla knew everything she was about to say anyway.

First, she’d start with telling her she didn’t want to push her into anything. Then, being nervous as she was, she’d probably babble for a bit.

“After Silas, I said that I was done pushing you into anything, especially stuff like this. I hate that I expected so much of you for a while at Silas. I never want to make the mistake of taking you for granted ever again. I left Florence up to you, you wanted to go, and I wanted to go, so we went. We did Florence. Beautiful, terrifying Florence, with the goons and the gargoyles and the Sprigg- I mean nothing, I mean Satyrs, yeah that. Urgh, I wish Amaya had been able to come, something about her kids reaching Satyr puberty?”

Then she’d reign herself back in and get back on track.

“Anyway, right, the point is I don’t want to ask you to do anything you don’t want to. It’s just…”

She’d need some help at this point. Otherwise, it would be awkward silence or back to babbling.

“But you really want to go do this, try to help this Kellan find her daughter and the rest of those missing kids.”

Laura’s eyes were full of contrition. Carmilla could see the struggle going on behind them. The urge to do what the core of her being demanded versus the reluctance to potentially drag Carmilla into something she cared nothing for.

“Yes,” Laura said finally, “I know it has nothing to do with us, I know that it’s me being foolish and dumb and something, something hero complex and that there’s this wedding we should be focused on. I am so sorry-”

Carmilla took a step forward and wrapped her arms around Laura’s neck, pulling them close and resting her forehead on theirs.
“Okay, first of all, you don't have to apologise for being you. I appreciate you thinking of me and what I want, but that goes both ways. The Laura Hollis I love doesn’t walk away from kids in danger, and I would never ask you to. I get it. I do, and I’m not mad. My fiancé is signing on to be a monster hunter, that’s actually kinda hot.”

That got a giggle out of her.

“You’re not upset?”

“That’s not upset.”

First a giggle, now a smile, she was on a roll.

“Wanna’ come to the States with me?” Laura asked.

Carmilla closed what was left of the gap between their faces, pressing her lips to Laura’s.

“Of course, who knows what kind of trouble you’d get into without me?”

Laura’s smile widened after the kiss, her face shining with relief. She already was beautiful in the sunlight. The smile completed the vision.

God she loved her. Of all the things Laura should be worried about right now, considering the whole ‘travelling to another country to potentially hunt down a monster’ thing that suddenly was on their itinerary. Yet first in her mind was to make sure Carmilla was okay with what was happening and wasn’t being ignored.

There was a time at Silas when Laura might have simply told Kellan yes on the spot and expect Carmilla to back her up. Not due to a lack of caring, but more to a lack of forethought, leaping into to the next crusade for good and justice only to be surprised that not everyone was completely willing to follow her into the trenches.

She’d grown so much since then, and Carmilla had been granted the privilege of a front row seat to it.

“You know,” Laura said. “We don’t actually know for sure there really is a monster. All we have to go on is the suspicions of a high schooler and their mother. Maybe by the time we land, all the kids will have turned up already.”

“That’s… optimistic.”

“Oh, and I suppose in your mind, it will be too late by the time we get there, and hence it will be all for nothing. An opinion you can probably express perfectly in some Nietzsche esque quote,” Laura’s tone was teasing.

“Maybe you’ve been infecting me as well, and instead I have images of us bravely saving the day, basking in glory and celebrating somewhere private.”

Laura snorted.

“Mm-hmm sure, I can believe that last part at least. As for the rest, well-”

Their mouths had pulled closer again, and in the space of a moment, they were back to kissing. Carmilla pushed forward until she had Laura’s back against the fence as Laura’s hands found their way under her shirt, massaging her stomach and then cupping her breasts. In response, she deepened
the kiss, her own hands tangling through Laura’s hair and her knee pressing firmly against Laura’s groin.

“Wow, this is escalating rather fast,” Laura managed to gasp out. “You do realise they think we’re having a conversation about whether we want to help her or not?”

“Yeah and I’d say the conversation is going very well. We’re agreeing on so much,” her words came out in a purr, and she started planting kisses on Laura’s neck. After a few moments, the kisses started travelling downward.

“Okay, whoa there, hold on a second,” Laura said.

Carmilla stopped, but they remained close, faces inches apart.

“This is lovely, but maybe not with my dad and a guest so close by,” Laura said.

“Maybe not,” Carmilla agreed. “The future seems pretty bleak for this though if we’re going to America and that lady’s house.”

“What? No no no, hotel Carm. We have money now, remember? We’re going to the best hotel there is in Savannah while we stay.”

Getting to stay in a luxurious private hotel room with Laura for a while? Perhaps this wasn’t going to be so bad after all.

“I can see that appeals to you, you’re practically drooling,” Laura said and giggled.

“One with a spa, I cannot impress upon you just how important that is to me.”

Laura nodded in mock solemnity.

‘Of course, I can’t think of anything more essential,” she laughed before continuing. “C’mon let’s get back in there.”

With that they returned to the living room, ready to give Kellan and Mr Hollis the news.

“We’ll help you. We’ll come back to the States with you and try to find your daughter and the other missing kids.”

“What? Laura, no!” Mr Hollis said loudly from his chair.

“I’m pretty sure that’s my line and speaking from experience it never works on her,” Carmilla said, leaning with her back against the wall as the others sat around the table.

“Thank you so much!” Kellan gushed. “I cannot thank you enough. I won’t ever forget this and I will make it up to you somehow, whatever it takes to repay you.”

Laura shook her head.

“As I said before, that’s not a thing you need to do.”

Mr Hollis turned to Carmilla, eyes reflecting something that looked oddly like betrayal.
“You’re okay with this? She’s just recovered from a bullet wound and God knows what else! And you’re okay with her going off to another country again to face what she,” he pointed at Kellan. “Thinks is a ‘monster’ of some kind. ‘You’re okay with that?”

Carmilla noticed Laura begin to rub her arm absently at the mention of the bullet wound she'd received at the Uffizi during their adventures in Florence.

Laura’s action more than Mr Hollis’ words brought back memories of the incident, which stalled her answer for a few moments. She couldn’t deny that there had been times in Florence where her fear of losing Laura had threatened to overwhelm her and by the end of it Laura had taken more injuries than a soldier in a war zone. With that in mind, the prospect of her going back into potential danger was not enticing, luxurious hotel with a spa or not.

Laura noticed her pause, and she turned around in her chair to face her with an expectant expression, waiting for Carmilla to back her up. Kellan looked to her as well, perhaps out of worry that she and Mr Hollis would change Laura’s mind and abruptly all eyes in the room were on her.

Two Hollis’ staring at her expectantly, impatient for her to take both of their sides, why was that scarier than most of the monsters she’d faced over her long life?

Ultimately one look at Laura was enough for her to remember who she needed to side with. Her set jaw and eyes projecting determination and resolve. Laura didn’t want to be mollycoddled or protected, and she’d proven time and time again to be in need of neither.

They had decided together on the need to get back into the world and scary or not, this was a part of that.

She looked at Mr Hollis.

“First of all, she can make her own decisions and second she’s not going alone. We agreed, we’re together on this, we’re going.”

Laura’s beaming smile was such that it felt like a second sun had appeared in the room.

Mr Hollis threw up his hands and muttered to himself grumpily.

Laura turned to Kellan.

“We’ll do everything we can, but it’s not like we’re detectives or anything. I think I’d give us an A plus on researching, really good at that. But, if the endless crime procedurals on TV have taught me anything, you also need to like, talk to people, and you know… investigate. Who is going to talk to us or let us into places? It’s not like we can say ‘hey we saved the world semi-recently, can we talk to you about child disappearances in your neighbourhood?’”

“They taught me that all detectives need to be ridiculously attractive,” Carmilla said and then shrugged, “so at least we’re both good on that account.”

Laura stifled a laugh with the back of her hand.

Kellan squirmed a little and bit her lip.

“Well actually, I may have done something to take care of that.”
“Carm c’mon, we have to get moving, Carm.”

The words came from such a lovely source, but she groaned at them all the same as she buried her face in the pillows. As if by shielding her eyes from the clear daylight leaking in from the bedside window she could deny the reality that it was already morning.

The tactic wasn’t a new one, more an old habit from a different life. Once you become an immortal vampire time can seem much less valuable. Don’t like the sun outside? Just bury yourself under the covers until it’s dark again, it’s not like you would miss anything important.

Since becoming human again, she’d struggled to adapt to time being once more a commodity. Luckily she had someone always eager to remind her.

“Carm!” Laura said more forcefully, pulling the off the blankets and making it impossible for her to get back to sleep.

Well, mostly luckily.

She groaned again, a plaintive whine. In the dark night an ancient, dangerous seductress, in the morning something closer to an irritated lazy cat was she.

Giving up on sleep, she twisted around onto her back, curling her legs around Laura’s thighs and pulling her down. Laura landed on top of her with a squeak.

“Carm the plane’s leaving soon, we don’t have time.”

But Laura’s words came out of a wide smile. She was sure she could change her mind on that if she really wanted to.

She did really want to. She brought her hands to Laura’s face and leant her head upwards into a kiss. In response, Laura relaxed on top of her with a pleasant moan and started peeling up her night shirt with practised fingers.

“C’mon you two! Mary here is getting nervous that you’re not up yet, you should really be at the airport by now.”

Mr Hollis’ call jolted them both, stopping the moment in its tracks. It didn’t ruin it though. Instead, they both laughed as they held each other. The reaction of long time lovers who both knew there would be another time and place.

“They’re right, we should get going,” Laura said, her voice muffled against Carmilla’s chest.

Carmilla let out a sigh.

“Fine, but only because the plane trip we’re putting this on hold for is taking us to a luxury spa.”

Laura hummed at the thought.

They reluctantly broke apart and looked around for their clothes. Like always, getting clothed took longer than it should have. Both stealing glances at each other in their various states of undress. Ludicrous, considering they’d slept in the same bed together now for over a year, but it appeared to be something neither were able to help.
Laura’s childhood bedroom was small and tidy. Old and faded masking tape organised the room into two sections, though when Carmilla had asked what the sections were for, Laura had gone red and muttered that she didn’t remember. A dressing table next to the closet covered in the stains of coffee mugs and highlighters. At the back of the room, a poster had been hung up, of whom Carmilla would have to guess as Laura had taken it down in such a hurry she’d almost tripped over. Underneath where the poster had been, the letters ‘WWBD?’ were written in what looked like crayon.

Carmilla could look around the room and almost see Laura’s reflection in it. No, not her reflection, rather an old image of the girl she had been before Silas. Carmilla could visualise her sleeping in a bed covered in patterns of Disney princesses, sitting at her dressing table drinking coffee late at night while she thought up her next plan of attack against whatever injustice she’d been currently fighting and every so often glancing at the poster of a childhood idol.

Carmilla wondered whether the old Karnstein Castle would hold any reflections of her former self as a Countess. She rather doubted it. It was most like a time worn ruin by now.

Despite the annoyance of dealing with other people, she was glad to have come here. To have seen where Laura had come from was like getting one of the last pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The puzzle of Laura Hollis getting that much more clear. Or was the real puzzle how a woman so warm and kind had ended up loving someone like her?

Carmilla finished putting on her leather pants and glanced over at Laura, who had stopped putting on her clothes after pulling on a pair of blue jeans to look at something on the dresser, its mirror reflecting Laura bare from the waist up. She’d have to do something about that soon, or Carmilla would have them right back on the bed, plane to catch or not.

She sidled up to her, wrapping arms around Laura’s waist and planting a kiss on her neck.

“What you got there?”

“Oh, just Kellan’s entire master plan to allow us to play detectives once we get to the States.”

She let out a dubious grunt before responding.

“I’m reserving the right to tell everyone ‘I told them so’ when it doesn’t work.”

Her mind returned to yesterday when Kellan had revealed her half-baked scheme to them all.

“Well actually, I may have done something to take care of that.”

Kellan had followed that up by pulling out a couple more plastic cards. One had a picture of Laura, the other, of Carmilla.

“What the hell is this?” she’d growled at Kellan then, confused.

It was Laura though who had answered as she inspected the cards.

“Private Investigator? Why does this say I’m a PI?”

“Well, in Georgia you need a license to be a Private Investigator. Luckily Ryan was popular with his colleagues, and they liked me as well. On Fridays I would send him off to work with these cookies they could enjoy after- never mind, they liked me is what’s important.”

Her expression flickered, sadness and pain showing for a brief second. Carmilla guessed talking
about her late husband so casually wasn’t something she usually did.

“I asked them for a favour. A big one, they didn’t want to do it, but you know, screaming and crying mother tends to persuade most people,” she smiled wryly. “Eventually they caved in.”

“And made you fake PI licenses for us both?” Laura finished.

Kellan nodded.

“They’re not perfect, but they said they would fool most people, even the police if they’re not looking carefully.”

“You went to all this trouble before even meeting us. What if you didn’t find us or we said no?” she’d said then.

Kellan was a difficult one to work out. Intruding in so suddenly and knowing way more about them than she liked. On the other hand, nothing Kellan had said rang as untrue and her stated motivations were about as noble as they could get.

No, Kellan wasn’t Okoye, but that didn’t mean she had to trust her.

“As I said, I couldn’t think of anything else, I was desperate, am desperate. I didn’t even want to think about you saying no,” Kellan said.

The conversation had devolved at that point into Kellan expressing all kinds of gratitude to them and Laura brushing it off. Later, after Kellan had collapsed on the guest room bed for what was probably the first time in a while, Laura had booked three tickets to a flight to Savannah first thing in the morning.

Now Laura had both the fake cards in her hands, absently rubbing them together.

“You know, I never thought about being a detective, but I guess it’s not that far away from what I was trying to become at Silas, still an investigator. Only instead of breaking a story after the investigation I’d drink dark coffee and hunt people down in a trench coat.”

“You watch too much television. Wouldn’t mind getting you in a trench coat though, I think you could pull that off nicely.”

_Preferably one with nothing underneath, so I could slowly take it off whenever we wanted and then_...

She shook the thought away, time and a place, dad and a guest in the house, luxury spa soon, _patience Karnstein._

Laura turned around. Carmilla’s arms stayed around her waist while Laura draped hers over Carmilla’s shoulders.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this? Me dragging you into whatever this will turn out to be?”

“I’d go with you anywhere,” she said and planted a kiss on Laura’s bare collar bone. “Besides, I’ve never had the chance to visit the burgers and freedom fries part of the New World.”

“What?” Laura said, incredulous. “You’ve never been to the US?”

“Have you?”
“Well, just the once, Disneyland, which is probably secretly its own sovereign entity if you think about it. So maybe not even once, but you are like, a centuries old ex-vampire, I always got a well-travelled vibe from you.”

“Contrary to what the average American might think, you don’t have to visit the United States to be ‘well-travelled.’ There is actually quite a lot of the world not located in America, the majority of it even.”

Laura chuckled.

“Okay, point taken. Wow, look at us, Hollis and Karnstein exploring the world together. I mean, Savannah isn’t exactly Paris or Florence, but.”

“Hollis and Karnstein?” she said, her voice going low and demur. “When exactly did your name become top billing in this story of ours?”

Laura’s eyes sparkled.

“Well, when I became the cool one of course. Happened around the time you threw out ‘Irinini Arammu’ as a bedroom line.”

“Oh, I see how it is, I deign to praise my love in the tongue of the ancients one time, and suddenly I’m the dorky one.”

The gap between their faces closed to almost nothing as they talked. Carmilla barely noticed it, so natural it was.

“Yes, that’s pretty much it. I see right through you, all the leather pants and raven hair and dark brooding can’t save you anymore. From now on, it’s Countess Karnstein the huge dor- mmm.”

As comebacks went, Carmilla quite liked this one. The one where she started kissing Laura as the last word in their bantering.

It didn’t take long for the jeans to come back off and for them to end up back in the bed.

This was likely going to be a constant problem for them. How were they ever going to get anywhere on time?

They were running rather late by the time they finally made it out of Laura’s old bedroom. Laura all ruffled hair and frenetic movements, Carmilla, quiet contentment and the ghost of a smile unwilling to leave her lips.

She always found herself to be calm after being intimate with Laura. Content and relaxed no matter what else was going on at the time, which for them was most often life-threatening danger.

A short time after being ‘rescued’ from her buried coffin by an errant bombshell, she’d read a book by a philosopher asserting that human’s had adapted their minds to their natural lifespan. Meaning that even if one’s body didn’t degenerate over time, they would be unable to keep up with an ever-increasing mountain of memories and experiences. Eventually, a person would experience too much for a human mind to handle, and they would go mad, no matter the condition of their body.
While she didn’t think herself mad, she could attest to the deleterious effects of centuries of dark memories. By the time she and Laura had first met, she’d been brooding more than ever. Constantly ruminating over her worst memories and the philosophers she’d turned to for help in understanding why she’d had to endure them, her mind a raging storm despite her outward appearance.

Being with Laura calmed that storm, a ray of sunshine breaking through the clouds. Her presence providing better answers than any philosophy book.

And so while everyone else in the house moved frantically about to catch a plane that would be replaced by another in no time at all. Carmilla merely relaxed against a wall in the living room and kept her eyes on Laura, calm and serene. Her personal storm had stilled for quite some time, its last flicker being washed away with her defeat of Gustav and his plan to turn her back into the killer she had used to be. No more storms, only sunshine, only Laura.

She didn’t care if that was sappy. She’d suffered for so long that she’d dare anyone to call her out on it.

Of course, all that appeared to have not done much to help her interact with people not Laura. But she supposed being happy, and content didn’t mean being perfect.

The packing continued at a frantic pace around her. She watched as Laura stopped for a second to pick up a glass of water and then, her eyes moving to something to her side, she abruptly dropped it. The glass shattered on the floor and the house went silent.

“Honey, are you okay?” the words came out of both Laura’s father and her own mouths at the same time.

Laura didn’t respond. Instead, she stared silently, and Carmilla followed her eyes to see she was looking at Kellan, who had entered the room a moment ago.

Laura blinked and shook herself.

“I’m sorry, I, I’ll clean it up, sorry about your glass, dad,” Mr Hollis rushed forwards, muttering that it was fine and picking up the shards. “Is that a shirt you brought here Ms Kellan?”

Kellan was wearing a red plaid shirt in place of the dirty baggy clothing she’d arrived in. Carmilla noticed that it looked a lot like the shirts Laura would often wear.

Kellan opened her mouth to speak, but Mr Hollis interrupted.

“Oh, no I gave it to her, couldn’t let her stay in what she was wearing. Couldn’t find much that fit her, so I had to go with that one,” he looked up at Kellan, “it was my late wife’s actually.”

His words sounded almost apologetic, though to whom it wasn’t quite clear as he then immediately shared a glance with Laura.

Kellan looked to Laura, concern on her face.

“I’m so sorry if I—”

“No, it’s fine.” Laura waved her hand, the words at complete odds with her demeanour. “I just got startled, rushing all this packing I guess, I uh, need to… got water on my pants,” she trailed off and headed out of the room.

Carmilla’s instinctive reaction was to follow, but a part of her argued that it might not be the best
thing to do. Despite how close they had gotten, Carmilla still didn’t know much about Laura’s mother. She had gathered that they had died during Laura’s childhood but other than that, the woman was a mystery.

With that in mind, she pondered whether Laura needed a moment alone or whether she needed someone at her side.

The pondering didn’t take long, seeing Kellan in her mother’s clothing had clearly upset Laura, and an upset Laura Hollis just wasn’t something she could resist trying to rectify. Leaving Mr Hollis and Kellan to their own devices, she followed Laura out of the room.

After a short search, she found her outside in the back garden they had talked in earlier. Laura’s back was against the brick wall of the house, facing the ancient clothesline. Her head was bowed, and her arms crossed around her belly.

The plane they were failing terribly to be on time for was the first flight out in the morning, and hence the suburb was currently mostly still asleep, only the odd chirp of an early bird to be heard.

Laura heard her coming and looked up at her. Her eyes were sad and distant, but the smile assured Carmilla that she had made the right choice in following.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

Carmilla nestled up to her, mimicking Laura’s position against the wall. Laura immediately rested her head sideways on Carmilla’s shoulder. A silent moment passed before she spoke.

“Sorry, just needed a minute. I’m fine.”

Carmilla kissed the top of her head and wrapped an arm around her back.

“It’s okay if you’re not.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m being dumb. I shouldn’t have reacted like that, it was only a shirt. It’s just I hadn’t seen it for a while. For a second it was like seeing a ghost.”

Without much knowledge of Laura’s mother, Carmilla struggled to find the right words to comfort her. She wanted to know more, but didn’t want to push, certainly not so abruptly.

Instead, she went for something she did know.

“I love you,” she said. “You can tell me anything.”

Laura responded to that by kissing her on the cheek and manoeuvring them into a hug.

“Thank you. I know I can and, I guess if you had to tell me a bunch of horrible things that happened in your past in… excruciating detail. It’s only fair I do the same. It’s just, maybe not right now.”

“In your own time and only if you want to.”

Laura tightened the hug for a second and then broke away.

“Alright, we really have to get going. Plane to catch, mysteries to unravel, kids to rescue.”

“Spa’s to relax in.”
Laura laughed.

“I can always rely on you to remember the important things.”

Mr Hollis’ car was old and cramped and noisy.

She and Laura had piled into the back seat if she was going to be pressed up against someone in a cramped space she knew which someone that would be. When Mr Hollis had asked about the seating arrangements Carmilla had responded by taking Laura’s hand and gunning straight to the back of the car, no words needed.

The world outside could have been rainbows and sunshine with dancing birds and she wouldn’t have known inside this tiny metal monstrosity. She’d once talked to an old man who’d been a tank driver during the World Wars at a bar in Prague, his vivid descriptions matched this experience far too well.

As Mr Hollis drove, Kellan and Laura talked loudly over the car’s tortured engine.

“What’s the name of the school you teach at?” Laura asked

“Salvation Hill High School, it’s named after the hill it was originally built on. A battle was fought there during the civil war. I don’t know the details but a glorious last stand of some sort I think. A lot of idiot men seem to think that kind of horrible stuff is worth naming things for apparently.”

Laura started typing on a tablet she had on her lap.

“Possible curse or hauntings,” she muttered to herself as she typed, low enough that Carmilla was sure no one else could hear it.

Carmilla had noticed Laura shift into research mode as soon as they had returned from the back garden. Her mouth set determinedly, her face radiating concentration. This was how Laura looked when she was about to start researching how to solve a problem and not stop until she found a solution. No matter how much cocoa was going to have to be sacrificed to keep her awake.

When they had first met, Carmilla had seen it as her being prissy and tightly wound, a brown nosing overachiever. Now she’d grown to appreciate it. Laura didn’t shy away from hard work, and her passion could be contagious, intoxicating even. When Laura made something her mission, she had a way of attracting people to her like a magnet. Her energy and drive such that people found themselves helpless to resist joining her cause.

Plus, when she was like this, Carmilla found her so very cute, a tiny ball of tenacious ferocity.

“When did the first kid go missing?” Laura asked next.

“Almost a couple of months ago, Wallis, the Meyers’ boy, it all started with him. He was at the Bishop's house. All four of them were there, including my Lexi. It was a weekend, and they finished late, Wallis didn’t make it home. We were all so shaken the next day. No one realised it was only going to get worse.”

The back and forth between them continued. Laura would ask a question, Kellan would respond,
and then Laura would type it down. The names of Lexi’s friends, When precisely they had been taken? What had the police told her? Did they have any enemies? Carmilla was sure that Laura had organised her tablet to put all of Kellan’s answers in neat and tidy boxes.

“Why did Lexi think the people at the school were involved?” Laura was getting to the good questions now, as far as Carmilla was concerned.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t let her explain. I didn’t react to her to telling me that very well. I’ve been working with some of the faculty for years, the idea that some of them are kidnapping students,” she shuddered in her seat.

“So, you have no idea who she suspected?”

“No idea and to be honest, I’m actually having a harder time believing that someone at the school was kidnapping kids than there being some kind of monster involved.”

“No, specific suspects,” Laura muttered again as she typed. “So about that monster. Uh, monster?”

“Lexi was sure of that, one hundred percent. You should understand, her father was in the NSA, so never being completely certain of something without concrete evidence was drilled into her since she was born, heavens, Ryan rubbed off on me that way too. But Lexi knew there was a monster, or some creature at least, of that she was certain.”

“Did she see it herself?” Carmilla asked.

“Yes, she and Abigail started searching by themselves without telling me or anyone else after Phillip went missing as well. Lexi said they were chased by a monster, something that howled like a wolf but stood up on two legs.”

“A werewolf?” Laura asked dubiously, she looked to Carmilla. “Are those a thing? Please tell me those aren’t a thing. We already have vampires and let’s just say recent popular fiction hasn’t been great with mixing those two things.”

“Not a thing,” Carmilla confirmed. “I know of shape changers who probably could turn into a wolf if they wanted to, or magic spells to transform someone into a wolf, or maybe just create a wolf from nothing. But no, werewolves are not a thing.”

“No… such thing… as werewolves, I’ll file that one under ‘thank the Gods.’”

Then she and Laura both almost suffered tragically fatal head injuries as Mr Hollis slammed on the brakes, jerking them face first into the front seats. Mr Hollis pulled down his window and shouted out some invectives. He received a great deal in return before they got moving again.

“I thought Canada was supposed to be full of nice people,” Carmilla drawled.

“Reports of our amicability are greatly exaggerated,” Laura said, rubbing her forehead.

“Well,” Kellan said, ignoring their close brush with death, “that’s what she said, a monster that howled like a wolf and stood on two legs.”

They’d certainly dealt with stranger things. Laura typed it down.

“Okay, that’s a good start, we can work with this. We’ve done more with less information.”

Carmilla felt like a pea in a thoroughly shaken tin can by the time they got to the airport and
gratefully escaped the metal horror of Mr Hollis’ car.

They barely made it to the gate in time and hence their farewell to Mr Hollis was a quick one. Laura still managed to find the time to hug him, and Carmilla was close enough to hear their words.

“I’m so sorry about the shirt Laura-”

“It’s fine-”

“No, it wasn’t. I should have thought about it, found something else that wasn’t your mother’s. You shouldn’t have had to be reminded about all that today. Not with everything else you’re doing. I’m sorry.”

Carmilla saw Laura tighten the hug. She hated herself for it, but she felt the slightest twinge of jealousy. This was something Laura and her father shared and no one else. Shared pain, probably one of the most enduring of bonds there was. Despite everything she and Laura had gone through, this was something for them alone.

She shook the jealousy away. She couldn’t think so reductively, childishly even. Laura’s unique bond with her father didn’t diminish what they had between themselves. Besides, she could hardly expect Laura to fully understand the bond that had been between her and Mattie. This was no different.

No, this was her more possessive traits she had developed as a vampire coming to the fore, wanting Laura to be hers and hers alone. At least she could recognise them for what they were now, unhealthy and unneeded. It made it easier to clamp down on them. If she truly loved Laura, she should be happy that she had a loving father, not oddly jealous. She focused on that.

Laura kissed her casually on the lips when she finished her goodbyes and then again right before they boarded as if some bored God had decided to grant her an award for her apparent leaps in emotional maturity.

She slept for most of the flight. Dreaming of Spa’s, Laura, Laura in a spa, her in a spa, Laura and her both in a spa, her subconscious was pretty clear on what it wanted at the moment.

She only woke up when the plane’s wheels hit the tarmac and so her first ever steps in the United States of America turned out to be not particularly ostentatious. Instead, she groggily leaned against Laura as Kellan led them through a twisting maze of noisy travellers and annoying security guards.

The world became nothing but checkpoints and lines. Endless and moving slower than a tortoise on Xanax. The airport itself was shiny and sleek, marble floors that squeaked a little when she stepped on them and a spacious mall under a grandiose circular window ceiling.

She probably would have liked the place if she could move a muscle without hitting a random passerby or wasn’t being asked inane questions by bored looking uniforms.

After what felt like an excruciatingly long time, the main exit was finally before them, large transparent sliding doors leading to the outside world. She sighed gratefully at the sight of it.

“How can you be tired already? We only just got here,” Laura teased, eliciting a groan.

Unlike her, Laura brimmed with energy, a bounce in her step. Excitement tinged her words and radiated off her face. Carmilla reminded herself that Laura hadn’t travelled as much as she had. Georgia might not be Florence, but for her, it was a new place to explore and experience regardless.
Carmilla let that energy and excitement flow through her. It was almost tangible, picking her up out of her stupor as effectively as a mug of caffeine might have.

“Almost there,” Kellan said. “I may have kinda just left my car in the car park when I got on the flight. I might have mentioned I wasn’t feeling myself. It could still be there I suppose.”

As she said that Kellan reached the door and it began to slide open, a gust of fresh air came from outside.

“Freeze!”

The shout reverberated around the building and was soon followed by other shouts of the same word, coming from multiple directions.

In a flash, men in white security uniforms surrounded them, all of which brandishing firearms in their direction. The people around them darted away in a panic, some of them screaming.

Laura and Kellan threw their hands up in the air, while Carmilla merely folded hers across her chest and glared around balefully.

As the security guards advanced on them, she turned to Laura, a hint of a wry smile on her face.

“Welcome to America.”
Laura

She sat alone in the dark room, staring at the screen.

She needed to turn it off, or run out of the room or even just cover her eyes and ears, anything to avoid hearing the words that were about to come through it. She couldn’t move though. Somehow she was stuck. She squeezed her eyes shut, but nothing could stop her from hearing the words. Her heart constricted as a voice came through the screen.

“My Laura, my darling Laura, I have never loved anything in this world as much as I have you.”

“Laura.”

She snapped awake with a gasp. Bright light hit her eyes as soon as she opened them, causing her to blink rapidly. As she waited for her eyes to adjust, she noticed there were arms around her, holding her firmly. She heard her name again, the voice close and concerned.

She looked up again and saw Carmilla’s face inches from her own.

“Laura?”

It took her a second to respond. Still blinking in reaction to the light, she tried to get her bearings.

She and Carmilla were sitting on a metal bench in a square, featureless cell, prison bars on two sides, harsh cement walls on the others. Kellan sat hunched in the corner, snoring softly. Other than her they were alone in the cell, though in the corridors outside people walked past intermittently. Most were in police uniforms.

There weren’t any windows and the place was lit up by the artificial lights that had stung her eyes when she’d woken up.

She turned to Carmilla.

“Just a bad dream, I’m fine.”

Carmilla shook her head.

“No, you aren’t. Laura, you’re shaking. Here.”

She tightened her hug around Laura, and her hands started massaging Laura’s back. She then kissed Laura’s cheek and the top of her head, reassurance in every movement and gesture.

Laura relaxed into her, closing her eyes and slowing her breaths.

“Alright, a really bad dream I guess. But I’m okay now that I’m back to a world that still has cocoa.”

She tried to laugh after that, but even to her it was unconvincing, there was no way Carmilla wouldn’t see past it.

Carmilla kept the hug tight and continued her ministrations by gently rubbing her cheek against Laura’s. One of the many cat-like habits that Carmilla still retained post vampire.

It was remarkably comforting for so odd an action. Laura had gotten used to such peculiarities over time. Now they only reinforced how unique she felt Carmilla was, truly one of a kind.
They stayed together like that for a while, watching the people walk passed the cell. None of the ones in uniform spared them a glance. A few visitors, both the voluntary and the involuntary kind, did, however. One of them, a young woman in a punk rock outfit even gave Laura a smile as officers shuffled her past. Strangely, Carmilla’s hug seemed to tighten even further when that happened.

Eventually, once she was sure she’d stopped shaking she spoke.

“So, we’re not telling Dad about any of this.”

“Agreed.”

“How long was I asleep?”

“A couple of hours, which means we’ve been in here for at least four. I can’t believe these Schlägers can just leave us in here without even telling us why.”

The security guards had been exceedingly harsh with their arrest. They’d first roughly brought Carmilla to the ground and then Laura, protesting their brutality vociferously, had been hit in the back with a baton, before being cuffed. Luckily Carmilla was already cuffed as well at that point or things may have gotten ugly. Even a human Carmilla had fought and beaten Professional Corvae mercenaries at the Uffizi. Laura didn’t doubt she could have gone through simple security guards like a buzz saw.

After a small wait nursing their smarting wounds under armed guard, actual police had shown up to arrest them properly. She’d been rather excited to explore Georgia while she was here. It was rather unfortunate that her first taste of it was from the back of a police car while handcuffed.

After a short drive, the officers had dropped them off at the nearest police station, where they had been taken to this cell and here they had stayed for the past few hours.

“To think I was sure we were going to a place like this after what happened in the Uffizi. Guess I was right, just took a while longer than expected,” Laura said.

“We didn’t do anything thing wrong, we just got here. These assholes better have a damn good explanation for this, why did they arrest us? Why has it taken this long for someone to talk to us? Why did they hit you?”

Carmilla spat out the last question with venom, and she started massaging Laura’s back again.

“Well, that last question will probably be some vague line about us resisting arrest, despite that being a load a crap. I’m struggling to think of the answer to the other two though. Maybe these police guys know we saved the world and really want our autographs.”

Carmilla grunted but otherwise didn’t respond.

They watched a few more people walk past the cell.

“Alright then,” Laura said, “looks like we’re going to have to entertain ourselves until someone finally comes.”

“People can see through the bars.”

“Not that!” Laura laughed. “Something else that’s fun. I would ask you to tell me a story to pass the time. But someone might overhear and find out you’re, you know.”
“Probably not the best idea,” Carmilla agreed.

“Maybe instead of remembering your past, past. How about something a bit more recent? I don’t think we ever got to finish our last movie night argument.”

“You mean whether or not Princess Bride is dumb or not? We did finish, I was right, it was dumb.”

“You don’t mean that. Deep down inside you loved it when Wesley saved Buttercup and they lived happily ever after.”

“Unless I have depths hidden from even myself, the answer is no.”

“C’mon, tell me that you didn’t secretly want to be Wesley, sailing the oceans and sweeping a beautiful princess off her feet.”

Carmilla ran a hand through Laura’s hair.

“Who says I haven’t already done those things? ”

“Hey! I thought we said no talking about stuff from your… long past.”

“I wasn’t, at least not the last part.”

“Oh,” Laura said, cottoning on.

She lifted her head up to kiss Carmilla lightly, before relaxing back into her embrace.

“Wouldn’t mind being back at the cottage, watching a different movie now. This one about people endlessly walking passed a jail cell is getting a little repetitive. Where is the remote?” Laura said.

“Too many characters and they’re all boring,” Carmilla agreed, “then again I thought the three we had at your father’s house was too many. To think we could have had a couple more.”

She shuddered for effect.

Laura didn’t respond, and Carmilla noticed her silence.

“I’m sorry that the ginger scrubs didn’t show up. I know you wanted to see them again.”

Laura sighed.

“The thing is I don’t even know if I did want to see them again really. I was so mad at them for just leaving you there in that pit with me dead in your arms. They just left you there. I tried so hard to let it go, and when I finally feel ready to forgive and reconnect, suddenly it turns out they’re ignoring me? Like I did something wrong? I don’t know how to feel about that, to be honest.”

Carmilla took a moment to respond.

“I know that they were your friends, regardless of what you might be to each other now. So I won’t say everything that’s going through my mind. Just, know that if they don’t want to talk to you, then that’s their loss, not yours. I might be a little biased, but rejecting the friendship of Laura Hollis seems like the dumbest thing someone could do. I can’t imagine anyone not wanting to spend time with you.”

Carmilla had said so many kind things to her in their time together, yet their frequency never lessened their impact, warming her from heart to soul.
She was still thinking of a way to show her appreciation when a voice rang from outside the cell.

“Mary Kellan? Where are you Mary, which cell did they put you in?”

Laura gently pushed herself out of Carmilla’s embrace and sat up on the bench. She looked over at Kellan, who was still sound asleep in the corner.

“She’s over here, in this cell. She’s asleep,” she called out to the voice.

A woman came walking into view, heralded by footsteps that echoed off the floor, easily heard even over the bustle of other passer-by’s. She wore professional clothing but in a loose manner. Her white shirt unbuttoned at the top and her grey suit rumpled and creased. Most striking though was her brown cowboy hat. At the sight of it, Laura felt like she was in a western, waiting on the Sherriff to let them out of jail in time for a dramatic shootout.

She looked them over and spotted Kellan in the corner.

“God damn it,” she said, her southern accent much more pronounced than Kellan’s, “I’m guessing you two are the ones who were with her at the airport?”

They both nodded.

“I’m sorry, this was not what I intended. I’m Detective Beattie”

She squatted down in front of them.

“Look I don’t know who you two are, but Mary Kellan is a Person of Interest in an ongoing investigation. She wasn’t supposed to leave the state, never mind the country.”

She sighed heavily and rubbed her eyes. Her face had more than a few crinkles, though Laura couldn’t tell if they were from her age or her job.

“But I told them to be on the look-out for her, not rough her up and throw her into lockup while I’m on my lunch break. I’m really sorry. Those dumb TSA shits are basically meat heads with sticks. They probably jumped at the chance to take someone down. I wasn’t worried that she was running from justice, I was worried that she wasn’t in a good frame of mind after her loss and we’d find her in the middle of nowhere.”

“So… you’re letting us out?” Laura asked.

Beattie nodded.

“Of course, but could I ask you who you are to her and what you were doing here? Are you friends of hers providing comfort?”

Laura hesitated before answering. She wished they’d had a chance to talk to Kellan about how exactly to go about talking to the police. She decided on the truth.

“We came to try and help find her daughter, as well as the other missing kids.”

Beattie’s eyes became concerned.

“She hasn’t roped you into anything, has she? She’s not in a good frame of mind right now, and I know that she currently has some, how should I put it, outlandish theories on what happened to her daughter. You have to understand she is going through a highly stressful time, the early stages of grief.”
“Grief?” Laura repeated, “Grief is what happens when someone dies. Lexi and those other kids are missing not dead. Grief is what happens when you give up, she hasn’t given up. Have you?”

“Of course we haven’t, but this is a horrible situation, and one has to accept the probability-”

“The probability? Yeah, it’s kinda sounding like you’ve given up. Four kids are missing somewhere out there, and you’re talking about ‘outlandish theories’ and grief? What are your theories? Did you even try to look into what Kellan told you before you gave up?”

“Nobody has given up!” Beattie snapped, her eyes flashing. “Who are you two exactly by the way? You sidestepped the question.”

Laura reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out the fake Private Investigator IDs.

“Laura Hollis and Carmilla Karnstein, we’re Private Investigators.”

Her stomach churned, and Carmilla stiffened next to her as she gave Beattie the cards through the bars. Kellan hadn’t been completely sure about whether real police would be fooled by the cards. Now would not be the best time to find out they wouldn’t.

Beattie looked them over slowly, her eyes flicking between them.

“God damn it, it all makes sense now. You’re pulling a con.”

The words oh crap! Reverberated inside her mind.

“What? No! I can explain-” Laura started in a rush, but Beattie cut her off.

“I see how it is. Ms Kellan was searching for someone to listen to her crazy grief borne ideas and somehow she found you. Let me guess, she’s paying you two PI’s a healthy sum, and in return, you feed her delusions until you suck her dry, that about right?”

“Wait, that’s what you think we’re lying about? I mean no. No, that’s not what we’re doing. She’s not paying us anything. We’re doing this, err, pro bono.”

Laura nodded profusely and turned to Carm to get her to do the same.

Beattie stared at them for a long moment.

“So let me get this straight, you and you’re silent colleague here-”

“Fiancé,” Carmilla interjected, because apparently she just had to, despite it being very much not helpful.

“Oh sure, of course, fiancé, why not? You and your fiancé slash suddenly able to talk colleague here are PI’s that Kellan went all the way to Canada to meet and now you’re working pro bono for her out of… the kindness of your hearts?”

Her question hung in the air for a few moments.

“Yes?” Laura ventured, drawing out the word.

Beattie sighed and took off her hat, revealing short blond hair with a ponytail.

“I’m not sure what to make of that, but these.” She motioned to the cards. “Seem to check out, and you’ve done nothing illegal. I can keep you in here for a while longer but how about we make a
deal. I’ll let you out now if you promise to make sure Mary goes home for the day. I want her to get some rest.”

“Deal,” Laura said.

Beattie stood up and began to open the cell door.

“Actually wait,”

Beattie looked at her quizzically. Carmilla did the same next to her.

“You want me to wait on letting you both out of a prison cell?”

“No, I don’t mean wait on that. But I was wondering if we could ask you some questions before we left. We really are trying to help find those kids, anything you could tell us would be appreciated.”

Sighing was quickly becoming a signature move for Beattie at this point. She rubbed her eyes again as she did so.

“Fine.” She opened the cell door. “Come with me. We’ll let Mary sleep a bit longer.”

Beattie led them through a few busy narrow corridors before reaching a small office. It had her name on the door. The office was stuffy, lived in. She’d probably been working in it long enough for it to become a second home judging from how it looked.

She sat them down on some well-worn chairs and brushed some papers off her desk to make some room.

“Alright, what do you want to ask?” she said once she sat down.

“Ah, well, um,” Laura had been making things up as she went along and asking the detective some questions sounded like a good idea a minute ago. But now to her embarrassment, she realised she couldn’t think of a single thing a PI would ask in these situations.

Beattie waited for her, impatience on her face.

“How about you start with the beginning, the first kid that went missing, tell us about that,” Carmilla said smoothly. Laura could have kissed her.

Beattie leant back in her chair.

“A couple of months ago, a boy, Wallis Meyer went missing coming home from a friend’s house, the Bishop residence. Nice people, though very poor. I got assigned the case, and I have to confess, I made no progress whatsoever. I found no evidence of any kind, either at the house or in the surrounding area. It’s like he just vanished. If you’re hoping for any clues in regards to his disappearance, I’m afraid I got nothing. It was, highly frustrating… for all involved.”

The detective’s face darkened greatly, and her eyes grew sad. Laura wished she hadn’t been so hard on her earlier in the cell. Perhaps Beattie really had tried her best.

“And the next kid?” Carmilla prompted.

“Phillip Turner, yeah more luck there in terms of evidence, less luck in terms of actually finding him. The boy was apparently really into wildlife, so to take his mind off the loss of his friend his parents took him to the Okefenokee. It’s a natural swamp in the south. Not my ideal getaway but each to their own.”
She waved her hand airily.

“In the night the parents lost track of him, heard a ‘horrible howling’ and screams. They called us when he didn’t turn up.”

“Maybe something ate him,” Carmilla said. Laura winced at how casually.

“Yeah, good call Columbo. But while we did find signs of a struggle, there was no blood, no body. Even if a damn ‘gator got him and dragged him into the water we’d have found something, and anyway, alligators don’t howl, no animal that lives in that swamp does.”

Another sigh and another rub of the eyes.

“Then I got pulled off the case.”

“What, why?” Laura asked.

“Got bumped up the chain, higher powers getting involved, or so my boss said. I assumed Feds, but that’s just a guess, haven’t been told a thing about it since. That’s what I told Mary last time we spoke. That I wished I could do more, but it was no longer my case.”

“So, you don’t know anything about who took over the case at all?”

“Nope, whoever they are, they’re not here. Look, I can give you this.” She picked out a small folder full of paper out of a stack and moved it across the desk towards them.

“This has the addresses of all the victims, crime scene photos, everything I managed to put together before I got taken off. I can’t do anything with it anymore, but maybe you can. I would have given it to the people who took over if they’d bothered to come talk to me.”

Laura took the folder.

“Thank you for this and I’m sorry about what I said earlier, I didn’t realise-”

“It’s fine, it isn’t like you were all that wrong, it was my job to find those kids, and I couldn’t do it. I really hope you two can do better, those were good kids, even if so much of the town didn’t think so.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Oh, just that the kids weren’t very popular. Outcasts, you know? The ones that get picked on by bullies during lunch break. I’ve interacted with the Kellan and Bishop girls a few times in the past. They were always kind and eager to help, good kids. They didn’t deserve to get picked on so much, and they didn’t deserve whatever has happened to them.”

A few steps out the Police Stations main doors and Laura found herself in the heart of Savannah.

The city hummed and buzzed with activity. An endless stream of cars going up and down roads lined with an impressive amount of greenery, both large trees with drooping branches and shrubbery. The large trees, in particular, dominated her view, their green contrasting with the orange and white brick of the surrounding buildings and the grey of the roads and streets. While Florence had been
cramped and small despite its beauty, her first real impression of Savannah was one of space and fresh air.

She’d read up a little on Savannah before they’d left and found out it was a coastal city. The breeze she felt was most likely coming from that coast, and above her, a flock of seagulls flew over the station.

She was first out the door. Her confiscated luggage in tow with Carmilla and a recently awakened Kellan behind her.

She walked up to the side of the road and hailed a passing by taxi. As it pulled up to them, she turned around to Carmilla behind her.

“I say we take Kellan home first and then get started.”

“We’re not going to our hotel after tucking soccer mum into bed?”

Laura smiled at her sympathetically.

“Sorry Carm, no spa yet, we’ve already lost too much time thanks to those thugs at the airport. I thought we’d check out the school after we get Kellan home. The last thing that detective said back there, about those kids being bullied? Between that, Kellan’s daughter accusing the faculty and the fact we know all the kids went to this school, it’s sounding like a pretty good place to visit.”

Carmilla shamelessly looked her up and down.

“Well, alright then Detective Hollis. Turns out Laura Hollis PI taking charge of her investigation is pretty hot. We definitely need to get you that trench coat and the next time we’re alone.” She leant in and whispered into Laura’s ear, “you play the detective, I’ll play the femme fatale.”

Laura shivered a little and felt herself blushing. Certainly not Carmilla’s worst idea. The taxi beeped, and Laura shook herself.

“We’ll make a mental note of that for…later.” She looked over Carmilla’s shoulder at Kellan, who seemed to be still waking up. “Ms Kellan, we’re going to take this taxi and get you home okay?”

Kellan nodded and allowed Laura to guide her into the car. Carmilla however, hung back.

“It’s fine. You go on ahead, I’ve had enough of riding in the back of cars for one day. If we’re going to be moving around this place and it looks like we’re going to have to, we can’t rely on Kellan finding her car or worse, public transportation.” She shuddered like she was talking about a horrible disease. “I’ve got a better idea. You take Kellan home, and I’ll catch up once I’ve got us some transport.”

Laura took a second to process that, she and Carmilla hadn’t separated much these past months, it was silly, but her first thought was to straight up tell Carmilla ‘no’. She caught herself before she actually said it. They were grown adults madly in love, not attached to the hip.

“You sure?” she said instead.

“Yeah, it’ll be fine, give me that piece of paper with Kellan’s address on it. Trust me, you’ll like what I have in mind.”

Laura did as she was asked and then embraced her with a kiss.
“See you soon, okay?”

After saying their goodbyes, Laura watched her through the car’s windows right up until the taxi turned the corner and she disappeared out of sight. It felt weird, abruptly finding herself alone with a zonked out lady she barely knew in the back of a taxi while it drove through a state she’d never been in before.

*You lived through an apocalypse at Silas and gargoyles and Corvae goons in Florence, Hollis. I think you can handle a taxi ride through Georgia,* she chided herself.

As the taxi drove towards Kellan’s home, Laura got to see more of the city through its dirty windows. Mostly more big green trees between old looking buildings. Laura saw that many of the trees had what appeared to be white moss hanging from their branches. She’d never seen anything quite like it before. It looked as if the trees had grown big shaggy beards, like dwarfs from some fantasy novel.

“Spanish Moss.”

Laura jumped a little and turned towards the voice. It came from Kellan, who was watching her as she sat slumped in her side of the backseat.

“Sorry?”

“The stuff hanging from the trees, it’s called Spanish Moss. It isn’t actually moss though. It’s a flowering plant that looks like moss.”

When Laura didn’t respond, she held up a hand.

“Sorry, I can’t turn it off. Being a teacher,” she said when Laura looked at her quizzically. “Always looking to impart knowledge whenever we can. It’s not important, forget I said anything.”

Laura looked back out the window.

“It’s beautiful. There’s nothing like it back where I grew up.”

“You wouldn’t have, it’s local to us mostly.”

“I guess I look a dumb tourist, gawking at stuff you’ve seen since you were little.”

“Oh, I didn’t grow up here, heavens no,” she chuckled lightly. “I guess I’ve been here long enough that my old accent is gone. That’s a little sad. Ireland.” She pointed to herself with a thumb.

“No way,” Laura said in genuine surprise.

“Yeah way.” Kellan smiled at her, it was kind. “Belfast girl, through and through. I was on holiday in London when I met Ryan. He was on holiday as well and we, just fell into each other. It took a lot of convincing but eventually, I agreed to settle down here instead of Belfast. And then we had Lexi.”

Her eyes glazed over as she reminisced, happier times.

“My parents met and got together overseas as well,” Laura said. “My dad was visiting family in Italy while my mum was on holiday there celebrating her college graduation.”

She wasn’t sure why she was talking about that. It seemed to come up naturally.

“That’s so lovely. Italy is beautiful, a great place for people to find love,” Kellan said
She paused for a moment.

“I’m sorry for any pain I caused by you seeing me in this shirt. I should have just kept what I had on. I think your father was just trying to be helpful.”

“No, it’s fine. It suits you. I was being dumb, it’s just a shirt.”

Kellan shook her head.

“I know that even the littlest of things can be more than ‘just a something’ when they belonged to someone you cared about who’s long gone. As soon as we get to my home, I’ll change into something of my own, and you can have it back.”

“Thank you.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Kellan spoke again.

“How about you and Carmilla, how did you two meet?”

“Oh, we definitely didn’t meet on a holiday. The opposite of that pretty much. You said you read a report on us, so you might have some idea.”

“That’s how you two met, during all that chaos? So you’re telling me you both saved the world and got the girl at the same time?”

Laura laughed, she hadn’t thought about it that way.

“Yeah, let’s keep it low key, but we’re basically real life action heroes.”

They both laughed together. The buildings outside were becoming more residential. They were probably nearing Kellan’s house.

“Lexi would love you,” Kellan said. “She’s always buying comic books with ladies flying around saving the world. She’d love to meet someone who did it for real.”

“I think she’d be a little disappointed with me. All I did was hug the bad guy and die, no flying around and punching things like Supergirl. Carm though, she’s amazing, the real hero.”

“Why do I get the feeling she would say the opposite?”

Laura couldn’t suppress a smirk in response.

“She’s needed heroes this past year more than ever, my Lexi. Those damn bullies never leaving her and her friends alone and then Ryan passing.” She visibly bit back tears. “I tried so hard to be that hero for her, but I couldn’t bring back her father, or stop those bullies and now I can’t even find her.”

The taxi started pulling up a driveway. They’d reached Kellan’s home.

Kellan brought her hands tiredly up to her face.

“All I want to do is hold her, it’s only been a week, but it feels like so much longer.”

Laura spoke without thinking, the words pouring out.

“You will. We are going to find her and you’re going to hold your daughter in your arms again. I promise you that.”
It didn’t have a white picket fence but other than that Kellan’s home looked picturesque from the outside. Two stories, a spacious front garden, a double driveway, sturdy and immaculate looking white brick, this was either were the Brady Bunch lived or where eighties slasher villains hunted down lustful teens.

To think Carmilla had told her how cliché suburbia her home had been.

There was a car in the driveway, and as Kellan moved to unlock the front door, Laura examined it. A white station wagon, it looked expensive but was currently filthy, dirt and mud all over the sides and bird stains on the top. She found a piece of paper wedged in the windscreen and took a look at the writing scribbled on it.

*Saved this from being impounded, keys on your kitchen table, Detective Beattie.*

After following her inside while dragging both Carmilla’s and her own luggage behind her, it didn’t take long to persuade Kellan to get some more sleep. The woman seemed to be in a permanent state of exhaustion and Laura wondered how much sleep she’d gotten in the past week.

Kellan sleeping in her bedroom left Laura alone to explore the house. The place had a slightly stale feel to it from being disused for a few days, probably longer considering Laura doubted Kellan had been in it much while she was searching for her daughter. A thin layer of dust covered almost everything, and spider webs were in the corners. The wooden floors creaked as she walked on them. She lingered around a shelf full of family photos. Happy smiling faces of the family over the years. One in particular caught her eye, a picture of Lexi dressed up as a superhero hugging her mother as she put a tiara on her head to complete the costume.

She found the girl’s bedroom upstairs, though nothing on first glance gave away it as such. Posters of action movies and comic book heroes lined the walls and figurines lay scattered around in every nook and cranny. Laura went up to a window next to the bed. It looked out over the side of the house. Underneath it was a black scrape, a shoe scrape?

Laura opened the window and looked down. The drop onto the tiled roof wasn’t a large one. A stealthy minded person might consider that a better option than walking down a set of creaky stairs and wooden floor to leave the house.

“Little adventurer aren’t you? Jumping out of windows to sneak out, maybe she’s the cool spy person in the family,” she muttered to herself.

But where was the girl going? Was she just going on a late night run that her mother had said she enjoyed? Or did she have a more specific destination in mind?

Laura started rummaging through the bedroom. She hoped Kellan wouldn’t mind the intrusion, but they had brought them here to investigate after all. If she had been in Lexi’s position, she would have written down everything she’d learned from her friend's disappearances, either on paper or on a computer. Perhaps Lexi had done the same. She went through draws, looked under the bed, parsed through a stack of comics in case the girl had hidden something between the pages. Eventually, after going through the closet and finding still nothing, she gave up. Either Lexi hadn’t
bothered to record anything, or she did it on something not here.

She came back down the stairs and eagerly awaited Carmilla’s arrival.

She found a few trivial tasks to do while she did that. She called the hotel to inform them they’d be checking in late, rustled up some food from the kitchen cupboards and after a short search, she found the wifi password in a small drawer next to the kitchen. All the while tapping on her tablet and looking through Detective Beattie’s folder to organise what they had learned so far. She hummed to herself softly as she worked.

Beattie had confirmed the child disappearances, so at the very least they could rule out Kellan merely being a crazed lunatic. Other than confirmations on what they already knew though, the detective hadn’t given them much new information. The kids had gone missing one by one and apparently there was some kind of two-legged howling creature involved.

Perhaps if Beattie were still on the case, they’d have more information. Laura had found it strange that the detective had been taken off without even being told who was taking over. According to Beattie, whoever had hadn’t even bothered to ask her any questions or collaborate in any way. Maybe she should have tried asking Beattie’s boss, but she didn’t want to press their luck too much with their fake IDs. She would rather stay out of jail for the time being thank you very much.

She’d only been half joking to Carmilla about not telling her father about being arrested. Trivial or not, the prospect of telling him she’d technically spent time in a jail cell seemed scarier than telling him about all the most dangerous parts of her adventures. She remembered the first time she’d had to tell her father she’d gotten a detention. This felt a lot like that, strange as that may be. She supposed that was the prissy little overachiever still in her, desperate not to let her father or anyone else think of her as ever being capable of doing the wrong thing, even if she hadn’t actually done anything to deserve being in that jail cell. Or the detention for that matter, the Vice-Principal had embezzled funds, and she’d proved it later that year. Who’s the nosy busy body now Mr Eklund?

She smiled at the memory and then shook it away to refocus. She kept looking through Beattie’s folder. Everything the detective had talked about was there, sans the piece of paper with Kellan’s address she’d given to Carmilla.

She got to the photos Beattie’s people had taken in the swamp the second kid, Phillip, had gone missing in. A lot of them were incomprehensible to her, but luckily they had notes underneath explaining what she was looking at. Apparently, they thought some kind of animal had grabbed the boy and dragged him… somewhere. That literally was the word used on the page, somewhere. Beattie hadn’t been lying when she said they had no real clue what happened to those kids.

In the end, the most interesting thing she found was the written down testimonies of the parents. She read the father’s first.

We couldn’t see much past the tent. There was this fog, so thick, that came out of nowhere, we could barely see our own hands. But, after the noise stopped it went away so quickly. It just vanished.

Then the mothers.

The noise was deafening. It was like the swamp had come alive, even the ground was moving, I could feel it shaking. And through it all, this howling shriek like a huge wolf. I thought we were all going to die.

Yeah, somehow she didn’t think the kid had been grabbed by a common wild animal. Otherwise, David Attenborough had a lot of explaining to do for not telling everyone about the swamp alligator
species that could create fog at will and shake the ground.

But how could she find out more? Back at Silas, this would have been around the time she hit the books to research what the creature could be. The internet had been a resource too, but ultimately the books at the university’s library had proven far more useful with this kind of thing. Unfortunately, she had no access to them from the other side of the world.

Unless.

She picked up her phone. This wasn’t going to lead to a conversation she was sure she wanted to have, but if it helped find those kids, it was worth having. She found the number in her contacts and paused over the dial button.

A harsh buzzing sound filled the air, coming from outside. Far off, but getting closer rapidly. She put the phone back in her pocket and headed outside.

She spotted the source of the noise immediately from the front lawn, a black shape in the distance coming her way. She worked out what the sound was, an engine. More specifically a motorbike engine.

The motorbike rapidly sped down the road towards her. Within seconds it was close enough for Laura to see the driver, long black hair that matched the colour of the bike and a pale grinning face.

“Carm?”

Carmilla saw her as well, and she pulled the bike up to a stop in front of her. It was sleek and sporty. Laura didn’t know anything about motorbikes, but even to her, the thing gave off that ‘most expensive thing in the shop’ vibe.

“Hey, cupcake,” she said with a wink, smouldering charm mode turned up to eleven.

“Where did you, how did you get, why aren’t you wearing a?” she sputtered out the questions in a tangled heap.

Carmilla had spent enough time with her to be able to parse them all out.

“From a car shop, with our money.” She pulled out a bank card she kept nestled in her bra. “And don’t worry about that.”

“You bought a motorbike?”

Carmilla swung her legs off the bike and swaggered towards her. She seemed very pleased with herself.

“Transportation issue sorted.”

“Do you even have a license? Scratch that, I know for a fact you do not have a license. How did you get them to sell it to you and drive it out the shop?”

“Licenses, paperwork, that stuff’s all so boring, and after a little chat, the sales lady agreed.”

Laura narrowed her eyes.

“Little chat, huh?”

“Just a little chat,” Carmilla said. Then she shrugged. “A little chat in which I agreed to pay double.”
“Oh, that kind of little chat, okay that’s not what I, that’s fine. Wait a second, double!”

“Relax, this is an investment.”

“An investment? You’re selling me on the idea that a motorbike you’ll get arrested for not being able to drive the first cop we run across as an investment?”

“Okay, first of all, I can drive it. It’s basically a really fast horse you don’t have to feed-”

“You saying that isn’t very comforting, I really don’t think that’s true Carm.”

“And secondly, it is an investment,” Carmilla insisted. “Not only do we have to get around this place. We plan on travelling the world. We’ll need a way of getting around the places we visit.”

“So you want to bring this motorbike that you illegally bought for double the price, maybe we need have some kind of talk about how we spend our money, around the world with us?”

“Exactly, we can bring it everywhere we go.”

“Great, so we can be arrested everywhere we go.”

“Relax.” Carmilla wrapped her arms around Laura and pulled her close. “It will be fine. I promise. I’ll work it out. You don’t have to worry. This will be much better than having to use something public, or whatever that ugly thing is.”

She tilted her head towards Kellan’s dirty car.

Laura let out a sigh.

“You should have at least bought a helmet.”

Without a word, Carmilla went back to the motorbike. She clipped something off the far side of the bike and turned around, a black helmet in her hands.

“Of course I got you a helmet. Safety is important,” Carmilla said with sincerity, handing her the helmet. Her eyes smiled as she did.

Laura shook her head, but couldn’t quite stop herself from smiling.

“Fine, but I have one condition. We have to get another one, for you and you wear it always.”

“Okay, Mr Hollis, whatever you say,” Carmilla quipped, but then followed up with. “Agreed, I’ll get another helmet. Shame though, you have no idea how good it felt to have the wind blowing on my face again.”

“I’ll get you a blow dryer. Or a fan.”

A few minutes later they were sitting around the kitchen table, a sturdy slab of white marble, eating over the now spread out pages in the detective’s folder Laura had been looking at before.

“You’re right, no way was it just some animal,” Carmilla said as she bit into an apple.

“Any idea what it could be, have you ever encountered anything like this?”

Carmilla shook her head.
“Not enough to go on. It could be a lot of different things from just this. What’s interesting to me is that no one said anything about hearing howls or seeing fog the night the first kid went missing.”

“True, but according to this.” Laura picked out one of the pieces of paper. “That house they were all at, the Bishop one, is a little out of the way. It could have happened, and nobody noticed. And Kellan’s daughter went missing in the middle of the night, going who knows where? Just my guess though, I don’t think she snuck out just for a run. I think she was going somewhere.”

“What about the other girl? Bishop was it?”

Laura picked out another piece of paper.

“Yeah, Abigail Bishop. There isn’t much on here because as Beattie said, she was off the case by then. All it says is she was last seen at the school’s library. She stayed late, it was almost dark by the time she left. This one is pretty passive aggressive about the fact Beattie couldn’t follow up on anything. I guess she was mad about her case being taken away.”

“Yeah, the good detective getting bumped off the case for mysterious somebodies is suspicious.” Carmilla shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe it’s a government cover-up, and the monster is an experiment gone wrong."

Laura raised her eyebrows.

“Did you also buy some tin foil when you got that motorbike? Aren’t I the one who’s supposed to come up with theories straight out of a dumb sci-fi film?”

“Trust me it’s not that fantastical of a theory. If I had a thaler for every time some creepy asshole working on behalf of a state tried to strap me down in a chair to perform experiments on, we wouldn’t have needed Okoye’s money to have a fortune.”

“Well, that’s…” Laura swallowed, “horrible. But maybe we’ll keep government conspiracy as a backup theory for now.”

“Sure. With our luck, it will probably end up being way worse anyway.” Carmilla finished her apple and stretched languidly. “Are you still thinking the school is the best place for us to stop by first?”

Laura nodded.

“Yeah, I think so. We should see if we can find anything or anyone that looks fishy. Try to find any evidence of any of the faculty being involved in the disappearances like Kellan’s daughter thought. I also want to find out why those kids were being bullied and how bad it was.”

“You think high school bullies are to blame for all this?” Carmilla asked, dubious.

“No, but I still want to know exactly what was going on. I don’t think we know enough right now to rule out anything.”

Carmilla shrugged.

“Eh, I remember when a rival Countess tried to poison my water jug after I accidentally spilled wine over her dress at a ball in Vienna. Kids can be capable of some evil things too I guess.”

“Spilled wine on her ‘accidentally’?”

Carmilla’s eyes glittered.
“It may have cost her victory in the waltzing competition, but she always said I was clumsy. It was all very unfortunate.”

“I’m sure it was,” Laura said through a smirk.

Yet another little story to remember to put in the notebook she’d started writing Carmilla’s remembrances in back at the cottage. In the past few months the pages had been mostly filled in, soon she’d need a second one.

Laura sighed.

“Got ourselves a tough one this time, haven’t we? Four kids, taken at different times and different places, something about a howling beast and an accusation that people at a school are involved.”

“It almost makes the stuff we had to deal with at Silas seem simple,” Carmilla said.

“We’ll work it out. One step at a time,” Laura hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

As they prepared themselves for a trip to the school, Carmilla asked if they should wake up Kellan.

“Soccer mum might be useful, being as she teaches there.”

“No,” Laura said. “Let her sleep. We can handle this part. At least we know our IDs work pretty well. If they fooled a detective, I doubt teachers will give us any trouble.”

“Almost gave me a heart attack when you showed them to that detective so casually. Right after she said she was about to let us out no less.”

“Yeah, me too, it was worth it though. We know a little more now than we did before.”

It was with some trepidation she clambered onto the back of the motorbike as Carmilla got it started. Right before, she’d clumsily struggled to get the helmet on and Carmilla, chuckling, had needed to help her out.

“How do you find a way to look so cute even with a helmet hiding most of your face?” Carmilla asked when Laura pulled the visor up.

Beattie’s folder and Laura’s tablet with directions to the school safely stowed in the back compartment, they were ready to go. Laura pressed as close to Carmilla as she could, and her arms pulled tight around their waist. The familiar feel of Carmilla’s body was reassuring, and by the time they’d gotten up to full speed, she had to admit the ride was rather enjoyable. Carmilla proved to be a much better driver than Laura expected and under her control, the bike cut through the air like a shark through water.

One of her favourite things about staying at the cottage was the way its isolation made it feel like she and Carmilla were in their own personal bubble. It surprised her how much the bike did the same. As the world through her dark visor whipped by, fleeting and featureless, she found it easy to just close her eyes and focus on clinging on to Carmilla. With her eyes closed and the noise of the bike’s engine cancelling out all else, the only thing that remained was the feel of Carmilla’s back on her chest. It wasn’t just comfortable. It was intimate.

Despite her earlier protestations, she could get used to this.

True to her word, Carmilla made it their first stop to get another helmet and then in no time at all they reached the school.
On first glance, Salvation Hill High School lived up to its name. The school sat atop a large hill that dominated the area. Carmilla slowed the bike a little as they drove up the road leading to it and Laura lifted up her visor to get a better look.

The road, an old and ill maintained path of cracked and bumpy concrete, winded its way up the left side of the hill, where the slope was gentlest. Laura could make out a car park at its end and next to that a small building that Laura surmised to be some kind of reception.

The hill’s right side was its highest and there the slope became steep to the point of being a sheer cliff face. At its summit, a rectangular building stood, and on top of that, a huge metal cross reached into the sky. The sight of the religious monument was probably supposed to be comforting, but to Laura it looked ghastly, a menacing structure staring malevolently at all below.

As they got closer, Laura could pick out further smaller structures on the hill. They were cheaply made, modular buildings for the most part. They seemed to have placed rather disorderly as if the school’s layout had been made by a drunken player of a building video game randomly placing buildings aimlessly with a click of a mouse.

They’d arrived a little after school hours, so most of the traffic was going in the other direction. Not just vehicles but also a lot of foot traffic on either side of the road. Groups of kids with backpacks migrating from their daytime prison back home.

The car park turned out to be in just as bad a state as the road they took to get to it. There were cracks and potholes so large that Carmilla needed to drive carefully lest the bike fall into them and the majority of the painted lines had faded away. It seemed from what cars were still here that most drivers were parking wherever there was space, with little regard to any rules. Laura shuddered to think about how much of a mess the place must be during peak hours. She made a mental note never to visit during them if they had any other choice.

There were quite a number of vans and a couple of large trucks in the car park as well. One of the trucks had its back door open as workers pulled out a variety of furniture, desks, chairs, stools, all brand new in their plastic coverings. In one of the vans, more workers were carrying out what looked like piles of laptops in containers.

“This place is falling apart, yet they have the money for all this new equipment?” Laura mused as Carmilla found them a spot to park in.

“The repair work is starting next week.”

The voice came from a worker passing by the front of the bike, easily heard now that Carmilla had cut the engine.

“Excuse me?” Laura said.

“Next week is when we start the repair work,” the worker said, he slowed his stride as he walked past to keep talking. “We’re repairing the main road in, this car park and then we’re repaving a bunch inside the school. Oh, and we’re building a bunch of new buildings as well, these guys are giving us contract after contract right now.”

“This school buy this much new stuff often?”
“Hah! No, these guys never bought anything new from what we could tell, the joke around town was they dumpster dived if they ever needed new supplies. Guess something’s changed, maybe they prayed hard enough to win the lottery.”

His eyes flicked to the huge cross on the top of the hill.

“Maybe they did,” Laura said with a friendly smile. “Thank you for that, that’s interesting,”

“Yeah, no problem,” the worker tipped his hardhat at them and got back to work.

Once they got off the bike and removed their helmets, Laura spoke.

“Okay, so I know there is like, zero connection between missing kids and the school getting a bunch of new stuff, but.”

“Yeah, kinda suspicious timing,” Carmilla responded as she took off her black gloves and got off the bike. She then turned to her with a serious expression. “Laura, if that Lexi kid was right and the faculty is involved in this, we need to be careful okay? They might not like people asking questions.”

“Agreed. Luckily it turns out you’re a badass biker chick lady. Otherwise, I’d be worried.”

Carmilla's face softened.

“How did the ride go for you?”

“Good, I enjoyed it a lot more than I thought I would.”

Carmilla smiled genuinely at that and reached out a hand to her own. An invitation for some of their customary hand intertwining that Laura eagerly accepted.

“Alright then, let’s go see what we can find out,” Laura said, and they set off towards the reception building.

The pathway there was in as much a state of disrepair as everything else. The pavement was dirty and cracked and out of those cracks unchecked vegetation sprung out. Weeds and fungus mostly, Laura could also see a lot of the latter growing on the sides of the smaller buildings they passed. However the school had gotten the funds for its new equipment and repair jobs, perhaps it would have been a good idea to spare some for a few extra gardeners.

The air had become humid and sticky. Laura abruptly felt the need for a shower and slapped at her neck in irritation as a couple of mosquitoes buzzed by. There was an annoying iterant sound of water dripping on the ground somewhere behind the buildings they walked passed. Somehow, it seemed to just add to the ugly feeling of the place.

She could sense Carmilla’s mood darken considerably next to her. Laura knew her to be annoyed at even being rained on, so this wasn’t a surprise. Carmilla wasn’t much for irksome weather, particularly the kind that involved moisture. Not to mention a life as a Countess in castles and palaces probably didn’t give one much experience with grungy places like this.

But what was a surprise, was the two guards Laura saw in front of the reception building.

They wore intimidating black uniforms and had large dangerous looking batons on their belts. Not only were there two in front of the reception building, but Laura spotted another patrolling to their left. The two in front of them watched them stonily. One took out a radio and said something into it they were too far away to hear.
“Uhh… okay?” Laura murmured under her breath.

“Yeah, maybe what we do now is turn around and think of something else,” Carmilla said, equally quietly.

As if on cue, Laura heard a set of footsteps behind them, and when she looked behind her, they were revealed to be from another guard.

“Or not,” Carmilla said.

Laura found herself remembering the Mercato Del Pucci back in Florence. This sudden turn for the scary black suited Gestapo Guards was giving off that familiar vibe of being herded into a trap she had felt there.

“Maybe this is just how schools are in America,” she heard her voice increase a few pitches.

“Nothing to worry about.”

They were almost at the door now. The guards continued their stony stares. They each wore a patch on their shoulder with the initials IDSS. Carmilla’s grip on her hand tightened as they walked between them. Laura held her breath and braced herself for something violent.

Neither of the guards moved at all. The door slowly and creakily slid open automatically to let them in.

Hoping they weren’t making a huge mistake and with Carmilla at her side, Laura stepped through the door.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, some bad news, unfortunately. I've been trying to update this around once a week but I'm struggling to keep up with that schedule right now. So to try and give me some time to rebuild a buffer the next update will be in two weeks instead of the usual one. I think this might happen every so often going forward, but hopefully not too much.

Sorry about that, hopefully, there won't be too much disappointment with a week delay. Although it's hard to tell without much feedback on how people are finding the story so far (see what I did there :p).

No, but more seriously, apologies for the delay, hopefully, it won't be too common of a thing and thank you so much for reading :)
The room she and Carmilla stepped into felt like another world compared to the one outside.

It was spacious and sparkling clean, with no sign of the ill repair they saw on the way in. The white tiles shimmered so much that Laura could see their reflections in them. She felt a cool pleasant breeze on her skin from the air conditioning that she greatly appreciated compared to the humid stickiness they’d had to deal with outside.

She might have actually felt relaxed if not for the automatic door creakily closing behind them like the prelude to a closing trap and the menacing black guards outside.

A lady sat behind a large counter in front of them. She looked young, her professional suit a few sizes too big for her. To her right was a corridor leading to the rest of the building. Laura could see a few doors along it.

Hearing them come in, the receptionist looked at them expectantly, a formal smile pasted to her face.

“Hello,” her voiced squeaked, “how can I help you?”

Laura walked towards the desk, half of her mind focused on keeping an ear out for the door to start moving again. There had been a guard behind them as well, would he follow them in?

“Hi, I’m Laura Hollis and this is Carmilla Karnstein, we’re both Private Investigators.” She pulled out her ID and Carmilla did the same. “We are looking into the disappearances of the missing children recently and we were wondering if we could ask some questions.”

The receptionist took a second to process that. As unlikely as it probably was, Laura couldn’t get the image of the lady keeping the smile pasted on as she pulled out a shotgun from under the counter or called for more black suited guards out of her mind. Carmilla’s warning about the faculty potentially being hostile to people who asked questions rang through her head. She tensed up, though, whether to fight or run she wasn’t sure.

But instead of doing either of those things the girl nodded to herself and spoke again. Neither did the automatic door slide back open. The guard behind them hadn’t followed them in.

“I’m sure that will be fine, I’m so glad to see more people on the case, we’re all pretty upset here as you can imagine. It’s all so terrible, those poor kids.” She nodded profusely and wiped her eyes for tears Laura didn’t see. “I’ll notify Principal Stevenson and I’m sure he’ll be willing to answer any questions.”

“Perhaps while we wait for him, we could ask you some questions,” Carmilla said.

The receptionist paled and bit her lip.

“Uh, yeah sure, of course, happy to help.”

She made a quick call to who Laura assumed was the Principal and turned the pasted on smile back at them.

“Okay, what would you like to ask?”

“Well first, what’s the deal with the scary guys in black walking around? Feel like I’m about to get a
“bag over my face and thrown into a black van or something,” Carmilla turned the question into a joke.

The receptionist relaxed visibly. Perhaps happy at getting a question she could easily answer.

“Oh, don’t worry about them. The people from IDSS are here for our protection. The police clearly aren’t doing their jobs to catch whoever is taking our students, so the school has taken its own steps to ensure the safety of everyone here.”

“IDSS?” Laura asked.

“Innovative and Determined Security Solutions, it’s a private company. Top of the line, I feel so much safer already.”

She said the last sentence automatically, as if by rote.

“But none of the kids were taken from the school,” Laura said. “They all went here sure, but they went missing in all different places, none of them here.”

The receptionist hesitated. Laura could tell she was scrambling for something to say now that what she usually said hadn’t worked.

“Well, um, you see the school-”

“Tabitha, who are you talking to over there?”

The voice came from a woman striding in from the corridor to the right.

The receptionist, or Tabitha as the woman called her, jumped a little and turned in her chair towards the woman.

“Ms Gravenberg! I was expecting Principal- never mind, I was just, uh.”

“It’s okay Tabitha, take a breath,” the woman said smoothly. “I was just on my way home and heard a conversation in here, thought that perhaps I could help.”

With that, the woman turned her eyes on them. They were small and hazel on an ageing austere looking face. Despite her apparent age, the woman stood tall and firm in her formal attire, a posture of almost military quality. Her small eyes flicked between them and Laura felt herself being studied, sized up. It threw her off balance, and it took her a moment to say something.

“Well, maybe you can. Laura Hollis and Carmilla Karnstein, Private Investigators, we’re looking into the child disappearances these last couple of months.”

“And you are?” Carmilla added.

The woman’s thin lips pressed into a smile.

“Eleonore Gravenberg, Vice Principal, but you can call me Ms Gravenberg. I’m not a stickler for the title. It’s not like it’s that prestigious of a job. Private Investigators, how fantastic. Hopefully, you can outperform the morons in the police department that have achieved exactly zero since this nightmare started. We’ve been recently looking to the private sector for security ourselves actually, as you probably saw on the way in here.”

Like Detective Beattie, her southern accent was a little more pronounced than Kellan’s. Regardless her words were clear, zipping from her mouth at a strong, confident pace. She seemed to be someone
at ease with taking charge of a room.

“Yeah, we noticed them. A little off-putting for a school isn’t it?” Laura said.

“Nonsense, they are here to protect us. Isn’t that right Tabitha?”

“I feel safer already,” the receptionist chimed in on cue.

“Exactly.” Gravenberg clapped her hands together. “Right then, I suppose you’re here to ask some questions. How about I take you up to Principal Stevenson’s office, we’ll both be happy to answer any you have. Anything that might help find our kids. Follow me please.”

She turned around and started walking back down the corridor without waiting for their answer.

Laura looked to Carmilla who shook her head dubiously, clearly wanting to get out of here as soon as possible. Their exchange of looks functioned as a mini conversation.

Are you crazy? This is a huge trap. We have to leave now.

We need all the info we can get. She’s offering some. We can’t just leave.

At least that’s what she got from Carmilla’s face and what she hoped came across on hers. To her relief, when she turned to follow Gravenberg, Carmilla was at her side.

They had to hurry a little to catch up with Gravenberg’s quick strides. The corridor was short, and soon they found themselves back outside. Sadly for comfort sake, the air was still just as humid and sticky as before. The school’s interior was no different to what they saw on the way in. More small, haphazardly constructed buildings on cracked and dirty concrete overrun with vegetation.

On a few of the buildings, posters had been put up. On them, images of the missing kids with writing below asking for people to call a phone number with any information.

She saw another security guard from the corner of her eye, shadowing them from behind. Carmilla must have also noticed him as she retook her hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

“I know this doesn’t look very good right now,” Gravenberg said, motioning around them. “But I assure you it won’t be long until we have this place as it should be. Big changes are coming. Soon, the school will appear on the outside what it already is on the inside, the best school in the state.”

“By big changes you mean those trucks and vans outside?” Laura asked.

“A part of it yes, right now we’re simply bringing in new equipment. But our plans are way bigger than that. We’re going to be building new classrooms, repaving.”

“Yeah, we heard about that on the way in,” Carmilla cut in. “Sounds like you got a real project going on here.”

“It’s a big initiative, yes. Probably the biggest one since the school was founded.”

“When did this initiative start?” Laura asked, hoping to not sound too accusatory with the menacing black security guard behind them.

“Oh, we’ve been working towards it for quite some time.”

“Yeah, okay but when did it actually start?”
Gravenberg turned to her with pursed lips.

“We got properly started about a month ago when we had finally acquired enough funding. Happy?”

“Happy,” Laura said quickly, expecting a baton to the head at any moment. “Sorry I just have some friends rebuilding another school I used to go to. I guess it’s got me interested in that kind of thing.”

Gravenberg nodded, apparently satisfied.

She was probably being more than a little paranoid worrying over being openly attacked in the middle of the school. School hours may have been over but the sun still shined down, and there were still a lot of kids around. Most were moving in small groups lugging backpacks, while others loitered around anything sturdy enough to lean against as they conversed.

They came upon a larger, sturdier looking building than most they had passed by so far. Rather than the modular rectangles, this one was much more traditional. Brown wood rather than metal and an archway entrance with a large double door. Laura had to crane her neck to see the top such was its size. Next to and above the entrance were circular windows through which she could see rows of book stacks and a few people moving around them.

“Ah, the library,” Gravenberg said. “One of the few buildings I can proudly say will not be changed much in the coming months.”

One of the security guards appeared at Gravenberg’s side out of nowhere, probably while she was looking at the library. He whispered something into Gravenberg’s ear that from her expression she didn’t like. She let out a sigh and turned to them.

“I am so sorry. Something has come up, but I, of course, understand how important it is that you get to ask us the questions you have and I’m sure Principal Stevenson does as well. This will just take a moment. Perhaps you would like to wait here? The library is one of the best places in the school to spend time in.”

Laura flicked her eyes from Gravenberg to the security guard and back again.

“Sure, why not? Take all the time you need.” *To plan out how you’re going to murder us in your creepy library and bury our bodies in the basement, oh stop spiralling Hollis!*

Gravenberg gave them another thin smile and went off with the security guard.

“Just when I thought we were done with libraries,” Carmilla said once they were out of earshot.

“Yeah, let’s hope this one doesn’t come with multi-dimensional travel… or you know, fake Private Investigator murder.”

“We could make a run for it. I think I can take a couple of those guards on the way out.”

“No,” Laura shook her head. “They haven’t done anything yet. We’re really being super paranoid and anyway, isn’t the library where the Abigail girl was last seen? We should check it out.”

“You were never a big fan of that story about the cat and curiosity, were you?”

“No, but I quite liked the variant with the second part, about satisfaction bringing it back. C’mon, let’s see how much we can find out before we have a nice chat with the Principal and/or get murdered.”
The heavy wooden archway door groaned as they pushed through it and into the library.

Luckily it’s old and traditional décor didn’t extend to it not having modern air conditioning, so if they were about to be violently attacked, at least it would be in cool pleasant surroundings.

They passed a row of computers placed against the front walls as they entered. A couple of them were being used by students, studying or more likely watching cat videos on someone else’s bandwidth. Rows upon rows of stacked books filled out most of the rest of the floor.

At the back of the room was a front desk curved like a horseshoe with a little office behind it. A portly woman with curly hair sat on a chair in the middle of it, watching them with overlarge spectacles.

Laura went over to her.

“Hello,” the woman said. “Are you here to pick up a student? I wasn’t told anything about that.”

Laura introduced Carmilla and herself, flashing the ID’s as she did so. She did it almost automatically this time. She wondered whether she was enjoying the action a little too much. Fake or not, the ID’s seemed to be rather empowering, bestowing an arbitrary aura of authority on them both. Perhaps they could keep the ID’s even after they had found the missing kids. If nothing else, they would add to the authenticity of any future role play she and Carmilla could do.

As that lovely thought went through her mind the librarian sat up a little straighter, her attention gained.

“Could you answer a few questions for us?” Laura asked.

The librarian reacted to that much the same as Tabitha the receptionist did.

“Oh, I don’t know about that, I think you should probably talk to someone a little higher up at the school-”

“We already talked to Eleonore Gravenberg,” Carmilla cut in smoothly. “She said that it would be fine for you to answer any of our questions.”

Laura held in a smirk. Nicely done sweetheart. Carmilla wasn’t just quick of wit when it came to banter or verbal sparring. She was smarter than most people gave her credit for. Then again Carmilla was a lot of things people didn’t give her credit for. Braver, stronger, kinder not to mention gentle and sweet and fiercely intelligent and beautiful and…

She probably needed to focus on the conversation at hand rather than continue extolling her fiancé’s virtues in her mind.

“Oh, Ms Gravenberg said… yes, of course, I can try to answer some questions,” the librarian said.

Without any chairs on their side of the desk, Laura found herself leaning her elbows on it languidly. Yeah, this Private Detective power trip was really going to her head. It was too late to change her position now though, so she decided to go with her cool badass detective routine she hoped she was pulling off. In the corner of her eye, she saw Carmilla lean sideways on the desk next to her. Somehow she was sure her eyes probably weren’t on the librarian though.
“We understand that Abigail was here the night she went missing. The police report said this was the last place she was seen. Were you here that night? Did you see her?”

“Yes, I was here. The school doesn’t have many other library staff, by which I mean I’m the only library staff, so I’m here every day pretty much.”

“You maintain this place by yourself? That’s really impressive,” Laura said, motioning around at the size of the place.

The woman smiled and blushed.

“Oh, it’s not as big a job as it seems. Hardly anyone comes in here for anything other than the computers and they’re taken care of by the IT guys for the most part.”

“Was Abigail using a computer the night she went missing?”

She nodded.

“Not just that night, every night for at least a week she’d been coming in and sitting at a computer here for hours. She actually asked me if she could come in on the weekends, but I have to go home sometime,” she laughed. “Poor thing, I don’t think she had a computer back home, many of our students come from very poor families.”

“Yeah, I can imagine that,” Carmilla said.

Laura bit her lip for a moment, thinking.

“Abigail, she’d need a student account to use the computers here right? Like a username and password?”

“Yes, that’s right. Every student gets an account and what the students do on there is recorded, they can save files to the account as well. Some kind of weather save.”

“Save Cloud. Can we take a look at that account?”

The woman paused, her face reflecting uncertainty.

“I do have the list of usernames and passwords here but, I’m not sure if that is something I can just give to you…”

Laura leant closer to her and found her eyes.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

“Agnes.”

“Listen, Agnes, I know you don’t want to do the wrong thing but four kids are out there missing, nobody knows where they are or what kind of trouble they’re in. We’re not trying to intrude on anyone’s privacy we’re just trying to find them. Can you please help us?”

Apparently, her puppy dog eyes didn’t just work exclusively on Carmilla. Agnes caved in almost immediately.

“Okay, okay, just please don’t tell anyone,” she reached under the desk and pulled out a big white folder. “Give me a second to find her.”
After a moment she did and then wrote what they needed on a small piece of paper before handing it to them with a shaking hand like she was giving them a bomb that could go off at any moment.

Laura thanked her before turning to find a free computer.

“I have to admit, I was kind of hoping you’d try bad cop over good cop, would have been more interesting,” Carmilla said as they sat down at the nearest one.

“To be honest, I’m starting to really get into this. Who knew how fun it would be to flash a badge at someone? They start telling you everything,” she said and smirked somewhat bashfully. Maybe lying to people about being detectives wasn’t the most moral thing to do, but it was for a good cause, surely she couldn’t be too hard on herself for enjoying it a little.

The screen was old and boxy and judging from everything else in the school Laura assumed the computer connected to it was similarly ancient. She wished she could have used her tablet instead, but it lacked the access to the school’s network she needed.

While Laura started typing, Carmilla attached herself to her left arm, idly massaging it up and down with her hands.

“What are you hoping to find? From what I’ve seen the only thing kids use these computers for here is watching dumb internet videos.”

“Kellan said Abigail and Lexi were working together until Abigail went missing. If they were, they might have recorded what they learnt down somewhere. If Abigail didn’t have a computer at home, she might have been researching here.”

“Clever, also if you’re wrong and the only thing we find is a teen’s high school project and a diary about how cute a girl is in her class, on the bright side maybe they’ll be slightly less of a chance of us being attacked before we can get out of here.”

Behind the computer was one of the circular windows that Laura had seen from the outside before entering. Through it, she could see a small yard of overgrown grass with a rusting bench placed in the middle. A steady trickle of people walked passed, mostly more students.

It took a few tries to type Abigail Bishop’s credentials in. A few of the keys on the keyboard were stuck and the mouse worked on a click five times for the result of one kind of deal. Finally getting it all typed in, she pressed enter only for the computer to beep at her.

ACCOUNT ACCESS DENIED: Please Contact System Admin

Laura tried typing the credentials in again to the same result.

“Huh.”

“Maybe she gave you a bad password or the folder she had was wrong,” Carmilla said. “Wouldn’t be the first thing this place seems to suck at.”

Laura shook her head.

“No, if the credentials were wrong, it would say something else. I typed in the right thing, but it’s not letting me access the account.”

“Why would it do that?”
“Well, I’m not an IT expert, but I guess it could be a glitch, or... bad things. Why would you lock a student’s account unless you didn’t want people to look at it?”

Carmilla started to reply when a whirl of teenage voices came from outside. Laura looked out the window and saw a small group congregating in the yard in front of the window. They spoke over each other in a chaotic, noisy babble that she heard easily through the window.

“You know that Ms Combs won’t give us an extension right? She never does. If we don’t finish it by tomorrow then we all fail,” a girl’s voice said.

“Yeah we’re so screwed, it was so much easier when we could pass group work off to the loser squad and let them do it,” a boy responded. “Just when I thought whoever took ‘em did us all a favour, it turns out those shits were good for one thing at least.”

“Meh, just take one for the team you two. I’d take one failed class if it means we never have to see those freaks again,” another said to cheers and laughter.

Laura stiffened. Her eyes went up from the computer screen and locked onto the laughing group. They sounded more like cackling hyenas than kids.

“Laura,” Carmilla said, warning in her tone. “Don’t.”

Ignoring Carmilla, she stood up and strode towards the door, her blood pumping fast and hot. Kids were missing, probably in serious danger away from their families as parents lost their minds in worry over the possibility they would never see their children again.

And these people thought that was funny?

She tried to remind herself that these were just kids themselves, by the looks of them they were in their final years, just like Lexi and the other missing kids were.

It didn’t work, her anger remained.

The pack turned to her as she got close. There were probably about a dozen of them, all looking at her with dubious expressions.

“Couldn’t help but overhear,” she said. “Funny is it? Your classmates going missing.”

“Who are you?” one of them asked, this one had a red nose and talked like they had the flu.

“Can’t you see we’re having a conversation here?” said another. A girl with most of her attention on the phone she was holding. “Are you even allowed in here? You’re not a student. Get out of our faces before we call security, weirdo.”

“Actually don’t leave before then, I’ve wanted to see someone get wrecked by those guards ever since they arrived, that would be so cool to see,” yet another said. She had trouble distinguishing them, they all sounded the same. Like a dozen high schoolers had fused together into an amorphous blob to create the worst hive mind ever.

Their eyes moved to something behind her, and a moment later she felt Carmilla at her side. For a second she found that calming but then one of the kid’s wolf whistled disgustingly.

She pulled out her fake ID. To hell with worrying about how ethical it was, this would be worth it.

“Laura Hollis, Private Detective and my partner Carmilla Karnstein, we’re investigating the
disappearances of the kids you seem to be so happy to be rid of. Perhaps we should all have a chat about that.”

The effect was as immediate as it was satisfying, a collective double take that rippled through the whole pack. The ones in front took a step back, knocking into the ones behind. The girl on her phone dropped it on the ground with a curse, and the demeanour of the group as a whole changed from one of adolescent arrogance to nervousness.

They all started babbling at once.

“Hey, wait, did you say detective?”

“We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Don’t you need, like a warrant or something? I think I saw that on a TV show.”

“If you take me to jail does my mum find out?”

Carmilla lost patience.

“Alright shut up already, all of you,” she said loudly and forcefully, her mouth curved into a cruel smile. “Or we’ll have to arrest you.”

Laura had to choke back a laugh. She was pretty certain that not even real Private Detectives could do that, never mind fake ones, but it had the intended effect. The kids went dead silent. Some stared at their feet while others looked around nervously.

“Okay, that’s better,” she said. “So what’s going to happen now is we have a few questions for-”

“What is the meaning of this?”

The shout came from an adult’s voice, male and carrying with it an air of authority. Its owner was rushing towards them, a man in a rumpled black suit. Gravenberg was right behind him, an anxious expression on her face. When the man reached them, he first looked to the pack of students.

“Don’t you have somewhere else to be? Either find a classroom to do some school work in or go home,” he barked and they scattered away eagerly.

He then turned to them both. His face was round and red and his lip quivered. He pointed a hostile finger at them.

“You! You two are not allowed to interrogate my students on my grounds. In fact, you’re not allowed on these grounds at all. You should never have been let in without my approval. I told Tabitha to keep you in reception and suddenly here you are, in the middle of my school harassing my students and causing a ruckus.”

Gravenberg spoke up behind him.

“Principal Stevenson, I apologise, I thought-”

“It doesn’t matter what you thought Ellen,” he said dismissively, his eyes remained on them.

“I want you off these grounds, now. You will both leave the premises immediately, or security can make you leave.”

Almost as if his words had spawned them into existence. A half dozen of the black security guards
appeared around them, their hands threateningly close to their batons.

“Laura,” Carm whispered to her and put a hand on her arm.

Laura stood her ground.

“Principal Stevenson? Hello, I’m Laura Hollis. I know what that looked like, but those students weren’t being harassed. We overheard them talking about the missing kids, laughing about those missing kids and we-”

“I don’t care what they were doing,” Principal Stevenson said. “I care about you trespassing on my school’s premises.”

“We weren’t trespassing we were let in. We are trying to find four missing kids. Your students, by the way, I would have thought you’d care about that and want to help,” she said. She was sure she had that look on her face Carmilla and her father often talked about, the stubborn one.

“I will put my faith in the proper authorities, the real authorities, not a couple of amateurs,” he spat. “I am sure they stand a much better chance of finding those students than you, thank you.”

“Yeah, I can see how much faith you have in proper authorities,” she replied back, motioning around her. “So much faith you hired private security because those same authorities weren’t doing enough to protect the school. Your receptionist’s and Vice Principal’s words, not mine.”

His face turned an even darker shade of red as his eyes bulged.

“Nice trucks outside,” she continued. “Care to tell us where your school finally got the money for all that stuff they’re bringing in?”

Principal Stevenson’s eyes went from bulging to narrowing dangerously.

“That’s it, last warning. Get out or get taken out,” he motioned to the security guards around them. A few had taken out their batons as they started pressing forwards.

“Laura!” Carmilla whispered again more urgently. Her grip on Laura’s arm grew tighter.

She glared at Principal Stevenson for a moment longer and then took a breath.

“Fine.” She put up a hand. “Fine, we’ll leave.”

It didn’t take long for them to find their way back to the entrance, security guards shadowing them the whole way. As they walked towards the car park, Gravenberg caught up to them.

“My apologies,” she said, “I thought Principal Stevenson would be happy to help, but he’s decided that it would be best to only work with the proper authorities on the investigation aspect of this matter.”

“You could still help,” Laura said hopefully. “If we could just talk to you for even a few minutes.”

Gravenberg shook her head firmly.

“No, I’m afraid I can’t do that, it’s the Principal’s decision. I am truly sorry. Good luck with your efforts.”

With that, she left them where they were and walked back into the reception building out of sight.
As they watched her go Laura threw up her hands in frustration.

“What the hell is going on at this school?”
Vienna 1695 Count Hochstein’s Celebratory Gala

The sound of clopping hooves stopped and the carriage lurched to a halt.

Her heart lurched with it. They had arrived much sooner than she had expected, or wanted if she was being honest. She tried to get her shaking hands under control. Her legs as well, it wouldn’t do trip over in front of everybody as her first act. She would have many an opportunity to humiliate herself during tonight’s festivities she was sure, might as well try to postpone it as long as possible.

She could hear the sounds of relaxing violins and the buzz of many voices outside the carriage. Despite getting here faster than she thought, they were at least a little bit late. The carriage door opened and she took a deep breath before sitting up and moving towards it.

Before she could leave a firm hand gripped her shoulder, it came with a voice that gripped her just as tightly.

“Remember how important this is to me Mircalla. I have other engagements I must attend to tonight, so I will not be there to manage you through the gala. But rest assured any failures on your part I will be made aware of and the consequences will be severe. Embarrass yourself, and by proxy, you embarrass me. I will not tolerate that, do you understand?”

“Yes, father,” she said.

“Good. Now go, remember to say and do everything I told you and you’ll be fine.”

With that, the hand left her shoulder, allowing her to gratefully climb out of the carriage and onto the ground below. The driver, who had opened the door for her handed her a piece of paper without a word before heading back to his seat. The carriage behind her started moving immediately, leaving her alone on the side of the road with Count Hochstein’s personal palace before her.

The Field Marshall’s palace was a place of luxurious beauty. She stepped into a small courtyard lined with extravagant water fountains in front of a façade of marble columns. The Palace was large and extended in a rectangle outwards with a number of large towers while a circular chapel stood at its centre. She had been told of a huge garden on the other side but had yet to see it. Around the courtyard, small groups of people congregated. Women in large frilly dresses like hers and men in immaculate suits.

She headed to the entrance. Slowly walking as she willed her shaking legs to hold her up. She tried to ignore the dubious looks and in some cases the laughter of the people she moved passed. She wished she’d had the courage to look at their faces as she passed, even if it was only to smile and nod at them. To show them she wasn’t afraid. But her head felt like it was being weighed down and instead she mostly stared at the ground in front of her.

She reached the entrance and looked up to see two guards in full armoured regalia, a plume of red hair on top of their glistening helmets. They barred the way in with long spears they held crisscrossed between them. She held up the piece of paper to them, hoping they could see it through their visors.

“Countess Mircalla-” her voice was hoarse and cracking so she swallowed and started again. “Countess Mircalla Karnstein, daughter of Count Regardl Karnstein. I'm invited, I have an invitation.”
She moved the paper a little closer to one of the guards faces hopefully.

Wordlessly the guards moved their spears out of the way.

“Thank you,” she said and quickly rushed through.

Once inside she made her way to the ballroom, where the majority of the festivities were taking place. The lavish room was full and noisy as royalty and upper-class citizens of the Empire alike squashed themselves into it. All knowing that anyone not in this ballroom might as well not be anybody at all.

Unless you had a proxy to take your place, as such was the case with her father and her. He could not be here so he would be represented by his daughter’s presence. Symbolically, of course, nothing of actual consequence was going to be discussed at the gala. This was to be a celebration, nothing more.

Her father’s instructions swirled through her mind. Mingle, make friends with everyone you can. Make sure you meet the Field Marshall and congratulate him personally on his victory. Make an impression on him and all those around him when you do.

Simple instructions, but as always she found it next to impossible.

No one intentionally engaged her. She stuttered some small talk in the direction of those taking food at the banquet tables, but what they didn’t ignore was dismissed with irritated hand gestures or cutting remarks. Those she approached melted into the crowd and anyone she bumped into made every excuse in the book to disengage with her.

A group of girls, Countesses like her walked passed. Their ‘leader’ Countess Vilgebray spotted her and the tall girl’s eyes lit up.

“Oh if it isn’t Mircalla, so nice to see you here. Such courage, to show your face to the world again after what happened in Prague. Or before that in Frankfurt… or before that in Graz. I’m happy to see you have that courage, you always provide us such entertainment at these events,” she put a hand to her mouth and tittered as the group walked away from her, their laughter ringing in her ears.

By now the rejection felt familiar, but it still stung. She took a small respite in a library she found a short walk away from the ballroom. She so wished she could hide out in it forever. At least none of the books refused to open their pages for her. It was nice to find something that was content with her company.

But her father would be furious if she did not at least try to congratulate the Field Marshall personally. So with a heavy heart, she dragged herself away from the peacefully dark and quiet library back into what was beginning to feel a lot like the lion’s den.

She found Field Marshall Count Hochstein sitting down at a table at the head of the room. He watched proceedings as an endless line of people came up to fawn over him. His cheeks were bright red from wine as sweat glistened off his bald head down a round face.

She lined up with the rest of them, and soon enough she came face to face with him.

“Count- I mean Field Marshall Count Hochstein, I am here on behalf of-”

She took a breath and tried again.

“Field Marshall Count Hochstein, I am Countess Mircalla Karnstein, here on behalf of my father.”

‘Karnstein eh?’ Hochstein interrupted, his voice appeared to only had one level, deep, loud yells. “Regarld couldn’t even face me himself, so he sends his hapless daughter in his stead. How like him.”

He laughed again and again the crowd laughed with him.

She hesitated, unsure if she should continue.

“Tell me, Regarld Karnstein’s little runt, do you even know what we’re celebrating here?”

“Of course,” she piped up, desperately trying to remember the words her father had told her to say. “We are celebrating your recent victory, glorious victory, over the French army at Deepey.”

“Dieppe, child, it is pronounced Dieppe. Perhaps if Karnstein would educate his daughter as well as he hides her, he’d actually have a daughter worthy of the latter.”

With that, Hochstein forgot her and stepped up out of his chair to announce it was time for a dance. She turned away slowly, letting the crowd push her back from the spotlight. Well, her father had told her to make an impression, but most like that was not the impression he meant.

Suddenly someone was at her side and talking into her ear. She recognised the voice as Vilgebray, her tone a hiss.

“I’d think twice about joining in on the waltzing Mircalla. There are significant people here I mean to woo. It would be unfortunate for me if they were distracted by your embarrassing presence. Unfortunate for you as well, I assure you my girls will make certain you suffer a painful fall. Do yourself a favour and keep to the outside, where you belong.”

She wished she’d said something, anything to stand up for herself. But like always she couldn’t quite find the courage. So instead as the people danced, she found a seat to watch from. There for the rest of the night, she sat. Not for the first time and most definitely not for the last, isolated and alone.

“What the hell is going on at this school?”

In response, Carmilla put a hand on Laura’s shoulder.

“Hey, whatever it is, we’re not going to find out by shouting at them while we’re surrounded by the scary guys with big sticks, okay?”

Laura sighed and visibly calmed down.

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I just can’t believe those kids were just laughing about it. They were happy that Lexi and the other kids went missing. And then principal douche-face shows up with his douche…face and kicks us out! ‘The people from IDSS are here for our protection’, ” her voice went up a few pitches to mimic the receptionist. “What a load of crap. They’re there for the same reason we couldn’t get into Abigail Bishop’s student account. Because someone there is super shady and is trying to cover something up. Certainly, know who I’m betting on.”
“Principal douche-face?”

Laura nodded.

“Who else? God that guy was infuriating. Who does he think he is…”

Carmilla let her rant. She was fairly certain that Laura found it therapeutic. These kinds of rants certainly seemed to empower her. Like a battery that ran on fighting injustice instead of electricity. During their last days at Silas, it had been one of those rants that had turned her from a defeated, despondent girl back into the fighter Carmilla knew and loved. Rants and big speeches, an important part of the Laura Hollis diet. Carmilla could still remember the first one she’d heard from Laura back at their dorm room. Her argument then being that the people at Silas, Carmilla included, deserved better. She was quite certain it was at that moment she’d first truly started to fall for her.

“How dare he? Strangle him, strangle him!” Laura was reaching the tail end of the rant. “Those bullies too maybe. We can’t let whoever is involved in this get away with whatever they’re doing. We have to get in there, find proof to bring them down and get those missing kids back.”

Carmilla waited for a second to make sure it was over. Then she nodded.

“Sounds good, but maybe, for now, we should get going before they decide to murder the nosy detectives and bury them under the school somewhere after all.”

Laura blew out a breath.

“Fine, I guess we can’t do anything else right now.”

The unloading of furniture and equipment was winding down by the time they got back to the car park. The trucks had left, while only a couple of the vans remained. The work day close to an end as the sun began to set on the horizon.

A gaggle of students had gathered around her new motorcycle. One of them stretched out an arm to touch it.

“If you want that arm to stay attached I wouldn’t do that,” she barked at him and then to the group as a whole. “Beat it, or else.”

The group scattered, muttering sullen curses under their breaths.

“If it’s any consolation,” she said to Laura as they grabbed their helmets, “looks like we finally get that spa we’ve been looking forward to.”

Laura bit her lip anxiously.

“Yeah, about that,” she said and trailed off.

“No, no Laura, come on. It’s getting late, what else can we do today?”

“I want to go check on Kellan.”

Carmilla groaned loudly.

“Look, I know, I’m sorry,” Laura said and cupped her hands around Carmilla’s face. Then she brought out her most effective weapon, the puppy dog eyes and beseeching face. “I’m really worried about her though. She’s alone in that house. She’s exhausted, I don’t think she’s been eating. Her child’s missing, Carm. All I’m asking is that we check.”
Laura could be difficult to refuse at any time, but when she was like this, Carmilla found it to be next to impossible. She groaned again before answering.

“Okay fine, we’ll check on soccer mum. You have to do any cheering up though, that’s not my thing.”

That earned her a kiss and a smile. Perhaps the sun wasn’t setting yet after all, from where she was standing it still looked pretty bright to her.

The drive back to Kellan’s home was invigorating. She’d had the idea of getting a motorcycle for some time now. Ever since a vivid dream at the cottage of her running across green fields as the panther she used to be able to transform into. The dream had reminded her of how much she missed the feeling of racing through the world being a panther gave her. Freeing and empowering at the same time. Nothing could catch her once she got up to full speed. No human, no vampire, perhaps not even Mother herself. A brief horse ride through Florence had served as another reminder soon after the dream, after which she’d decided to try and find a way to replicate the old feeling.

She hadn’t told Laura any of this. It had been hard enough to assure Laura she was perfectly happy with her human transformation without admitting there may have been one or two things she was sad to lose. She didn’t want Laura worrying about her being secretly unhappy when in truth becoming human had brought her unparalleled joy.

Now with this motorcycle, she could bring back one of the few things she missed.

Night had fallen completely by the time they made it back to Kellan’s home. The motorcycles bright headlight shone through the dark suburban streets, casting shadows of everything it touched. A few of the shadows moved rapidly away, street cats most like. The darkness was such that Carmilla almost missed the house and braked hard enough for the tyres to screech loudly. To the delight of everyone relaxing in their homes nearby, she was sure.

“I hope we didn’t make too much of a disturbance,” Laura said as they got off the bike. “People looking at us right now probably see two trouble makers on their big noisy bike. A couple of no good rapscallions about to make trouble in the neighbourhood.”

“You’re sure anyone peeking through their curtains will start calling the police in a panic after seeing you,” Carmilla drawled. “If this place is at all similar to Florence they’ll be streaming out of their houses bearing you gifts in no time more like.”

The door opened before they reached it. Kellan came out in a nightgown, eyes wide, and a phone in her hand.

“Hi, I didn’t know it was you at first, wow is that a motorbike?” she kept going before either of them could answer. “I saw it pull up through the window. I know you have a room at a hotel, but I was still hoping you might come back or call. Not that I was waiting or anything, I was just...”

She ran out of breath and stopped there.

“We do have a room, but we wanted to see how you were going before we headed there,” Laura said.

Kellan’s smile was tired but genuine.

“Thank you, that’s very kind. It’s getting chilly out here. Please come inside.”

The house didn’t have any lights on until Kellan switched some on as they came in. Carmilla noticed
a small chair next to the front door window. Carmilla saw a vivid image of the woman sitting on it in the dark clutching her phone as she stared out the window, desperate for any news.

Yeah, maybe Laura had been right to check on her.

“Have you had anything to,” Laura started then stopped. “I mean, Carm and I are real hungry actually. Any chance we could have something here? We could talk about what we learned at the school over dinner.”

Carmilla smiled. That was clever. Kellan probably would have brushed off directly being asked to eat something, but Laura had framed it well in making it an opportunity to talk about her missing daughter in Kellan’s eyes.

Besides, parents loved cooking for people. The good ones anyway.

“Oh, of course, we have plenty in the pantry. Do you two like pasta? It was Lexi’s favourite.”

As food cooked, Kellan took a moment to move the lone chair away from the window. When she noticed Carmilla looking at her, she flushed a little and bit her lip.

“Just cleaning the curtains a bit, needed some extra height.”

Carmilla just smiled and nodded. No need to embarrass the woman. It also wasn’t like Carmilla was a stranger to brooding in the dark. Maybe instead of taking a chair away, she should have pulled a second one up. Carmilla could have shown her how it’s done.

It probably wasn’t as excellent as the room service Carmilla undoubtedly would have called up had they went straight to the hotel, but she had to admit the dinner was good. She’d been human for a little while now, but the pleasure of good food still felt fresh and wonderful. They sat around a large rectangular dinner table. Kellan had wiped off the sheen of dust from the top and thrown a white cloth over it. She and Laura sat together while Kellan took a seat at the table’s head.

As Carmilla ate, Kellan started her bombardment of questions.

“Did you learn anything at my school? Did you talk to Principal Stevenson? Or Ellen? You should have brought me with you I could have been helpful. Are my posters still there? I put up these posters.”

“Yeah, we saw the posters,” Laura said, answering the last question first. “And we did talk to both Principal Stevenson and Ms Gravenberg, one a little more than the other to be honest. Principal Stevenson may have kinda kicked us out.”

“What?” Kellan said, aghast. “Why would he do that?”

“He said he wanted to let the police handle the investigation and he didn’t like us talking to his students. That’s what he said, but I,” Laura paused. “You said Lexi was confident that people at the school were involved?”

“Yeah, she was more vague on that than the monster, but yes she seemed sure. Wait, do you think Principal Stevenson has something to do with this? I’ve known Harry for years. I wouldn’t call us friends but.”

She seemed at a loss for words.

“We don’t know anything for sure yet, but there was a lot of stuff there that was, let’s go with
sketchy,” Laura said. “Did you know about the private security guys they have over there now?”

“Private security? Oh, wait yeah, I remember them talking about that around when Abigail went missing. I thought it was ridiculous. Armed thugs walking around students, how would that make things safer?”

“We think it has less to do with protecting students and more to do with stopping anyone from finding out that something real shady is happening at that school. We also learned that Abigail had been visiting the library a lot before she went missing. We tried to get into her student account, but it’s been locked. We think she might have been investigating the disappearances while she was at the library and something might be on that account someone at the school didn’t want people knowing. You said Abigail and Lexi were close friends and working together on this. Maybe they were taken for the same reasons.”

Kellan brought a hand to her mouth, muffling her words slightly.

“I can’t believe this. I know it’s silly, I could get over the idea of monsters and… everything I’ve learned about you two, but this is unbelievable.” Her eyes grew fierce and the hand slammed on the table. “If Harry Stevenson thinks he can do something to my daughter and hire thugs to get away with it, he has another thing coming. What’s the plan, how do we get to him? Do we go to his house or-”

“Whoa there.” Laura put a hand up. “First thing, we don’t actually know anything yet. This is all speculation and theories. Second thing, if we decide to do anything. It will be Carm and I doing the, well, whatever it is we end up doing.”

“Right of course, sorry I got a little carried away there. I just really wanted to thank you. You’ve already done more than anyone else has ever-”

“Hey, no.” Laura waved her off firmly. “We haven’t done anything yet. Thank us when we get your daughter back.”

Nothing of much importance was said for the rest of the dinner. Small talk, mostly between Laura and Kellan as Carmilla piled on as many helpings as she could manage. She noticed Kellan brighten up and even crack a smile a few times at the table. Food and people to talk to seemed to be doing her good.

Shortly after they finished, Laura shivered, apparently cold. Kellan immediately offered to turn the heating on.

“I can do it. I saw where the panel is. Have to go to the bathroom anyway,” Carmilla said, getting up from her seat.

There had been such confidence in Laura’s words when she had told Kellan to wait until they got her daughter back. From anyone else, she would have thought them either arrogant or only for show. Not from Laura though, Carmilla knew from experience that Laura fully believed they would find Kellan’s child. She probably hadn’t even thought much about the possibility of failure.

Carmilla had though and she wished Laura wouldn’t be so eager to assure Kellan of her daughter’s impending rescue. She knew Laura would move heaven and earth if that’s what it took to find the girl but after being missing for so long…

She really needed to have a talk with her about lowering expectations. She didn’t want her taking it too hard if there weren’t any kids left to save by the time they worked this out. It would be so like
Laura to blame herself, regardless of whether that was fair.

She was on her way back to the living room by ways of a corridor connecting to the bathroom when she overheard Kellan and Laura continuing the conversation in her absence.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. It’s not my story alone to tell,” Laura said, sounding almost bashful.

“Please, come on. Give me something nice to think about for a change, if only for a moment. When did it happen? When did you know?”

Carmilla stopped moving, old habits of lurking in the shadows coming to the fore. She stayed in the corridor to listen as Kellan encouraged Laura with a few more ‘come ons’ and ‘pleases’ before Laura gave in.

“Oh, I don’t,” Laura said, almost bashful. “I’m not sure if I can really answer that though. There weren’t any signposts or anything. I think, there was this party, my friends and I were planning to, well, okay we were planning to ambush and capture her at it, which we actually kinda did and kept her in a chair for like four or five or nine days but never mind that. Misunderstanding, Carm’s over it. Anyway…”

Carmilla could only imagine how high Kellan’s eyebrows must have gone.

“When did it happen? Well, I think that’s when it started for me. I’m not sure for her. I’m certain she found me naïve and irritating when we met. This tightly wound dork who wouldn’t stop annoying her. I can’t hold that against her, that was pretty accurate.”

Laura laughed.

“But she kept saving me. I would be dead so many times over without her. It wasn’t just the ‘saving my life multiple times thing,’ though. She opened up to me about herself and the more I learned about her and the more we spent time together, the more I realised how incredible she was. She’s had to endure stuff I can’t even fully imagine, pain and evil. But through it all, she’s still her. This smart, funny, beautiful… hero. Not like a knight in shining armour hero from a story. She’s better, because she’s real and yeah, that means sometimes she can be frustrating and mean and she doesn’t play well with others to put it mildly, but.”

Laura paused for a second.

“It’s who she is and I’d never change a thing. I feel so lucky every day I get to spend with her. Every day she puts up with me,” she chuckled and finished with a simple. “I love her.”

Why had Laura wanted the heater on again? She herself felt nothing but warmth right now.

It probably would have been rather awkward if she burst into the room right now. So instead, she found the panel in the corridor and turned the heating on.

“Got it,” she called, “coming back.”

She could almost see Laura jumping a little in her seat at that.

“Oh, of course, you must be tired and you’ve already explained to me everything that’s going on. I mean, I’m sure I could whip up some desert…”

“Alright then,” Carmilla said as she got back to the dinner table. “We should probably get going.”

Kellan’s face went downcast.

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Kellan’s face went downcast.

“Alright then,” Carmilla said as she got back to the dinner table. “We should probably get going.”
“We can stay for that,” Laura said, predictably. *Just a little longer,* she mouthed to Carmilla as Kellan got up and headed to the kitchen.

“Yes, fine,” Carmilla said. “Laura, can I talk to you while she does that?”

Looking for privacy, they ended up in the missing girl’s room upstairs. Laura walked over to the window after turning the room’s light on.

“See the shoe scrapes? I think Lexi climbed out of this window the night she went missing. But where she went off to is the real question. Maybe she—”

“Yes, that’s very interesting,” Carmilla interrupted and turned her around into a kiss.

They fitted together so well now, like a hand into a glove. Her hands gently guided Laura’s face closer while Laura wrapped her arms around Carmilla’s waist. Both pressing each other close as their mouths met. The long kiss was deep, Laura’s lips warm and soft as they always were against her own. As soon as she finally broke it, she pressed her forehead to Laura’s.

“I love you too.”

Laura crinkled up her nose and winced.

“Guess you overheard that. Sorry, I don’t know what it is about her, I just find myself talking for some reason. Are we sure she’s a teacher and not like a therapist or something?”

Carmilla gave a tiny shake of the head. “Don’t worry, I’m not complaining. This isn’t how I complain.”

Laura laughed. She disengaged from the embrace and sat on the bed. Carmilla leant herself against the wall next to the window.

“What do you think?” Laura asked.

“What?”

“About the missing kids of course. I mean, I think I made my thoughts pretty clear on Principal douche-face but what do you make of it all? I’ve just realised I didn’t really check in with you. I’m sorry I shouldn’t forget to do that. We’re in this together and no, this isn’t flirty flattering, you’re one of the smartest people I know. With everything we’ve learned so far, I wanna know what you think.”

She took a moment to answer, crossing her arms over her waist as she thought.

“Well, first of all, thanks for asking Detective Hollis, always nice to know my intellect is valued in this relationship,” she put on an extra purr in her voice and got the desired result of a giggle. “To be honest, I can’t disagree with anything you’ve come up with. I’m sorry I shouldn’t forget to do that. We’re in this together and no, this isn’t flirty flattering, you’re one of the smartest people I know. With everything we’ve learned so far, I wanna know what you think.”

Laura nodded.

“Thanks, that’s nice to know. Not exactly an expert investigator over here and the stakes are kinda pretty high.”
“You’re doing great,” Carmilla assured her. *But, you need to prepare yourself for the worst and know it won’t be your fault no matter what happens.*

She couldn’t say the words out loud though, not right after she’d perked Laura up with what she’d said previously.

Laura laid back on the bed with a sigh.

“You know what’s silly? Even though it’s trivial compared to everything else, I can’t stop thinking about how horrible those kids were. Bullies through and through, can you believe kids could care so little about their classmates being in danger? Hell, they were happy about it.”

Carmilla’s eyes flicked downwards before she spoke back.

“Yeah, I actually can believe that pretty easily.”

Laura sat back up.

“Okay, I know that voice, that’s the dark and broody voice. Want to talk about it?”

Carmilla waved her hand.

“No, no it’s nothing, forget I said-”

“Come on,” Laura said, her voice somehow both insistent and gentle at the same time as she patted a spot next to her on the bed. “You can if you want to.”

Carmilla hesitated at first, but with a smiling shake of the head she took the spot offered to her and sat next to Laura on the bed. Laura put an arm around her when she did so.

“I can believe it pretty easily because there was a time when I was the one those kids would have been laughing over being in danger. In fact, when I died at that ball, I’m certain many a glass of wine was clinked in celebration.”

She felt Laura’s shocked intake of breath next to her, but otherwise, they remained silent, not wanting to interrupt her. Laura’s fingers began to play up and down Carmilla’s thigh. They felt so nice.

“I wasn’t always like this, how I am I mean. ‘Doesn’t play well with others-’”

“Oh my God, Carm I’m so sorry I-”

“No, no I’m not upset at you saying that,” she kissed Laura on the cheek. “What I meant was, I wasn’t always like I am now, but I have always struggled to make friends, even as a human.”

“Yeah, I remember about that. I can’t believe how horrible your father was. I wish I could yell at that guy, does he have a grave somewhere I can at least glare at angrily?”

Carmilla smiled.

“I do happen to know where it is. Maybe we can waltz on it one day, if that isn’t too macabre for you. I think I remember one time when Mattie cast a spell for a hundred birds to shit on it for my birthday. But anyway, it wasn’t only him, my… peers, I guess you could call them, weren’t too fond of me either. I kind of get it now. I was an outsider, locked up in my castle while they were bonding. So I was an easy target for them to feel strong, to have someone who they could treat like all the men treated them. To pull me down in the same ways they were. I didn’t know that at the time though, so
it felt like they hated me for no reason at all, or worse, that there was something wrong with me.”

She shrugged.

“Look, there’s no reason to get all teary eyed about it. Obviously, things changed at the ball and it was a long time ago. I guess dealing with those kids at the school reminded me of it is all.”

Laura’s eyes were soft. She brought up her other hand to caress Carmilla’s cheek.

“I’m still sorry though. And angry. I think I want to yell at those girls now as well. I’ve said before that I wish I’d known you back then, I think this just makes me wish that even more.”

Carmilla turned to face Laura fully, her lips curving upwards a little to hint at a smile.

“That would have been something to witness. Laura Hollis yelling at Lord Karnstein in front of his Royal peers and telling off the Empire’s most prominent Countesses while she was at it. You would have been little Mircalla Karnstein’s hero. She’d probably have proposed to you on the spot.”

“Well, the more I hear about Mircalla Karnstein, the more I think I would have accepted.”

Laura probably didn’t realise it, but that was absolutely the best thing she could have said. Carmilla leant in and kissed her again. If they’d been in their own hotel room instead of a teenage girl’s bedroom, she doubted she could have stopped herself from going further. Instead, she spoke again.

“Those missing kids, Kellan’s daughter and the rest, if they are anything like I was, the idea that someone like you were invested in saving them. After getting nothing but spite from everyone else, it would mean the world to them. It would have for me.”

“Someone like us,” Laura corrected firmly. “You’re invested too.”

“Sorry to disappoint but no, getting us to that hotel spa finally is what I’m invested in.”

“Nope, don’t believe you,” Laura said. “I think you’re feeling bad for these kids because you had to go through something similar to what they were.”

“Who did we think was secretly a therapist again?”

Laura smiled but didn’t respond. Carmilla sighed in defeat.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I wouldn’t mind giving those kids something I never got myself for a very long time. The knowledge that someone out there cares enough to help.”

Laura leant her head on Carmilla’s shoulder.

“Thank you for sharing all that with me. I know that kind of stuff is hard for you to talk about.”

“But I tell you stories all the time.”

“Not ones like that, the bad ones. I appreciate you trusting me with them.”

“Well, if I can’t trust my fiancé with them who could I trust them with?”

Laura pecked her neck with a kiss. The feel of Laura’s breath on her skin was amazing.

“I can’t overstate how much I now love that word.”
They sat together for a time in comfortable silence, until a mischievous glint came into Laura’s eyes.  

“So, now we’re all in agreement that you care about finding those kids. That means you have to agree to this next thing I’m going to propose without getting mad.”

Carmilla narrowed her eyes.

“Why do I suddenly get the feeling I’ve fallen into a trap?”

Laura took a deep breath and stood up off the bed.

“I was thinking about this on the ride here and during dinner but I wanted to hear what you thought first. Something is going on at that school and I want to find out what that is now, not tomorrow or the next day, now. I say we go back there later tonight. We sneak in and find out what the Principal or anyone else there is hiding.”

Laura’s jaw was set, her eyes determined. By now Carmilla knew what that meant.

She sighed. *God damn it. At this rate, she was never going to get to enjoy that spa.*
“This is a terrible idea,” Carmilla said from the backseat, as the car quietly drove down the dark road.

Laura rolled her eyes in the seat next to her and checked the batteries of the flashlight they’d borrowed from Kellan, before putting it back in her pocket.

“No, it isn’t. This is our greatest chance of learning something useful. They’re only security guards, we’ve handled worse.”

“Top of the line’ private security guards,” Carmilla corrected. “They won’t be unlike the goons at the Uffizi. You know, the ones that almost killed us and shot you in the arm.”

“Oh wow, I forgot about that,” Kellan said, jumping into the conversation as she turned to look at them from the driver’s seat. “Mr Hollis mentioned that back at his house. Are you okay sweetie? That must have been awful.”

“Yes, fine, it's fine now, thank you,” Laura brushed off and turned back to Carmilla. “I highly doubt the high school got trained mercenaries like Corvae did. They’re probably eating doughnuts in the school cafeteria or watching movies on the projectors as they get paid easy money. This won’t be a problem. We just sneak past them, find out what’s going on in there and get out. Easy.”

To say Carmilla was dubious of that would be an understatement, to say the least.

It had been a few hours since their talk in the missing girl’s bedroom. After Carmilla had grudgingly accepted Laura’s plan, they’d then told Kellan over desert. Kellan had been full of nervous energy from that point on, which Carmilla supposed wasn’t really that surprising. It made sense, her being anxious at the idea of being party to a break in at her own school yet also excited at the prospect of learning more about her daughter whereabouts.

She’d insisted on driving them as close to the school as possible in her car. They’d agreed, the motorcycle, for all its qualities, was not well suited to sneaking around.

Rather than driving up the same road they had taken before, Kellan took them around the back of the school. They’d decided on this before leaving as well.

“Your best bet would be going around the back,” Kellan had said. “That’s where the school’s oval is. At the edge of the oval on one side is a line of trees that goes right up to where the gymnasium and music buildings are. You’d be tough to spot going through the trees.”

They hadn’t seen many other cars on the road. They hadn’t seen much at all. The sky was cloudy this night, the moon and the stars nowhere to be found. The houses they passed had mostly gone to sleep, meaning only the odd street light provided illumination. Carmilla had insisted they turn the car’s headlights off once they got close to the school to make it more difficult for them to be discovered.

At least her usual black leather attire was rather useful for this kind of work. Laura had found herself some darker clothing from her luggage and Kellan had given her a pair of black gloves. Like they were a couple of burglars complete with a getaway driver, she mused. All they needed were a couple of balaclavas to complete the image.

The drive around the school revealed that the hill much of it was built on flattened out considerably on the other side. Carmilla wondered if the school’s creators had wanted a school on the hill, only to
realise later that the hill wasn’t quite big enough and hence had needed to keep building beyond it. With the school to their right, Carmilla could see a large oval through the windows that seemed thoroughly unkempt. The clumps of wild grass making it look more like a grazing field for livestock than a sports oval.

“Yeah, so this side of the oval has the maintenance shed,” Kellan pointed out a small building that Carmilla could barely see through the darkness tucked away in a corner of the oval. “We’re going to the other side, where the trees are.”

The road curved around the back side of the oval and a small drive brought them to where they wanted to be. Carmilla saw the trees Kellan had talked about, a line of them on the outside edge of the oval that led up to two large buildings further up the hill. They had the same white moss dangling from their branches Carmilla had seen a few times since coming to Georgia. Kellan had been right about it being a good spot to sneak in through. Between the large branches, the thick moss hanging from them and the night time darkness, she doubted anyone would notice a small army walking between them.

“Oh hey, these trees have beards too,” Laura chirped, and Kellan chuckled lightly. Carmilla wondered what joke she was missing out on.

Kellan gently stopped the car and twisted in her seat to look back at them.

“I should really come with you two. I can show you where everything is,” Kellan said.

“What? No, way too dangerous, you stay in the car,” Laura said.

“But barely more than a minute ago you said-”

“You already told us where the Principal’s office is, which would be the best place to look for anything shady. That was helpful enough. You just stay here, and we’ll be back before you know it.”

Laura got out of the car as she spoke and as soon as she finished the sentence, she shut the door to effectively end the argument.

“Hopefully you brought a thermos or something,” Carmilla said and got out herself. “Stay right where you are. If we end up being chased, I’ll be quite annoyed if you’re not here to pick us up.”

She shut the door and joined Laura.

“Remember, passed the library, before the main hall with the giant cross, on the left,” Kellan called through the car windows.

They moved swiftly across the empty road and into the line of trees. The ground underneath them was dirt and sticks. The sound of their feet snapping every little-discarded twig they landed on would have annoyed her but for the loud masking sounds of humming crickets and chirping frogs coming from the oval next to them.

The air was sticky again and now also bitingly cold. The line of trees only went a little further than the width of the oval, yet for the moment it felt like they were in a miniature cold dark forest. The branches were thick with the white moss and fungus grew around every stump. The place felt wild and alive, which was strange considering they were only a short walk away from being in the midst of concrete and metal buildings.

“Surely you’ve done this like a zillion times right?” Laura asked in a hushed tone. “Sneaking into
places? Be like riding a bike for you.”

“To be honest, it was a lot easier with padded feet. It’s amazing actually how little noise cat paws make. Or if I really wanted to I could have simply…”

“Teleported? Say it, say it! I knew you could teleport, admit it already. I saw it happen. You can’t say I didn’t.”

“I was going say I could have simply murdered everyone on the way in. You have to let go of the teleportation thing. You dreamt it, never happened.”

They were about halfway to the two buildings Kellan had told them where the gymnasium and the music building. Once they got to them the hard part would start Carmilla was certain. At the moment though, they were making good progress without a single guard in sight.

“I have literal video footage of you instantly appearing in our old dorm room. You’re going to have to admit it one- Argh!”

She twisted wildly as her hands grasped at her face. Her hands and hair tangled up in a web as a spider danced on top of her head.

“Laura, relax it’s just a spider. You walked into its web. It’s fine.”

“Get it off, get it off, get it off,” Laura said as her hands snatched fruitlessly at the wriggling spider.

Carmilla walked over and casually flicked the creature off Laura’s head. It flew back and hit the tree behind Laura, before scuttling off into the darkness.

“Shh, it’s off, you’re making too much noise over nothing. We’re going to get spotted, and then something actually bad might happen,” she said as she helped brush off the web’s remnants.

Once she got rid of the last of it, Laura returned to the hushed tones the situation warranted.

“Just a spider? Just a spider! So says the formerly undead lady. I dunno how many creepy crawlies you’ve gotten used to over the centuries but I assure you having a spider on your face is a serious crisis!”

Carmilla felt her mouth curving into a smile as she fought to suppress a laugh.

Laura glared at her for a moment, before it began to fall away as their mouth started curving upwards as well.


Laura straightened up, took a breath and brushed herself off.

“Thank you,” she said through a tiny smirk, and God help her if Carmilla didn’t find the whole thing immeasurably cute. It was probably not the best idea to divulge that to Laura right now though.

Carmilla was about to turn to start moving again when something about the tree behind Laura caught her eye. From one of the tree’s branches a small bundle of twigs hanged by a single strand of spider web. It wouldn’t have caught her interest, but something had twisted the twigs into the shape of a triangle.

She stepped towards it for a closer look and then realised it wasn’t alone. On other branches, similar
bundles were hanging from strands of spider web, all shaped into various symbols. She looked up at them all, fascinated. Had she just flicked Charlotte the spider off Laura’s head?

“Carm? Is everything okay?” Laura asked. She’d already started moving again and was probably surprised at Carmilla not being at her side.

Carmilla blinked and shook her head. This wasn’t important.

“It’s nothing, coming now.”

They continued through the trees without further incident and made it to the large buildings. Other than Kellan’s word, nothing suggested they were a high school gym and a music building. Both were large featureless grey coloured concrete structures from the outside. Other than its library, the entire school was an eyesore as far as Carmilla was concerned.

Between the buildings, there was an ugly gravel path that winded upwards into the interior of the school. They’d been told about it and had hence had a vague idea of where it went, but visually it was difficult to see much of it in the dark. They took cover behind one of the buildings and considered their next move.

“Alright, so Kellan said Principal douche-face’s office is just up from the library,” Laura said. “So we follow this path until we get back to the library and from there finding the office should be simple.”

“Unless we get seen by somebody, then not so simple,” Carmilla warned.

Laura leant out from the edge of the building and looked up the gravel path.

“It seems clear right now. We should get moving.”

As soon as she did so, a small light flashed from the path, and there came a sound of crunching footsteps.

Carmilla grabbed Laura by the waist and wrenched her back behind the building. Barely in time. The moment Carmilla got Laura back behind the wall the ground near them lit up from the guard’s flashlight. They both held their breaths and remained still, Carmilla’s arms still wrapped around Laura, waiting to see if they’d been spotted or had made too much noise.

The light moved forwards, and the sound of footsteps grew closer. Carmilla moved one hand over Laura’s mouth and the other over her own.

The guard came into view, barely an arm stretch or two away. He didn’t spare a glance to either of his sides. If he did, he’d be looking right at them. Instead, he continued on. His hand reached for a radio on his belt, and he spoke in a bored voice into it.

“Moving to the oval, over.”

He got a confirmation back and soon his black uniform was fading into the darkness, only his flashlight remaining visible.

Carmilla would have breathed a sigh of relief if it wasn’t for the glint of metal she’d spotted on him before he’d disappeared. Apparently, at night these guys upgraded from mere batons.

He’d been holding a gun as he walked past.
“I highly doubt the school would pay for trained mercenaries’,” Carmilla said, mimicking Laura’s voice. “This is going to be easy’.”

“Yeah, rub it in. Let’s all point and laugh boys and girls. Laura Hollis was wrong.”

“I’m starting to think you have some kind of magical effect. Reality warps around you to create these kinds of situations.”

They’d remained behind the corner of the building, taking a collective breath and keeping an eye on the light from the guard’s torch behind them.

“We should still be fine,” Carmilla said. “Luckily it’s only one guard. If we’re careful, we can go back through the trees and get to the car without being-”

“What?” Laura asked, nonplussed. “We haven’t gotten what we came for. We can’t leave yet.”

That was absolutely not what Carmilla wanted to hear. She grasped her hands around Laura’s arms and spoke slowly and clearly.

“Cupcake, things have very clearly changed. We were not prepared for these guys to be walking around with machine guns. Big sticks were one thing, this is another. We can come up with a different plan, but we need to get out of here.”

“Those kids are out there right now. Some of them have been missing for weeks,” Laura argued. “We don’t have the time to run away the first sign of a little danger.”

A part of her laughed wryly at the woman who had minutes before freaked out over a spider in her hair describing sneaking around guards armed with guns as ‘a little danger’. The rest of her desperately struggled to find the words to convince Laura to turn back. She was really dreading ‘the face’ right now.

“I understand that the sooner we find those kids, the better. But we can’t help them if we get dead here and now.”

“We can handle it. We’ve dealt with so much worse. C’mon we only have to get to the Principal’s office and back out again.”

“I already got you shot once. I’m not letting that happen again,” the terse words shot out to her immediate regret. Framing the decision to leave immediately as a way of protecting Laura was probably the worst thing she could have done.

Damn it.

Laura stiffened. For a moment Carmilla thought she would react angrily. Instead, her face grew soft, and she brought them closer into an intimate embrace.

“I get it. I do,” she said. “You don’t want me to get hurt, and that’s sweet, it really is. But we decided on this before we left my Dad’s house. Kids missing, possible monster, we knew that there might be danger if we decided to get involved. But we did anyway, because it was the right thing to do. We can’t just give up. We can handle this, I believe that, I believe in us both.”

Her eyes shone with such intensity. It was impossible not to be swept up in the passion radiating from her. It helped that Carmilla could see Laura’s point. They had dealt with much worse. As
ludicrous as it probably was, it almost seemed silly to baulk at something as mundane as men with
guns after everything they’d been through. A tiny voice in her head warned vaguely about the
dangers of arrogance, but it was drowned out by Laura’s infectious confidence.

She sighed and shook her head. “Alright fine, but if we’re doing this, you stay behind me okay?
Please, for me?”

Laura nodded eagerly. “Of course, I’ll stay behind you, real close. Second shadow close. But like in
a good way, not that creepy Doctor Who episode kinda way.”

Carmilla took one last look to make sure the guard was still far away and then up the dark gravel
path. It looked clear.

“Okay, we’ll take the path like we planned and get to the library, then we’ll work out the rest from
there. If we see a flashlight and there’s nothing to get behind, we drop to the ground immediately.
Ready?”

Laura gave her an affirmative and they got moving. The gravel crunched under their feet to
Carmilla’s chagrin, especially as the sounds of frogs and crickets from the oval were no longer
cancelling their footsteps out as they had before.

Luckily the gravel eventually turned into the concrete they’d been walking on during their first visit
to the school earlier that day. She tried to look around and see if she could recognise any of her
surroundings, but that proved fruitless. The visit had been a short one and the darkness robbed her of
any familiarity anyway.

As they moved past yet more featureless modular buildings, a light flashed up ahead. They both
moved to the right of the path and flattened themselves against the closest building’s wall, taking
cover. Her hand squelched against something soft and gooey. She looked down at it to realise she’d
accidentally crushed some kind of fungus growing on the wall.

This place is so lovely.

The light moved randomly, flicking this way and that as the guard searched around. He was coming
closer though, that much was clear. If they stayed on the path, he’d see them for sure. She searched
for places to go. They couldn’t move around the back of the building they were up against as a
second building had been placed long ways directly next to it. The gap between was such that one
could barely get a hand through, never mind a body. Going back just delayed the problem and
running across to the other side of the path risked disaster if the guard happened to swing his
flashlight around at the wrong moment.

She cursed inwardly as she struggled to come up with a plan before she heard Laura fiddling with
something behind her.

She turned around to see that just above them was a rectangular window. It was large enough fit a
small person through. Laura had her nails dug under its hinges and was trying to lift it open.

“It’s not locked, but the mechanism is on the other side. I can get it open with a bit of help,” Laura
whispered as she pulled.

Carmilla joined her, and together, they got the window open. She helped Laura clamber up through
it as the footsteps got closer. She heard the tiniest of squeaks as Laura fell through it and into the
building. The next thing she heard was a light smacking sound. A moment later, Laura reappeared at
the window. She reached her hands down to help Carmilla up and through as well. The whole effort
was done with a weird mix of frantic urgency but also desperate caution, both knowing that too much noise would give them away.

She almost fell face first onto the floor once she finally got through the window. At the last moment, she managed to fold her arms in front of her to take the impact. She looked up to see Laura close the window and move away from it to huddle in the corner. Blood flowed from her nose freely. Clearly, she hadn’t been quite so lucky with her fall from the window.

Despite it not appearing to be a serious injury, she had to fight the urge not to go to her. They both kept as still as possible, her lying on the floor and Laura sitting in the corner as they heard the footsteps of the guard pass by the window.

The footsteps kept on going and eventually faded away.

Laura let out a breath and stood up. “Wow. That was definitely a thing for a moment there.”

Carmilla got up and moved to her, eyes on Laura’s nose.

“It’s fine, I just fell on my face like a dummy getting through the window,” Laura said, her voice slightly nasal from the injury.

Carmilla ignored the words and inspected closer. The nose didn’t seem broken. She didn’t like how freely the blood flowed out of it though. She gently cupped her hands under Laura’s chin and lifted her head up.

“Keep your head up for a moment, okay? I’ll find something to stop the bleeding.”

She turned to take stock of where they were.

Not unexpectedly the building turned out to be a classroom. They were at the back of it, with a few rows of desks and chairs in front of them and a whiteboard on the other side of the room. The desks and chairs were flimsy things made of cheap wood stained with ink and parts of them appeared to be rotting.

Along the walls were more rectangular windows like the one they’d climbed through and rather than carpet or floorboards the ground was blank concrete, hard and unforgiving. No wonder Laura’s nose was in its current state.

“Are we sure this isn’t a school for penal convicts?” Laura asked, verbalising what Carmilla had been thinking herself. “How can they teach kids in a place like this?”

“Didn’t you hear what that Gravenberg woman said? This is the greatest school in the state,” she replied in a drawl.

At the end of the room, there was a larger desk in front of the white board. One of the things on it was a box of tissues. She grabbed it and came back to Laura.

“Hold still sweetheart, let’s take care of this.”

She staunched the blood flow with some strategically placed tissues and then began wiping away the blood drying on Laura’s face.

“I guess I should be glad you’re not a vampire anymore. Otherwise I’d look like a juicy steak right about now,” Laura said.
“Well, I’d like to think I had a little more class than drinking the blood coming out of someone’s nostrils like some kind of savage, but sure, insult the nice lady tending to your injuries.”

“Oh please, if I didn’t start washing your blood mug back in our old dorm room you’d have died from vampire salmonella ages ago.”

Carmilla wiped off the last of the blood and finished her ministrations with a light kiss to the tip of Laura’s nose. The way Laura crinkled it up in response brought a smile to her face.

“All done, keep the tissues there for a while longer though to stop the bleeding. Also, so I can laugh at how dumb you look with them sticking out.”

“Thank you,” Laura said, her voice still nasally with the tissues stuck up her nose. “You didn’t need to bother though. I would have been fine.”

“I like to bother,” Carmilla said as she went up to one of the windows and peered through it.

“See anything?” Laura asked and walked up next to her.

Directly in front of them, she saw the library. She could tell from the circularly shaped windows she remembered seeing earlier in the day. The path they’d been on was at a crossroads, breaking off into different directions. The path straight ahead looked to take them around the library’s right side and presumably to the front entrance where Gravenberg had left them.

“Fantastic,” Laura said. “According to Kellan, the Principal’s office is only a short walk from here. ‘Passed the library, before the building with the big cross.’ We’re almost there.”

They left the classroom and got back outside onto the path. Once they reached the rear of the library, they hugged its walls as they moved towards the front entrance.

Even in the dark, things were looking much more familiar at this point. It seemed absurd that only hours before they had seen school kids wandering around the same place they were now playing hide and seek with armed guards in.

They were almost at the edge of the library’s right side wall and about to turn the corner to the front side when they heard voices.

“Mike, get in here! There’s a free spot at the table. Francis is going home early, asshole can’t stop sneezing,” the gravelly voice came from inside the building.

“Shit, him too?” a voice outside responded, Carmilla took a peek around the corner to see its owner walking towards the library’s front door. “Didn’t Morgan go down yesterday the same way? Hay fever or something?”

“It’s this damn shit pile of a school, fungus and all kinds of shit growing all over the place,” a female voice this time. “I swear they get like ten kids a day going home early, coughing and sneezing their guts out. Honestly, I haven’t been this worried about getting malaria since that job in Malaysia.”

There was general laughter at the woman’s words. Carmilla guessed there was a half dozen at least. She couldn’t see them, but she could see that some of the building’s lights had been switched on.

“How do we get passed them?” Laura whispered.

“I’m not sure yet.”
As the one guard walked in, another guard walked out, unsteady and wheezing badly. The guard walking in slapped him on the back amicably before disappearing through the door. The wheezing guard sneezed violently and then staggered off into the darkness.

“We could go round the other side,” Laura suggested.

Carmilla nodded. “Good idea, go round the other side and get back on the path to the Principal’s office from there.”

But no sooner had the words left her mouth that a flashlight appeared behind Laura in the direction from where they came. Either another guard or one they had snuck past before walking back.

“Damn it,” Carmilla cursed.

Laura motioned towards the other side of the path, another modular building, probably a classroom also.

“We could hide in there, like we did before in the other one.”

“You mean when we got lucky that the window happened to be unlocked? If we run over there and we can’t get in, we’ll be spotted for sure.”

“What do you have a better idea?”

She didn’t. She was about to say so when a bang went off somewhere near, followed by loud crackles.

Thinking it to be gunfire, she instinctively enveloped Laura, pushing her back against the wall and putting her own body in the way of any harm. But then she heard further sounds. Celebratory whoops from what sounded like teenagers and shouts of alarm and confusion from inside the library.

“Relax,” a voice rang out over the shouts. “Some dumb kids with a fire cracker, probably on a dare or something just as stupid. Come on we have to check it out regardless.”

Carmilla peeked around the corner again to see the whole group filing out of the building, all heading towards the sound at a brisk pace. She turned to see the flashlight of the other guard coming faster towards them. Seeing an opportunity, she put an arm around Laura.

“Stay right next to me and move when I do, we have to time this right.”

She waited for as long as she dared, keeping an eye on both the group walking towards the disturbance with their backs to them and the upcoming guard. Then, with the guard behind almost close enough to see them she grabbed Laura and scrambled around the corner, putting the building between them and him.

But if even one of the small group of guards turned around for any reason, things were about to get very unpleasant. The next few seconds went by at a crawl as Carmilla willed the guards to keep going. In her mind, she could almost hear one of them saying something along the lines of “Damn, I forgot something, better go back.”

*Don’t turn around, don’t turn around. Don’t turn around you verdammt arschlöchers.*

They didn’t, and the guard coming up from behind jogged passed without noticing them.

“Time to go,” Carmilla whispered urgently.
Keeping low, they dashed passed the library’s front entrance, putting as much distance as they could between the guards and them.

“The Principal’s office should be right up this path. I don’t think we were noticed, there isn’t anyone chasing us,” Laura panted out.

“We’re also not being shot at. So yeah, I think we’re good.”

The giant cross was up ahead. During the drive, Kellan had said the building it had been built on doubled as a church and a main assembly hall for the school. As ugly as it was, Carmilla was glad to see it so close. It meant the Principal’s office should be nearby.

Finally, they reached it.

It wasn’t what she expected and without the signpost nearby with the word’s ‘Principal’s Office’ she probably would have kept walking and missed it entirely. Principal Stevenson’s ‘office’ turned out to be a small converted house. Like the library, it was both older and much nicer than everything else in the place. Carmilla was certain it must have been built before the school. Flowers encircled the majority of the house like a moat except for a little brick path up to the front door.

The left side of the house’s front had a large window. Through it, Carmilla could see what looked like a reception made out of the living room, a desk in the left corner and a few cushy chairs sprinkled around. To the right of the window was a brown wooden door. The Principal’s name emblazoned on a small gold banner next to it.

“Ohay,” Laura said. “So I guess now we have to find a way in. Preferably a sneaky way in that doesn’t make much noise.”

Carmilla strolled up to the wooden door and kicked it open.

“Or that.”

“Come on, the faster we find something, the sooner we can get out of here.”

Passed the living room turned reception was a hallway filled with framed pictures of people on each side. Without exception, they were old white men with self-satisfied smiles. Only a few were in colour. A couple were paintings rather than photos.

“Past Principals,” Laura said.

“They seem pretty happy to have been in charge of such a shithole,” Carmilla said. “At least Mother’s evil school was clean when there wasn’t someone being eviscerated in the halls.”

“Maybe it wasn’t always this bad,” Laura mused.

The hallway led them to Principal Stevenson’s office proper. Its door had a frosted glass window and, rather unnecessarily at this point, his name and title printed at the top.

This door got the same treatment as the last one. The glass shook alarmingly at the force of her kick but luckily didn’t break and shatter noisily. She was probably being a little reckless. She wanted to get out of here before their luck ran out.

In the middle of the office was a wooden desk, on it a computer monitor, a mess of papers and a white tea cup with a half-eaten biscuit next to it. Along the walls were filing cabinets, more than Carmilla cared to see considering Laura would probably insist on searching through them all,
regardless of the danger.

On the wall behind the desk was a picture of the Principal himself. Larger than the ones along the hallway and surrounded by certificates and other worthless ‘accomplishments’ he’d seen fit to stick on his wall for all to see.

“Alright, let’s get searching,” Laura said, taking her flashlight out of her trouser pocket and switching it on.

Carmilla threw her a nonplussed look and simply turned the office’s ceiling lights on by the switch.

“Sure, I mean searching the office for documents in the dark with a torch is much more noir and hence way cooler but,” Laura shrugged and went to the nearest cabinet.

“Like I’ve said, too many movies.”

Despite it being such a tense situation, after a few minutes of searching through tedious financial records, grade patterns and other useless pieces of information, she started to feel more bored than anything else. They didn’t bother putting anything back where they found it so soon the floor became a graveyard of discarded paper.

After finding nothing in her current cabinet, Laura changed tack and went over to the desk. More papers hit the floor and Carmilla looked up when she heard Laura trying to pull one of its drawers open.

“Need any help with that?” she asked.

“No, it’s just a little stuck,” Laura said through gritted teeth and grunts of exertion. The effort had caused her nose to start bleeding again. Carmilla could see the white tips of the tissues in her nose going red.

“Laura, hey,” she said and started moving over to her. “Give yourself a break. Let me give it a try.”

“Got it!” Laura said triumphantly, and there was a sound of the drawer sliding open. Laura looked down at its contents and put her hand in.

“Hey, what’s this-”

An ear piercing screech exploded out of the drawer. The glass in the door shattered and the desk split apart into several pieces. Carmilla flew back against a shaking cabinet and landed heavily. The lights flickered for a moment and then failed.

She groaned as she forced herself back to her feet only to find herself facing a creature floating above the ruined desk. It took her a moment to recognise it before she cursed.

“Oh shit.”
The creature floated above her, silent and still.

It was humanoid, looking much like a woman in a frilly ballroom dress but all of ‘her’, skin and clothing both, was stark white and luminescent.

Carmilla could see the room’s back wall through its body, though vaguely distorted as if being viewed through foggy glass. The creature’s face was sallow and gaunt to the point of being almost skeletal. Its hair was long yet also thin and stringy, like an old mop running out of cloth strings.

It began to revolve smoothly where it hovered, whether to better explore its surroundings or simply to enjoy its newfound freedom to move, Carmilla wasn’t sure. She took the opportunity to dash forwards and attempt to find Laura amidst the wreckage of the destroyed desk. It was paramount that she got Laura and herself out of the room before it fully got its bearings and screamed again.

She found Laura on the ground behind a large piece of the desk. Other than her eyes flicking wildly around, she was totally still, frozen in place.

Carmilla picked her up and made for the exit. She had them almost out the door when another screech erupted from the creature behind them. Her muscles spasmed and she stumbled out of the room while holding onto Laura. Her ears felt like either a bomb had gone off next to them, or she’d been at a concert for a week straight, ringing so loud she barely could hear her own voice when she spoke.

“It’s okay. If you can hear me, it’s okay. You’ll be able to move again soon. It’s temporary.”

She ran them back down the hallway, into the reception and out the door. Once they were outside, Laura let out a big gasping breath and her arms clutched around Carmilla in a tight hug.

“What was that? What happened to me?”

Carmilla stopped and put Laura down. She kept her arms around her though, unsure how functional Laura’s legs currently were.

“Banshee,” she said. “That’s what happened to you. Damn near happened to me as well. Luckily I was far enough away and it always takes them a few tries to really get their scream on. You, on the other hand, were right next to it.”

“Banshee?” was all Laura managed to get out in response to that. Blood trickled out of her right ear. Carmilla wondered whether ‘banshee’ was the only word Laura had heard properly.

“Where did it come from?” Laura asked.

“I’m guessing the drawer, did you touch something?” she raised her voice and spoke as clearly as she could. “Did you touch something that was in the drawer?”

Laura took a moment before responding.

“There was this stone, I, it looked interesting, so I-"
“Yeah, it would have been a Convocanty Stone. Or Convocantes or something like that. Look, you can trap things in them and... you know what? It doesn’t matter, and we need to get moving, it came out of the stone, and it’s going to come floating out of that house any second now and kill anything it sees. Can you move?”

Laura nodded but before she could answer verbally, a shout rang from behind them.

“Stop!”

A guard stood a few metres away, his weapon raised. More were probably coming. The banshees scream had probably made as much noise as the firecrackers earlier. He shouted again.

“Stop where you are and get on the ground.”

Carmilla edged herself between his gun and Laura. She pointed at the house.

“Look asshole, we’re not your problem right now. Something really, really bad is in there. We all need to run as fast as we can away from it.”

The guard shook his head and flicked the safety off his gun. “What needs to happen here, is you both staying put until we can sort this out. In a second I’m going to call my friends and then we’re going to work out what to do with- what the hell is that?”

His aim switched over to the house. Carmilla turned to see the banshee floating straight through the house’s front window towards him. Its eyes, glassy white balls without pupils fixed on him.

She half expected him to yell at it to ‘stop and get on the ground’ as well like a dumb goon would have in a story. To his credit he didn’t do that, clearly recognising that what was coming towards him wasn’t something you could threaten. Instead, he shouted into his radio for help and opened fire.

The bullets were worthless. They went straight through and hammered into the house. Breaking the window and putting holes in the wood. Thoroughly undeterred, the banshee floated silently closer. Its demeanour was almost serene, like a ballerina drifting through the air.

Then it screamed.

Its lower jaw distended down a great deal more than any humans could. The scream shook the ground such was its power. Fighting her own spasming muscles, Carmilla tried to pull herself and Laura away. The guard dropped to his knees and clutched at his ears, his weapon falling to the ground.

The banshee closed the distance between them. As it did so, its body brightened and solidified, its ghostly form becoming physical. It raised a hand with blade-like long claws and swiped at the guard’s neck. The nails sliced through with ease, lopping the guards head right off his shoulders with a burst of blood.

“Uhhh,” Laura said.

“Yep,” Carmilla agreed.

They got up and started running, neither particularly concerned about the direction. Carmilla looked up and saw the giant cross. They were heading up the crest of the hill towards the main hall Kellan had told them about. The main hall that began as a church and still doubled as one, as evidenced by the fairly obvious cross still built on it. That was good. This was a good direction to be running in. If they could just make it across the threshold...
She pointed at the giant cross and the large building it was built on. “Hallowed ground, pretty useful place to be in when a ghost is trying to kill you. We should head there.”

“Will we be safe there?” Laura asked. She had to wipe away the blood dribbling down into her mouth to do so.

“No, but it will be a lot weaker if it follows us in.”

The building was almost within reach. Now that they were close, even through the darkness, she could make out its features. Large and rectangular, it looked a lot like the drab concrete buildings they’d passed before. The only distinguishing feature was its huge rectangular double doors that looked to be designed for a giant to walk through. Before it was a small round courtyard blocked off by a metal picket gate.

Carmilla grabbed a couple of the gate’s pickets and pulled. The gate opened outwards with a wail of rusty metal. She made to go in.

More crackles of gunfire started up, followed by another scream. The dead guard’s friends must have shown up. Good, every second the banshee focused on them the better their chances of making it to the hallowed ground.

The thought should have been comforting, but instead, she felt a twinge in her gut that she couldn’t quite explain until Laura tugged at her arm and verbalised it.

“Carm, those people down there are going to die.”

So?

Except she didn’t say it out loud, if she was honest, already knew the answer.

Laura stopped running. She wiped more blood from her face as she took a few long ragged breaths. She wasn’t doing well, Carmilla could clearly see. She appeared to be struggling to breathe properly due to the injury to her nose and without the tissues to stop it, it bled freely.

But it was going to take a lot more than that to stop Laura from being Laura.

“We have to get back down there and help,” Laura said. “We can’t just let that thing kill them.”

“Those people down there would have shot us dead if they found us,” Carmilla argued.

She saw a dozen arguments cross Laura’s eyes. One that would point out that the guard that did find hadn’t shot them on sight. Another that would have been another impassioned argument that they should be better than taking the easy letting people die options. Maybe even one based around her desperately pleading with Carmilla ‘to do it for her’. Instead, Laura simply shook her head.

“We’re not them.”

She was getting better at this. She didn’t even need her big speeches anymore.

Carmilla groaned loudly. “I’d say you’re killing me, but odds are the banshee’s going to beat you to it real soon. Do we even have a plan?”

Laura bit her lip. “Ah, well, didn’t you say it would be weaker in the church?”

“Yeah, weaker doesn’t mean not dangerous enough to slice us into pieces.”
The gunfire had grown more sporadic and when Carmilla looked down the hill most of the black uniforms she saw were either kneeling or lying on the ground. It was hard to see from a distance, but a couple appeared to be missing their heads.

Laura shrugged and threw up her hands. “We’ll have to find a way like we always do. We get it to chase us into the church and work the rest out from there.”

Another ear destroying scream rang out. Laura started running back down the hill. With a groan, Carmilla followed.

“I can’t believe I let you trick me into becoming a better person. I never used to do anything this dumb until I met you,” she said once she caught up to Laura.

“Yes,” Laura gasped as she ran. “Probably would have been smarter not to let me do that.”

Carmilla glanced over at her and saw the humour in Laura’s eyes. She smiled in response and gripped Laura’s hand firmly before they reached the banshee.

Translucent again, it hovered over another guard, a kneeling woman with hands over her ears. As before, the banshee solidified as it raised its claws for an attack. Before Carmilla could even think to stop her, Laura picked up a discarded gun from the ground and threw it at the banshee’s back.

The weapon hit the creature square in the back of the head with a solid thud. It let out an annoyed hiss. The first sound it had made that wasn’t a scream since appearing out of the drawer. It turned slowly, its body returning to translucency as it locked its eyes on Laura.

“Hey!” Carmilla yelled. It revolved towards her.

Usually, she was pretty good at throwing verbal barbs at her enemies. Even in the most intense of situations, she’d have some witty insult or terrifying threat. In this moment, however, nothing in particular came to mind, so instead she threw out her hand and extended her middle finger in the banshee’s direction. From the way it immediately began to float towards her, she was pretty sure it understood her meaning.

She grabbed Laura by the arm and ran. A scream rang through the air behind them, rattling her teeth and causing her ears to bleed. She stumbled but didn’t fall. She kept an arm wrapped around Laura’s back to make sure she did the same.

“Did you just flip off an angry, murderous ghost?” Laura asked.

“Did you just pick up a loaded machine gun and throw it?”

“Touché.”

The sound of gunfire started up again. The bullets whizzed by, hitting the ground around them. For a surreal moment Carmilla thought the guards had somehow decided to shoot at them instead of the banshee before remembering any bullets they fired at it would go straight through. A bullet hit the concrete an arm stretch away from her foot.

“Laura, I swear if we end up getting killed by the very people you said we had to try and save.”

“At least you’ll get to say ‘I told you so.’ Maybe that will make up for the whole dying violently thing.”

The banshee’s next scream hit them as they reached the door. Even at a distance, the sound felt like a
physical force crunching into her. Her bones felt like they were vibrating and her head pounded painfully.

Desperate, she launched herself at the huge doors. They swung open as her shoulder hit them and she landed inside. Laura came in after her and shut the doors behind them. Carmilla looked up at her from the ground.

“You get that it can go straight through the door, right?”

Laura found a light switch next to the doors and flicked them all on.

“Forgive me,” she took a big sniff and wiped her face, flicking flecks of blood against the wall. “If I’m not an expert on surviving ghost attacks.”

She moved to Carmilla and helped her back to her feet.

“Come on. I’m thinking we should get as far away from its Petrificus Totalis scream as we can.”

The building’s interior was vast and every sound they made echoed through its cream coloured walls. The first thing Carmilla noticed were seats, rows upon rows of empty seats. In the centre of the room, the seats were two groups of long benches enclosed into boxes and divided by a path down the middle. Cheaply made single chairs of rusty metal and worn leather made up the rest. At the end of the hall was a stage, empty, except for a lone pulpit at the front.

What most caught her eye, however, was the large structure directly in the hall’s centre, standing in the middle of the path between the two groups of benches. It was massive, a block of black metal that reached up far above them. When Carmilla craned her neck to see how far, she saw that it went through a hole in the ceiling above.

“That ugly giant crucifix that you can see from miles away? Yeah, looks like its base actually goes all the way down to the ground. They must have built the hall around it.”

“I think they built around the whole church. They tore down the church’s walls, but they kept the benches and the cross.”

“Fascinating. We need to find something that can hurt a banshee before-”

She felt a chill down her spine. She turned to see the banshee had already entered the hall. It was scary how easy it was to lose track of it when it wasn’t screaming.

“Crap.”

“Didn’t you say it was supposed to be weaker once it got inside? I recall that was a pretty big part of the plan. Actually, I think that was the only part of the plan. Yet it looks exactly the same to me right now,” Laura said.

“Yeah, you’re right, this is all my fault. Oh, wait, who made us go back down the hill to be great big dumb and super dead heroes again?”

They backed away down the path between the church benches as it advanced, arms outstretched. Her back hit the metal cross. She reached for Laura’s hand next to her. Its body brightened and solidified, which Carmilla found strange. It usually screamed and got close enough to swipe its claws before doing that.
Then she realised that it wasn’t solidifying all at once as it had before. Instead, only its outstretched arms were becoming solid, the rest of it still translucent. It stopped and looked down at its arms, confusion on its face. It tried to float back, but its arms couldn’t move back with it as if they were stuck somehow. It pulled hard, like someone trying to get their arms out of a jacket with incredibly tight sleeves, desperate hissing coming from its mouth.

They both watched its struggles with open mouths, neither knowing quite what to make of what was happening in front of them until Carmilla noticed how close the banshee was to the old church benches.

“Of course!” she said. “It’s only now crossed onto hallowed ground. The hall they built around the church doesn’t mean anything. It must have crossed where the old walls were.”

The banshee stopped struggling. Its white eyes narrowed as it fixed them both with a glare. The serenity it had affected when it wasn’t screaming completely gone, it bared its teeth and floated forwards. The rest of its body brightened and solidified as it came over the invisible line where the hallowed ground began.

“Okay, so it’s solid, and it can’t leave. It’s trapped! Go team,” Laura said. “All we have to do is leave the hallowed ground ourselves and-”

Its lower jaw distended down to scream again.

There was rage in this one, Carmilla could hear it. This time her body couldn’t fight it. Her muscles seized up, and her vision swam. She slumped back against the metal block and slid slowly to the ground. She couldn’t hear anything bar the ringing in her ears and none of her limbs responded to her commands.

Only her eyes continued to work. She blinked a few times to clear her vision. The banshee was almost upon her, death in its eyes. Its intentions were clear. If it was trapped in this place, at least it could get revenge on its imprisoners.

“Laura,” she gasped. Or at least she thought she did. She couldn’t hear her own voice over the ringing, and there was a chance her mouth was as frozen as the rest of her. “Just crawl. If you can, just crawl. Get over the line. Just crawl.”

The banshee raised its claws upwards for a strike. Carmilla could have sworn it was grinning. It swiped at her neck.

A force pushed her sideways as the claws struck. They missed her entirely and struck the metal of the cross. There was a sizzling sound. The banshee hissed angrily, before floating away as it clutched its wounded hand.

She felt something on her side and flicked her eyes up to see Laura on top of her. She had crawled after all, except she’d crawled to her rather than away.

Idiot, moron, fool. I love you.

Laura shakily pushed herself back to her feet.

“Got an idea,” she said with a wink. A statement more terrifying than the banshee.

Laura manoeuvred herself against the cross and waited. The banshee soared at her, claws outstretched. Laura ducked away at the last moment, and the banshee flew straight into the cross.
It sounded like an egg frying in a pan. The banshee screamed, but this time it was all pain and fear. Laura pushed herself against the banshee’s back, throwing all of her body weight into stopping the banshee from getting off the cross.

At first, all the banshee did was scream. But after a few seconds, its body began to dissolve into a bubbling white spongy mess. It thrashed wildly, but Laura held firm against its back. Its screams stopped, and soon, the spongy white substance was all that remained of it.

The hall fell silent. Laura, covered in goop and still bleeding from the nose, closed her eyes and leant hard against the metal. The majority of the goop dribbled down and spread across the floor.

Carmilla was starting to get worried about her, when Laura opened her eyes, raised the goop on her hands to them and laughed.

“Hey, look at me. I’m a Ghostbuster.”

Her laugh was genuine and infectious. Soon Carmilla was laughing with her. The sound reverberated around the empty hall.

“Okay, never again,” Laura said. “Never ever let me say something is going to be easy ever again.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey there,

So the unfortunate news is that this will be the last update for a little while. I consider this the end of Act 1 of the story and I felt that would be a good place for a natural break. I’ve struggled to keep to a posting schedule and I’m afraid that if I keep pushing it, quality (what quality there is ;p) will start to suffer.

I do however like the idea of posting in regular schedules. So what is going to happen is I’m going to take a little break from posting to recharge the batteries, take stock of the story as a whole and where it’s going and build up another buffer so I’m not stressing out about it too much.

I’m sure the break won’t be too long, I can’t imagine it being too much more than a month. So, for now, thank you so much for reading and all the comments, which have been so nice.

Thank you again.

Analogue
Laura

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She felt warm, clean, relaxed and was with the best company she could ever ask for. If this wasn’t heaven, she’d still rather be here.

Laura popped her head out from under the bubbling water of their hotel room’s private spa. Droplets trickled down from her hair and back into the water as she wiped her face, the sound of it the only thing to be heard when she wasn’t humming in satisfaction.

She opened her eyes to a sight even lovelier than how she felt. On the other side of the circular spa, Carmilla floated with her arms crossed behind her head, as languid floating in a spa as she would be lounging on a comfy couch. Her mouth hadn’t moved from a small content smile since they’d gotten in and her eyes, fixed on Laura, held nothing but affection. She hadn’t said much for a while, but the odd purr told Laura that she was as happy with their current situation as they were.

“So, finally got your spa,” Laura said. “Is it everything you hoped for?”

“Mmm-hmm,” Carmilla hummed out before she closed her eyes and took a big satisfied breath. Laura could see her chest swell upwards just below the surface. If only the water level were a tad lower…

As if sensing her thoughts, Carmilla’s eyes opened again, and her smile widened, gleaming teeth showing.

“I’m also so very pleased you saw things my way in regards to underwear.”

Laura stifled a giggle and looked over at the two messy piles of discarded clothing near the bathroom’s entrance. Bra and underwear included.

“You were right. This is much better. For a variety of reasons,” Laura matched Carmilla’s smile with one of her own.

Even if they weren’t in the best spa Laura had ever had the pleasure of relaxing in, she would have been glad to get out of those clothes. What the weird goop that the banshee had melted into didn’t cover was stained by blood. This wasn’t the first set of clothes ruined by crazy supernatural adventures. Perhaps she needed to check the tags better when she went clothes shopping. See which ones had instructions for washing out ghost goop and one’s own blood.

Of course, that their ruined clothes were the biggest casualties from last night’s adventure was probably something to be very grateful for.

She bit her lip and looked down at the water for a moment. “Not the only thing you were right about.”

When she looked back up, she saw that’d gotten Carmilla’s attention. Her eyes were bright and piercing, but she didn’t say anything, so Laura continued.

“I think I owe you an apology. You warned me that we were being reckless and I didn’t really listen. And so a little light sneaking turned into almost getting shot by armed guards or decapitated by a ghost.” She pointed a thumb at herself. “That was my fault, mea culpa.”
Carmilla kept silent for a long moment, before finally speaking.

“We’re not invincible, Laura. I know that we’ve been through a lot and that it might seem that way after Silas and Florence. Especially for someone so young-”

“Hey.”

“Which you still are,” Carmilla continued firmly. “I can only imagine the effect of defeating a death God has on a twenty-year-old’s perception of their own mortality. Hell, for a while back there you had me feeling like we could do anything as well and I’ve been around for a fair bit longer than that. You have to remember you’re still mortal, no matter how many deities you get the better of.”

Laura opened her mouth to respond, reacting negatively to her age being brought up on instinct. She bit it back though, taking a second to let Carmilla’s words process. They had a point, and she could hardly argue with it considering she’d started this conversation with an apology.

She met Carmilla’s gaze. “I’m sorry.”

Carmilla shook her head. “You don’t have to be sorry. I just want us to be more careful. I get that you want to find those kids as soon as possible. But getting ourselves killed won’t help them.”

“You’re right,” Laura nodded. “No more reckless half assed plans. From now on, they’ll be nothing but careful planning and smart decisions.”

“Yeah, that would be a first for us I think,” Carmilla snorted, she looked genuinely amused. “But I’ll take that for now. Apology accepted. And anyway, it’s not like I can be all that mad when you were literally trying to save children.”

They were both floating towards the centre of the spa, bit by bit, as magnetised to each other in the water as they were anywhere else.

“Are you sure, I’m completely forgiven?” Laura asked, closing the gap between them fully with a final push through the water. “That there is nothing I could do, to apologise more?”

Carmilla’s eyes flashed, and she bit her lip.

“Well, now that you mention it, I suppose after such a horrible night I could use a little more apologising. Do you have something in mind?”

In response, Laura wrapped her legs around Carmilla’s waist and pushed most of her body out of the water. She then placed her arms around Carmilla’s shoulders and pressed against her tightly. Carmilla for her part hugged her arms around Laura’s waist to hold her in place, and when Laura looked down, Carmilla’s expression was one of adoration. Eye’s roaming up and down, mouth open.

Guess you’re not the only one who can leave the other breathless. She couldn’t help but enjoy the occasional reversal from their usual dynamic.

“How about this?” Laura asked.

“Forgiven,” Carmilla breathed out as Laura began grinding against her. “Very, very forgiven.”

Any further words got smothered out when Laura lifted Carmilla’s chin up with a finger and leant down into a kiss.

It may have taken longer to get to this spa than they’d hoped, but some things were worth the wait.
She murmured something unrecognisable even to her at the voice coming from right next to her ear. It repeated a couple of times. When she didn’t respond, the voice’s owner began to shake her lightly.

She opened her eyes. She was still in the spa being held by Carmilla, their chins resting on each other’s shoulders.

“You fell asleep for a while there,” Carmilla said. “Which is a great idea, I’m right there with you. But we should probably get you into bed instead of floating in this tub all day. I hear it wrinkles the skin or something. Back when I was a vampire I could float in these things for days.”

Laura turned her head and looked past Carmilla into the bedroom through the bathroom entrance. The large bed in the middle of it was a mess. The night before, when Carmilla had driven them from Kellan’s to the hotel, they had collapsed into its soft sheets. Both too tired to even take off clothes that by now were exceptionally dirty with sweat, blood and goop. Laura’s muscles and bones were certain she’d been involved in some kind of hellish decathlon, while her ears had rung right up until her head hit the pillow.

She was sure Carmilla has been in a similar state and looking back it was likely a miracle she’d been able to drive the motorbike all the way to the hotel. They’d staggered through the front doors, probably looking to the on duty receptionist like a couple of drunken vacationers coming home from one hell of a bender.

Perhaps it would have been smarter to have taken Kellan’s offer for them to stay over for the night, but Laura was happy they didn’t. After what they had been through at the school, they’d needed a night for themselves. Or more accurately an entire morning and perhaps even some of the afternoon.

She groaned at the sight of the bed. A night of sleeping in it with her dirty clothes on had resulted in some of the goop getting in it. She’d rather stay in the spa.

“We’ll clear the gunk out,” Carmilla said, reading her thoughts again. “Can’t stay in this tub forever.”

“We can’t stay in bed all day either,” she said, hating the words coming out of her mouth. “We have to get back to work. What time is it?”

“I’d say about noon and do we really have to get back to work? We almost died last night, does that not entitle us to a day off?”

“Are those kids out there entitled to a day off from being kidnapped?” Laura said as she waded towards the edge of the spa and pulled herself out. “No, last night was a bust. We didn’t learn anything from it. We have to get started on another plan.

“Plus,” she continued. Walking over to some towels on a rack and wrapping herself up in them. “Kellan said she’d be over around now with our luggage. I don’t want her to see us lounging around.”

Carmilla draped her hands over the side of the spa and leant her chin on its lip. “Well, we wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

Laura recognised the tone. “Something on your mind?”

Carmilla shrugged. “It seems we’ve been doing a lot for Ms Mary Kellan recently. Travelling to
another country, doing investigation work for no reward, almost dying in that investigation. But sure, wouldn’t want her to think we’re *slacking*.

“You think we’re doing too much?”

“I think when you see someone suffering your first reaction is to help, to drop everything that you’re doing and throw yourself into action. Just remember, we were the ones who risked our lives last night. If we want to take a break we can.”

“I know that.” Laura grabbed a few more towels and carried them over to Carmilla. “It’s only, I don’t want her to think we’ve given up or anything. Thought it would be nice for her to see us getting right back into things despite what happened last night.”

Carmilla took the towels as she rose out of the spa and Laura momentarily forgot how talking worked.

“But, you’re right. Again,” Laura said once Carmilla had finished wrapping herself up in the towels. “There is no reason why you shouldn’t enjoy the rest of the day. You were amazing last night. You deserve the day off. And I don’t want you doing anything you don’t want to. How about while I start planning our next move, you enjoy that very large and very luxurious King sized bed. You can watch me work from there. We kinda don’t have any clothes until Kellan gets here, so I have a feeling you might enjoy that.”

Carmilla laughed and brought her into a hug. Her hands cupped around Laura’s cheeks.

“Relax, I’m teasing, mostly. Of course, I’ll help you plan our next move. Despite that being such an enticing offer. But perhaps instead, before we start you’d want to do some of that yoga you love so much. I can’t imagine a better time for me to start learning it through close attention.”

Laura stifled a laugh and shook her head.

“That sounds lovely, but I don’t think my body would forgive me if I tried yoga right now. Not after going ten rounds with Casper Wilhelma last night,” she kissed Carmilla’s cheek and walked into the bedroom. “A banshee you said? And it came out of the stone?”

There was a wall sized window next to the bed. She walked up to it and pulled the blinds to take a look. The window looked over the Savannah River. It was narrow, and across it, Laura could see a small island full of trees and a few large buildings on the other side. After the thoroughly grungy and depressing high school, they’d spent so much of the last day in, it looked beautiful. Though she was sure for Carmilla, it would be nothing special.

Carmilla followed her in and began pulling the dirty sheets off the bed.

“Yeah, that’s what it was. Seen a few before, not particularly threatening back when I was a vampire, I think being around Mattie and Mother shouting at each other all the time worked up an immunity for me. Now those were screaming matches,” she finished with the last of the sheets and poked her fingers into the mattress, like a cat clawing at a surface to make sure it was comfortable, before lying down on it.

“And yeah, the banshee must have come out of a Convacantes Stone. It’s Latin for summoning I think. If you know how to use them properly you can trap things like banshees and other spirits in them and then let them out whenever you choose.”

“You mean like a genie?”
“Sure, except you only get one wish and it's 'kill everyone around you.' It was probably being used as a defence mechanism, like the security guards. Was there anything else in the drawer?”

Laura thought back, she hadn’t gotten a good look, the stone had caught her interest first, and there had been no time to look further once the banshee was unleashed.

“I’m sorry, I’m sure there was, but I saw the stone first. If only I didn’t pick it up like an idiot.”

“Nah, don’t beat yourself up about it. Odds are touching anything in that drawer would have set it off. You said we didn’t learn anything last night. I’d say we actually learned a bit. We now know for sure that someone is hiding something and we know that someone knows their shit when it comes to spells and magic. You don’t accidentally find a stone with a banshee in it and set it to go off if someone rummages through your desk.”

“It has to be Stevenson, it was his desk,” Laura said. “Maybe he knew we might try to sneak in at some point.”

“Or he always has stuff like that going on, and those budding Nancy Drews stumbled into them.”

That thought sent shivers down Laura’s spine. The idea that any of the kids had been attacked by something like the banshee was a dark one. The banshee’s claws hadn’t been for a light, gentle kidnapping that was for sure. Her mind returned to the creature Lexi had described to her mother and the crime scene photos Beattie had given them. What if whatever it was, it was as murderous as the banshee?

Carmilla must have noticed her anxiety as she sat up on the bed and reached a hand out to her. Laura took it instinctively.

“Laura, look. I know how much you want all these kids to be still alive. But you have to be ready.”

She hesitated for a moment before continuing. “Ready for the possibility that they’re not. That won’t be your fault, despite how much I know a little voice in your head is going to say so. Sometimes you get dragged into a bad situation, and there isn’t anything you can do, no matter how hard you try, or how much you want to.”

Laura let her hand go on autopilot with the intertwining as she mulled over Carmilla’s words. She knew they were right, but accepting them felt barely a step away from what she’d accused Beattie of back at the Police Station, giving up.

Carmilla wasn’t saying that though. Laura could see the good intentions behind the words. She was only looking out for her. Carmilla had been around her long enough to know her tendency to blame herself for everything currently going wrong. This was Carmilla trying to get out ahead of that.

Laura knelt down and met Carmilla’s eyes. “Thank you, I see what you’re trying to do. I need to assume those kids are still alive for now though. They’re out there, and they’re alive, and they need our help. If they’re not and this is all for nothing… We’ll just have to deal with that when we find out.”

Carmilla reached out her free hand and ran it through Laura’s hair. Her eyes concerned.

“I know we will. I’m just a bit worried. You had another nightmare last night, a bad one and—”

“Did I? I was so exhausted. Everything after we left the school is a blur. We did fight a ghost that killed a bunch of people last night though, so nightmare sounds like a pretty natural response to me,” Laura said quickly.
“Except this is two nights in a row and this time you were mumbling. Mostly one word—”

Laura placed her second hand over Carmilla’s and her own intertwining ones. “I’m sure whatever it was, it was just a dumb dream. Nothing to worry about, I’m fine.”

The room’s intercom buzzed loudly.

“That would be Kellan,” Laura said, getting up and moving towards the main room. “I’ll let her up. Try to act cool, like everything is fine and you have no worries whatsoever… So act like you normally do.”

“Sure, we telling her we have a plan for what to try next?”

“Uh, yes? No, maybe. I have about thirty seconds once I buzz her up to figure that out.”

She walked across the spacious main room full of expensive, luxurious furniture and a television large enough to be a miniature cinema. The room was lit up by the sun shining through a glass sliding door that led to a balcony. The soft carpet felt heavenly under her feet as she strode past it all to find the buzzing intercom.

She found it next to the front door passed a sparkling white kitchen so clean messing it up by actually cooking in it would be a crime. As nice as their cottage had become, this suite was a step above. The cleanliness meant that the thick bundle of bloody bandages on the kitchen bench stood out in a rather macabre way. Laura tapped her nose gingerly. It hadn’t bled for a while, but it still felt sore.

After buzzing her up with the intercom and opening the door for her, Kellan bumbled into the room with two large suitcases. She still wore the same baggy clothes from last night, and her short hair was a mess. She did smile as she greeted Laura, but like the bags under her eyes, it looked tired. As well as the two suitcases, Kellan had a black handbag around her shoulder. How she managed to wrangle it all up to the elevator, Laura wasn’t sure.

“Wow, look at this place,” she said, looking around at the suite. “Should have brought Lexi here for our vacations, forget Disney World.”

Carmilla appeared out of nowhere, grabbing her suitcase from Kellan and darting off to the bedroom.

“I’ll take that,” she said, and once she reached the bedroom, she shut the door behind her.

That left Laura alone with Kellan. There was an awkward pause as Laura tried to think of what to say.

“How are you feeling?” Kellan eventually said. It might have been to break the silence, but the question sounded genuine. “How’s the nose?”

“Fine, it was barely a thing after you patched it up last night. I appreciate that and everything else you did last night.”

Shortly after defeating the banshee in the main hall, they’d had no choice but to head back outside and into what could well have been a hail of gunfire. But to their surprise, other than the bodies of the banshee’s victims there were no security guards to be found. Now Laura wondered where exactly they had gone, but at the time neither particularly wanted to question their good luck.

With no guards in sight, there seemed little point in going all the way back through the school and across the oval, so Laura had called a thoroughly alarmed Kellan to pick them up from the main car park.
“It was very brave of you to stay despite hearing all that gunfire and shouting, thank you,” Laura said. She meant it. Without her, they’d have needed to walk all the way back to Kellan’s home or their hotel suite.

“What else was I going to do? I couldn’t just leave you two there,” her eyes found the bloody bandages on the bench, and she shook her head. “I forgot how bad it was before I got to it. Those bandages look like they belong to someone who got stabbed or something.”

“That makes it look worse than it was. It’s fine.”

“No,” Kellan said firmly “No it’s not. I have such gratitude for what you both have tried to do, but I can’t let this continue. People were shooting last night. It sounded like a war zone from where I was. Never mind that you were saying something about a ghost decapitating people?’

Laura really wished she hadn’t blurted that out on the drive back to Kellan’s.

“And where was I during all of this? In my car, letting other people do all the work, be in all the danger to try and save my daughter.” Her eyes were fixed on the bandages. “I wanted to save my daughter so much that I went into another parent’s house and put their child in danger. That’s not right, what kind of a mother does that? Thank you again for your efforts but from now on any risks should be taken by me. I came here to say goodbye.”

She’d struggled to get that last sentence out, and Laura could understand how hard it must have been. Kellan was smart enough to know that her chances of finding her daughter decreased dramatically without their help.

“It’s funny,” Laura said with a slight smile. “From what we’ve learned so far it’s looking more and more like your daughter was both very noble and very brave, trying to fight some scary stuff to save her friends. I think it’s pretty obvious where she gets it from.

“But here’s the thing Ms Kellan. Carm and I both wanted to come here. We came not because you forced us, not because you paid us, but because we wanted to. Even if you told me to leave now, I wouldn’t. I’m staying here, and I’m going to do everything I can to find those kids regardless of it’s with your help or your blessing. I’m invested in this and while she does a good job of hiding it, so is Carm. We are finding your daughter, and that’s the end of it.”

The hug Kellan gave her was as tight as it was sudden. She felt a trickle of warm water go down her cheek where Kellan’s eye brushed it, and the embrace drove the air out of her lungs.

“Thank you, thank you so much.”

As tight and powerful as it was, the hug didn’t last long. Kellan quickly stepped back, looking slightly abashed at her spontaneous action. Not wanting to let the moment get awkward, Laura spoke.

“Like I said before, save all the thanks for when we actually do something. I’m sorry that we got your hopes up last night. Things didn’t exactly go as planned.”

Kellan sniffed and wiped her eyes. “I thought after what you said happened last night you both would be buying the next plane ticket back to Canada. You’re a brave girl, has anyone told you that?”

“Not a lot, no. Mostly people call me crazy or annoying, self-righteous, tightly wound…” A loud thud came from the bedroom. “But some people are much nicer and say lovely things to me all the time, and those people are really, really great.”
Kellan gave a start and reached for her handbag.

“I almost forgot. I needed to give this back to you,” Kellan brought her mother’s plaid shirt, neatly folded, out of the bag. Kellan presented it to Laura carefully. “I hand washed it last night after you two left, a bit old for a machine. I’m guessing your father isn’t very good with such things, so I thought I’d…” she trailed off.

“Thank you,” Laura took it. Despite how soft the fabric was, it felt almost electric to touch. She told herself it was just her mind playing tricks. “I appreciate that and no, dad was never good at washing. The number of times I had to go to school with shrunken clothing.”

They both chuckled.

The bedroom door opened and Carmilla, back in her usual black leather, returned to the room. She brushed ever so lightly against Laura’s arm and then found a wall to lean back against.

“Well,” Kellan said. “If you two are committed to staying and helping, perhaps you wouldn’t mind coming over a bit later today? I uh, may have set something up last night after I decided that I’d come here to end things. But now that you’re both staying, I’d love for you two to be a part of it.”

“Set up what?” Carmilla asked.

“Maybe it would be better if you came to see for yourselves.”

Carmilla’s eyes narrowed.

“Of course, we’ll come,” Laura said. “We’ll head off as soon as we’re ready.”

Kellan’s smile was much brighter than the one she put on when she came in. She thanked them for what must have been the hundredth time, said her goodbyes and left.

Laura placed the shirt on the kitchen bench and turned to Carmilla.

“Well, that went well.”

Carmilla snorted. “If by well, you mean it looks like we just got roped into some new scheme she wouldn’t even tell us about, then yes, it went great.”

“C’mon, you have to admit her last one worked out. The fake I.D’s have worked perfectly.”

"Oh, yeah, I forgot you two have become best friends suddenly." Carmilla walked over to the kitchen table, her eyes on the shirt. She stared at it for a long moment. "Plaid shirt, I guess you both had the same taste in clothing," she paused and poked a finger at the fabric. "Laura-"

“So we should probably get going. See what Kellan’s come up with, it’s not like we have a plan right now.”

Carmilla’s eyes flicked downwards for a moment before she nodded. “Sure. But you say we don’t have a plan, how about this one. Instead of heading off to Kellan’s house, we find out where this Stevenson lives and take this whole thing up with him. I rather dislike it when people try to murder me with screaming ghosts, so I’m pretty good with the prospect of beating him until he tells us where the kids are.”

“As much as I would love to see Principal douche-face get punched in his douche face repeatedly, weren’t you the one saying we should be more careful? If his desk was booby trapped with a
murderous ghost and his school is full of armed gunmen, imagine what his house would be like? I think we need to think things through this time.”

Carmilla smiled. “Look at that, smart decisions and careful planning already. Okay fine, let’s see what fresh disaster Soccer Mum has for us today.”

It took them a little while to arrive at Kellan’s home. Having to first to unpack their luggage and find something to eat at the hotel’s restaurant. The drive there was pleasant, Laura finding that snuggling up to Carmilla on the back of the bike felt almost like taking a much-needed nap.

Three cars were outside the house that hadn’t there when they’d last left. All family sized sedans, one in the driveway behind Kellan’s and two more on the side of the road. Carmilla parked the bike behind them.

“You’re the two investigators, right? Hollis and Karnstein? I’m Martin Bishop, and this is my wife, Gianna. We were so happy when Mary told us you were both coming, the rest of us are inside.”

Laura took his hand and forced herself to smile.

“Fantastic, that’s just fantastic.”

Hey,
So the gap between posts ended up longer than I expected. I am sorry for that. The delay (if this is TMI, my apologies and feel free to skip) came mostly due to some severe negative feedback some betas gave to the upcoming chapters while they were WIP. The feedback was totally fair but I temporarily lost a lot of confidence in my writing.

I’m back on it now though and after a great deal of rewriting, I’m more confident in what’s on the page now than I was before. This update also comes with edits to the story as a whole. Nothing narrative wise was changed, they were grammatical in nature designed to increase readability and flow.

Hope this chapter was enjoyable, thank you for reading.
Laura

What the hell had Kellan invited them to?

Her mind whirled as she followed the Bishops inside the house almost on autopilot, being too busy spiralling to notice much of what was going on around her. She could only think of one reason why the parents of Abigail Bishop might be here. She also didn’t need many guesses to be pretty sure of what Mr Bishop meant by ‘the rest of us’.

Laura could hear voices coming from the living room as she went through the door. She couldn’t see their owners. Both the Bishops were bigger and taller than her, blocking her sight of the room.

“Martin, Gianna, it’s so good you decided to come back.”

She recognised the voice as Kellan’s. There was relief and surprise in it. She hadn’t expected them to return, Laura guessed.

A general murmuring of assent accompanied her words.

Even without being able to see much from beyond the backs of the Bishops, Laura could already sense the room’s mood. The house was much warmer than it had been before with the extra people in it and Laura could smell sweat and body odour. The tension was palpable, not feeling too dissimilar to the atmosphere of her exams back at High School, stressed out people cramming themselves into a room. This room though was much more intense. She grasped for Carmilla’s hand behind her and was grateful to find it.

“Me and my wife are sorry to you folks,” a man’s voice, thick with a southern accent. “We didn’t mean to offend or distress in any way. We can get a little carried away, we apologise.”

“It’s fine, we understand, we’re all on edge,” Mr Bishop said, though his words were stiff. “And besides, look who we found as soon as we went outside.”

The Bishops moved forwards into the living room and shuffled off to the side to reveal Laura and Carmilla to the group. And Laura’s worst fears were realised.

There were four, excluding Kellan. All seated around the dinner table. A brown bowl full of peanuts sat in the middle, untouched it seemed.

At first glance, they all looked the same. Dark pits under their eyes, sweat stains under their armpits, messy unwashed hair, crumpled and creased clothes that looked like they’d been worn for days. They looked like Kellan did when she’d first met them at her father’s house. Sleep deprived, starving, on edge.

Desperate.

They sat in two distinct pairs on opposite sides of the table. The pair to the right, a tall man with a bushy moustache and a baseball cap and a woman in a black tracksuit, drew her attention first. The man spoke, and Laura recognised his voice as the one she’d heard apologise to the Bishops.

“Well, goddamn finally.”

“What did we say, Peter?” Kellan’s question was a rebuke. “Stop being an ass and be respectful. These two are trying to help, and they went through hell last night for us.”
“Hey, I wasn’t being an ass I was just talking. Was I being an ass, honey?” he turned to the woman next to him, who contradictorily shook her head yet also shushed him. He trailed off into a mutter and fell silent.

The other pair on the opposite side of the table remained quiet. Both were skinny, their flimsy, cheap looking clothes hanging off of them.

They were sitting on the side of the table closest to a wall and had positioned themselves in the corner of the room. The light from the windows Kellan had opened around the living room didn’t quite reach it. Their eyes shone from their dark little corner, fixed on her and Carmilla.

Without a word, the woman stood up.

“Emily no, don’t bother them,” the thin man said, surprised. He reached out a hand too late to stop her.

‘Emily’ ignored him. She moved towards them in a small timid stride, her hands crossed over her belly. She went to Laura first, and once she reached her, she spoke in a tiny voice.

“Mary says that you’re both trying to find our children. Is that true?” her eyes were wide and bright.

Laura nodded. “Yeah, I mean yes, that’s true. We have, uh, taken up the case,” she wasn’t sure if she should take out her fake private detective ID. Had Kellan told them they were PI’s?

The woman slowly pulled out her arms from across her belly and moved them around Laura in a hug. The movement was slow and gentle. As if Laura was a shy animal that could run at any moment.

“Thank you,” she said. “No one else seems to care. My boy, my baby boy, is out there, and nobody cares.”

The woman's cheeks were heavily freckled. They were so close that Laura could see every individual one. Her voice was painful to hear, full of suffering and grief. Laura had only heard that kind of voice once before. From Carmilla as Laura lay dying in the pit back at Silas.

“We care,” Laura said as she pulled away. “We care and we're doing all we can.”

She could feel the eyes of the whole room on her. Everywhere she looked she saw a mixture of expectation and desperation. She felt light headed, claustrophobic.

“Have you learned anything? Can you tell us anything?” The woman in the tracksuit pants said.

“I, no, I’m sorry, we-“

“But Mary said something happened at the school last night, can’t you tell us what?” Mrs Bishop said from the side.

“Yes, something did but…”

“Come on Emily, give her some room so she can speak,” the thin man said, gently pulling the freckled woman away and back to her seat.

How about some room to run away could she have some room to run away?
There were murmurs now, to go with the stares, impatience obvious in both. Indecision gripped her. She had no idea what to tell them. What she could tell them.

“Bathroom,” she said, “gotta go… to that.”

“I can show you,” Kellan started as Laura made her escape.

“I know the way,” Laura snapped. She couldn’t help but feel like the woman had led her into an ambush.

She walked down the hallway towards the bathroom and strode right past it. The hallway the bathroom was in ended with a door that led into the back garden. Laura remembered it from the first time she’d explored the place. The back garden was a mess. It looked expensively assembled, elaborate tile paving and a small water fountain. But it suffered from a lack of recent maintenance. Dirt covered the tiles, the water fountain had no water, and the plants were overgrowing.

The fresh air and the warm sun on her face was enjoyable regardless. It struck her that this was the second time in two days she’d felt the need to take refuge in a back garden.

The thought proved to be insidious, bringing her mind back to her mother’s shirt and the memories it had triggered. She couldn’t believe something as simple as a shirt could have had this effect. Was there more to it than that? Brooding over the past was supposed to be Carmilla’s thing, not hers. But despite what she told Carmilla, she remembered her nightmare last night perfectly, and it had nothing to do with ghosts. At least not of the literal kind.

*My Laura, my darling Laura, I have never loved anything in this world as much as I have you.*

The words rang through her head without warning. She pushed them away violently. Now was the not the time for this. She really wanted to open up to Carmilla about it, but not while they were busy with this multiple kids missing and probably in mortal danger thing.

A familiar voice carried down from the hallway into the garden.

“How about next time, you actually think for five seconds before casually deciding to lead the person who cares the most about finding your daughter into a goddamn ambush?”

She smiled. Just as before, Carmilla wasn’t far behind her.

“It wasn’t an ambush,” Kellan said. “I mean it wasn’t supposed to be. I should have known they would swamp her, I see that now, but you have to understand how they’re feeling. If I could talk to her and explain.”

“No, you’re going to leave her alone and give her a minute.” Carmilla’s words were forceful and brooked no argument.

Laura heard Carmilla’s footsteps coming down the hallway. They were the only ones, so Laura assumed that Kellan had backed off.

The sight of her face as she appeared at the door was even better than the fresh air. Carmilla wasted no time in moving to her.

“You okay?” she said, placing her hands under Laura’s arms.

“That was pretty intense in there,” Laura said in response. “Did you see the looks on their faces? How desperate they all were? They all needed me to say something, and I had no idea what to tell
them. What should I tell them? Should they know about ghosts and vampires and that we think their kids may have been caught up in something straight up supernatural? Would they even believe us if we told them and even if they did. Are we okay with random people knowing about this kind of stuff?”

Carmilla waited for a second to see if she was done.

“Okay, so that was far too many questions, so instead of answering them, I’m going to repeat mine. Are you okay?”

Laura let out a breath. “Yeah, I guess so. You know, crazy as it sounds, that room was scarier to me than the decapitation happy ghost last night.”

“We don’t have to go back in there. If you want we can just go.”

Laura stepped closer and snaked her hands inside Carmilla’s jacket.

“No, we can’t do that. Not now anyway. These people thought they were finally going to get some answers. I can’t give them nothing. Thank you for saying it though,” she pressed her forehead against Carmilla’s for a short moment. “Haven’t we done this recently? You making me feel better while we’re in a back garden?”

“Yeah and both times you were upset because of the same person.”

Well, that was pointed. Laura noticed the sharpness in Carmilla’s voice.

“I think that’s a bit harsh. The first time was me being dumb and this… she was probably trying to do the right thing. Maybe she thought the other parents had a right to know what was going on. She should have given us a heads up though.”

Carmilla’s expression grew dark.

“Yes, she should have. She’s screwed us over here. Now we have an entire room full of breeders screeching at us to tell them we’ve magically worked out where their kids are already.”

Laura winced at the lack of sensitivity in Carmilla’s words. But if she was honest, she did feel somewhat similarly. At the least, she really didn’t want to go back into that room, knowing what would be awaiting her.

“It would be easier if we knew what Kellan’s told them exactly. If she’s already told them everything, then I think we might be kinda screwed,” Laura said.

“No she hasn’t, that was my first thought as well. When you went off to the ‘bathroom’, she came up to me. She said she gave them the PI story and told them something happened at the school last night. That’s it. If she’d told them stuff about us, I would probably be disembowelling her as we speak.”

That was good news at least. She took a relieved breath. “Thank God. Could you imagine how they would react if they thought we were some kind of world saving heroes?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe they’d intrude upon our privacy, track us down like a crazy person, rope us into travelling to another country and risking our lives to rescue their missing kids. Something like that?”

“I’m starting to think maybe uploading everything online back at Silas wasn’t the smartest choice.”
“You’re starting to think that just now?”

Laura groaned and buried her head in Carmilla’s shoulder.

“What are we going to say to them? I don’t have a plan. I don’t know what I’m doing right now. I mean, okay, that’s nothing new. But at least at Silas, I didn’t have a half dozen scared out of their minds parents to deal with while I flailed about.”

“Hey,” Carmilla cupped her hands around Laura’s cheeks and lifted her chin up so that their eyes met. “First thing, you didn’t flail… much. And when you did it may have been impossibly cute and endearing, but more importantly.”

She paused for a moment, lending her next words weight.

“You have nothing to prove to anyone. We’ve been here one day, and we have already worked out more than any of these people or the police have in months. Yeah, we don’t have all the answers right now, but for one day on the job, I think we’re doing okay. When we go back in there, I want you to remember you’re Laura Hollis, the woman who saved the world. There won’t be anyone smarter or more capable in that room.”

Carmilla’s words deserved more than the quick kiss Laura gave her, but for now, it was all they had time for.

“We should spend some time building up our garden back at the cottage,” Laura said. “Seems like a great place for pep talks.”

“Meh, never was much for gardening. You get dirt on your hands, and there are always worms wriggling in the ground,” Carmilla said and shuddered.

“I’ll handle that stuff. We’ll get you a hammock or something you can lie in as you observe and direct.”

Carmilla grinned. “Now, that sounds pretty nice. I can go with that.”

They came together again in a hug.

“Ready?” Carmilla asked.

“Yep.”

“Okay, so what’s going to happen here is I’m going to tell you guys what I can, and you aren’t going to interrupt me until I’m done. Then you can ask questions.”

She stood at the head of the table, her hands clasping the top of the chair she was leaning down on. All the parents, Kellan included, were seated, so she hoped it gave her an air authority. If only she weren’t so damn small.

The parents started murmuring to themselves at that. Laura could only pick out a few things.

“If I could just ask her something first.”

“But what if we have something we need to say?”
“Look, I’m not trying to be that guy, but who put the little girl in charge again?”

A loud thump reverberated from the wooden floor.

“Or we could leave and give you nothing,” Carmilla said from the spot on the wall she was leaning against. As always off to the side, but close enough to observe everything. “Perhaps you’d rather that?”

The room fell silent.

“Right,” Laura started, “my name is Laura Hollis, and this is Carmilla Karnstein. We’re private investigators, and recently we decided to take on the case of your missing children. We’ve been talking to Ms Kellan and to the police, and from what we’ve learned so far we think the school might be involved in the disappearances.”

She stopped there and took a breath.

“That’s it?” The man with the baseball cap and moustache said.

“Did I mention we took the case recently?”

“But Mary said something happened at the school last night, what about that?” Mrs Bishop said.

“We don’t want to talk about that right now,” Carmilla said firmly. Laura gave her a thankful look before turning back to the table.

The murmurs became angry.

“So what, we don’t get told anything?” The woman in the tracksuit pants said as she and her husband shook their fists. “Why can’t you just tell us what you’ve found out?”

“Why are we even here if you aren’t going to tell us anything?” Mr Bishop said. His voice not as loud and angry as the rest, but still clearly annoyed.

A ghost attacked us last night, and something supernatural may have taken your kids. Is that what you want me to say?

“Maybe we should go to the real police, and they can convince you to not withhold information!” The moustached man said loudly.

“Alright, that’s enough!”

Kellan stood up from her chair, and the room’s eyes swung to her.

“You can all stop acting like these two owe you something or that you all came here for them. I only told you they might be coming once you were already here. Or that the police have bothered to listen to anything any of us has told them, Peter,” she threw a look at the moustached man. “I asked them to come here because I thought you would all appreciate knowing that there was someone out who was still looking for our kids. Because it’s very clear that no one else is.”

Her words rang across the room. Laura wondered whether being a teacher helped her in situations like this. Getting her voice to carry, taking control of a room full of people.

“But now, after how you’ve treated them, I think might’ve made a mistake in setting this up. And they’d have every right to be rather mad at me,” she glanced at Laura, contrition in her eyes. “They don’t want to talk about what happened at Salvation Hill, that’s fine. But I will say that they risked
their lives for our kids last night. Who else has even lifted a finger? How about instead of threatening them, we show some appreciation.”

She glared around at the cowed table.

“Or even better, instead of throwing questions at them, how about we try to be helpful. I’m sure they have some questions of their own.”

There was a long silence.

The first to speak was the thin couple. They’d said virtually nothing since Laura and Carmilla had come back to the room and Laura had almost forgotten they were there.

“Um, we, we would be fine with answering questions,” the man said.

“We want to help,” the woman added.

Laura nodded appreciatively, first to them and then to Kellan. “Thank you, and yeah, we have some questions. We need all the help we can get.”

The rest of the parents weren’t far behind. The man with the moustache, Peter, Laura had heard him called a couple of times, rubbed his eyes and spoke.

“Look, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so aggressive, and of course, we’re appreciative. I’m sure my wife is the same,” the woman next to him nodded vigorously. “It’s just been so hard to stay calm ever since some asshole took our boy. I’d have stopped them if it wasn’t for that damn fog.”

“You’re the Turners,” Laura said, remembering the police reports. “Your son is Phillip Turner right? Got taken in that swamp? The Okaa… Oko-”

“Okefenokee, and yes we’re the Turners,” the woman said.

“So that would make you the Meyers. Your son was the first that went missing,” Laura said, turning to the thin couple.

They both nodded.

The Bishops were last. Martin held up a hand.

“We also would be happy to help any way we can.”

Well, this was suddenly going much better than expected. She thought for a moment, trying to think of what to say next. The looks on the parent’s faces now mirrored that of Detective Beattie’s back at the police station, all expecting her to start asking questions. Six parents, three different kids. Dealing with one parent with one missing kid had been hard enough. How would she go about this? The feeling of being overwhelmed returned and the moment stretched into an awkward pause.

Then a thought struck her. The last thing she’d tried was going straight to the school, trying to solve the problem all in one go. But that hadn’t worked, so why not try a different approach and tackle things one at a time?

“Alright, so Carm and I are going to talk to each family one by one,” she turned to the Meyer’s.

“You first. We’ll go right from the start all the way to now.”
Kellan’s study was upstairs, down the hall from Lexi’s bedroom. Laura had brushed past it on her exploration of the place yesterday. Laura doubted Lexi had hid anything in the room mostly used by her own mother. Now though, it felt like a good place to talk to each of the families.

It was stuffy, Kellan likely hadn’t been in here for a while. A layer of dust coated everything, the filing cabinets against the wall, the computer desk, the large bookshelf, a small part of her cried out for a duster. The air was stale, prompting Laura to open the small window at the room’s rear.

There were only three chairs including the desk chair that Laura took. Carmilla swept the dust off a section of the computer desk and perched herself on it. Leaving the remaining two for the Meyers.

They waited patiently, their eyes flicking downwards, unable to maintain eye contact for any length of time. In anyone else, Laura might have found that suspicious. With these two, however, it seemed more a lack of confidence than anything else.

“Hi,” Laura began, going for a friendly smile to try to put them at ease. “A bit nicer in here I think.”

They both nodded.

“Not as loud,” Mr Meyer agreed.

“Yeah, exactly.” Laura fiddled with her tablet she’d grabbed from the bike before coming up here. Might as well pretend she was a professional. “Can we start?”

More nods.

Her first few questions merely rehashed what she already knew. Their son had gone up to the Bishop’s house with his friends and never returned. The police hadn’t found anything and soon after more kids had gone missing as well.

“How was Wallis supposed to get home? The distance between your houses is pretty far.”

“He had a bicycle,” Mrs Meyer said. “He would ride it there and back. He knew the way. He’d gone there many times.”

“We would have picked him up in the car, but he always said no. He knew gas was expensive. He’s good like that,” Mr Meyer added.

“That’s our boy, so good with numbers, always trying to come up with ways to save money.”

“Sounds like a smart kid,” Laura said.

“Yes, super smart,” they both said together. Then Mrs Meyer. “We got offers, a lot of them for better schools. He tested so well, better than most of the rest, that’s what they said right,” she turned to her husband who nodded vigorously. “Better than most of the rest.”

Their voices grew in confidence as they talked about their son, their faces brightening and their body language more animated.

“Didn’t, didn’t have the money though. So… he had to go to Salvation Hill,” Mr Meyer said. And the air in the balloon deflated and they both fell back into their usual demeanours.

“The kids there didn’t like him mostly. This poor kid from a poor suburb showing them up all the time, they hated that. We kept telling the school about the bullying. Nobody did anything though,” Mrs Meyer said.
“Well, no that’s not entirely true, Emily, remember? The Vice Principal started listening to us finally not that long ago.”

“Gravenberg, the Vice Principal Eleonore Gravenberg talked to you?” Laura asked. She felt less like an investigator and more like a conductor, nudging the conversation where she wanted it to go. It was different from asking rapid fire questions, which was what she’d imagined in her mind beforehand.

“That’s the one. She was the only one who actually took the time to listen. She came to our house even. She was so nice,” Mrs Meyer said.

“Yeah, she was helpful when we visited the school as well, sort of anyway. You both said the police were useless but did any of you think about going to the media? Getting your story out there?”

They both gave her small, rueful smiles.

“We did,” Mr Meyer said, “we thought it would be a big story, especially when more kids started to go missing. Big picture in the papers, all over the TV and radio,” he shrugged and shook his head. “We got a little piece in the back pages of our local paper, no picture. Nobody cares about people like us going missing. That’s not news to them. We’re not important.”

“So, your son Phillip really likes wildlife, I’ve been told,” Laura said.

Hardly relevant, but it started things off well. The Turners, sitting in the same chairs the Meyer’s had a few minutes ago, nodded appreciatively and spoke over each other to answer her. Neither appeared to begrudge the other whenever they were interrupted. Laura guessed this was how they always talked together.

He took after his father, who worked as an animal conservationist. Twenty-two years in May at the Okefenokee. A really interesting swamp and Laura should go there if she got the chance. Phillip visited all the time, always learning about some new creature he would try and get Abigail to draw at school the next day. They’d been so happy he’d finally found some friends like Abigail and the others at school. He’d been isolated until then. The kids at that damn school were awful. This one time, they’d-

“Okay,” Laura held up a hand to stop the deluge of garbled information coming her way from two mouths at once. Unlike with the Meyers, maybe she’d need to keep a more firm hand on this conversation lest it run away from her. “I’m sorry about the bullying, that sounds awful. The Meyer’s said they were having trouble as well. Apparently, the Vice Principal got involved, Ms Gravenberg. Did she contact you at all as well?”

“No,” Mr Turner said. “She never came to us.”

“Makes sense though,” Mrs Turner continued off from where her husband stopped. “Eleonore is one of the few that give a damn about how things are run over there. She’d make a much better Principal than Stevenson-“

“Principal ‘Useless’.”

“Yeah, exactly honey. Eleonore works so hard, always last leave the school every day, everyone knows that. I bet she’s the reason the school’s been doing a bit better lately.”
“You mean all the new stuff the school is buying?” Laura asked.

“Not just that,” Mrs Turner said. “The school has been winning competitions. You know, sports and debate teams and all that. We never used to do that, bottom of everything for so long. But we’re doing better in so many things now, it’s been so exciting.”

“It has to be because of people like Gravenberg and Mary turning things around,” Mr Turner said. “The actual Principal’s so lazy he hardly shows up anymore. Can’t believe he’s in charge.”

Too lazy or too busy kidnapping kids and hiding ghosts in his desk drawer? Laura wondered. Hardly something the Turner’s would know though. So instead, she switched topics.

“I’m sorry to bring this up again. I know it must have been awful, but, that night at the swamp when your son went missing.”

Both of them tensed up, but they didn’t object. They must have known this was coming.

“I don’t need to you to go through it too much. I read the police report. All I need to ask is. When it was happening, the roars, the fog, the shaking. Did you see anything that you didn’t tell the police about?”

Carmilla spoke for the first time since entering the study.

“Maybe you didn’t want to tell the police because it was so strange, you didn’t think they’d believe you.”

The Turners were quiet for a moment before shaking their heads.

“No,” they said together. “Couldn’t see anything through the fog.”

“Are you sure?” Laura pressed, “nothing that might have looked… ghostly or?” God, there wasn’t any way to ask something like this without sounding crazy.

“What?” Mr Turner said, his puzzled expression mirroring his wife’s. “No, why would you even ask something like that?”

“Forget it,” Laura said quickly. “Thank you for your help.”

“Kellan said that both your daughters are very close.”

Laura rubbed her eyes as waited for the response. This was turning out to be a long day already, her relaxing morning in the spa with Carmilla almost forgotten.

“Yes, they are,” Mrs Bishop said as her husband next to her nodded. “That girl is one of the best things that ever happened to our daughter. Abigail has always had a lot of trouble fitting in at school. We’ve had to move schools a lot it gets so bad. Salvation Hill was one of the last places we could try. We were so happy she finally found someone like Lexi. And the two boys as well.”

“I’ve been getting similar stories from everyone. Sounds like these kids were lucky to find each other.”

“Our only consolation is that if they’re out there, they’re out there together,” Mr Bishop said. His weathered, craggy face showed no real happiness at the sentiment.
“We’re pretty certain Abigail was working with Lexi to investigate the disappearances themselves. Did Abigail tell you about that?”

“No, but Mary told us about it once her daughter went missing. It blindsided us completely,” Mr Bishop said.

“They always spent so much time together, we didn’t think anything of it. We just thought they were helping each other through the stress of their friends being missing,” Mrs Bishop added.

“When they spent time together. Did they go anywhere in particular? A place they liked to go to?”

“Lexi would mostly come over our house. It’s pretty large, a little away from the city. There’s lot of space for them to find somewhere private. I think they enjoyed that,” Mrs Bishop’s face brightened for a moment. “They might not know themselves yet. But, a mother does.” She winked at Laura.

Laura accepted that with a quick smile before pressing on.

“If they spent a lot of time at your home, we would love to take a look around if that isn’t too much trouble?”

Their response wasn’t quite what she expected.

Mrs Bishop immediately dove a hand into her pants pocket and brought out a key chain. The keys jangled noisily together as she pulled one off and handed it to Laura.

“Key to our house. You are both free to come and look whenever you want, whether we’re there or not,” her hands lingered on Laura’s, before sliding away.

Laura took a moment process that. These two strangers were giving them a key to their house without even a second thought.

And why not? Their child was missing. What was the worst thing Laura could do compared to that?

She shook the dark thought away.

“You don’t have to be afraid to tell us what happened at the school last night,” Mr Bishop said. “We don’t care if it was illegal on your part or anything like that. We just want to find our daughter.”

After the trust they’d put on her and Carmilla, Laura found it difficult to refuse him. She clamped down on the urge to tell the truth though. If anything could ruin this, it was convincing the Bishops she and Carmilla were insane people who believed in monsters.

“Let’s just say I doubt school is in today. After all the mess.”

“Except it is,” Mrs Bishop said.

What?

“What?” Laura asked. Carmilla leaned forwards on the desk, interest apparently piqued. Their little late night high school excursion had resulted in gunfire, a destroyed principals office, a pile of goop in the centre of the schools main hall and last but not least, a number of headless corpses. The idea that mere hours later the school would up and running as normal seemed ludicrous.

“It’s a regular school day over there,” Mrs Bishop said, regardless. “I called a friend of mine who works in the cafeteria. She said everything is normal, no one is talking about any disturbances and the place looks completely fine.”
Elsewhere

Lexi woke with a start, her eyes snapping open to find herself alone.

At first, she couldn’t see much in the dim light, but her eyes adjusted to the gloom. She was in a cave or something similar, definitely underground. Moss covered her surroundings, much like the room she’d been in when the creature had…

The creature.

She tried to move, only to realise she was stuck. Literally so this time, rather than out of fear. A layer of vegetation held her against the wall. She could wriggle in her bonds, but her arms were pinned to her sides.

Yeah, she’d watched this movie before. Soon something would jump on her face and then her chest would burst open. She redoubled her efforts, jerking from side to side. It proved useless, her organic prison unyielding.

Her soggy prison as well. Water dripped from the ceiling onto the soaked moss below. A few drops would hit her head from time to time. Falling onto her hair and then sliding down her cheeks to end up in between her clothes and skin. The sensation irritated her, like an itch she couldn’t scratch.

Even the air felt wet. Perhaps she was near a river? Under a river even?

A buzzing sound. A mosquito had decided to join in on the fun. Fantastic.

The sound triggered her memory. She’d heard buzzing in this place before. Had she woken up earlier? She struggled to remember until the blurry, fuzzy memories finally came back.

That creature had been in here with her, a swarm of flies and insects buzzing around it. Its hands had been moving at a furious pace. Throwing dust at something in the wall next to her as it chanted in a language she couldn’t understand. It’s voice low and guttural.

The chanting and the dust throwing went on and on. Growing more and more frenetic until the creature was bellowing the strange words as its body shook with the effort.

She remembered turning her head to get a look at what the creature was so focused on. It was a person, someone she recognised.

“Phillip!” Lexi blurted out at the memory. She turned her head again to find him. Maybe she could wake him or-

The person next to her didn’t look like Phillip.

They looked like they’d been dead for centuries. Their skin yellowed and desiccated. A mummified husk.

She didn’t react or say anything for a long moment. Her mind blank, uncomprehending.

The mosquito landed on the husks nose. It fell away immediately, dissolving under the insect's tiny weight. The face collapsed in on itself, crumbling into dust. The rest of the husk soon followed and,
within moments, it disintegrated before her eyes.

Lexi screamed.
Finally, they were done with all the questions.

It felt like they’d been in that dusty study forever. A procession of boring couple after boring couple. She might have grudgingly admitted her interest in rescuing the missing kids, but that interest didn’t extend to hearing their parents talk about probably the dullest subject they could broach. Themselves. Hardly any of what the parents had told them appeared useful to her. Laura’s soft and gentle approach to her questions resulting in a mountain of meaningless chaff to sort through. She could summarise what few important parts there were in no time at all.

The Meyers kid had been bullied because they were poor. The kid got himself kidnapped because he’d rather bike home than be picked up by a car, because they were poor. The parents then couldn’t get any help to find their kid, because they were poor. There, done.

The irritatingly loud Turner’s were weirdo extroverts who liked to spend time in swamps. Their kid turned out to be the same. The last family trip to a literal garbage dump of nature they took turned bad. Either they didn’t see anything and were useless, or they were too scared to say what they saw and were useless.

Lastly, the Bishops and Carmilla conceded they had been the most useful. Abigail Bishop’s home would be a good place to check out. Maybe she’d hidden what she and Lexi had learned about their future kidnappers somewhere in there. With that in mind, a key and an invitation were probably the most fruitful thing they’d gotten out of this whole ordeal.

The last thing Mrs Bishop had said, about the school being already back up and running was also interesting. Usually, even Silas would have a brief stoppage if half a dozen people got decapitated on its grounds. How had they managed to cover it up so easily?

And that was that, a long boring session of listening to dullards to gain so very little.

To think, if soccer mum hadn’t invited them to this trap of a meeting she would still be in that hotel room with Laura. Probably in bed or back in the spa. It didn’t really matter. She’d take being alone with Laura in one of those swamps the Turners liked so much over being here.

Her mood was a sour one then by the time the Bishops filed out of the room. But she knew a pretty easy way to fix that. When Laura got up from her chair to follow them, she held her back by reaching out and lightly touching her arm. As Laura turned to her, she slid off the desk and brought them into a close embrace. She guided Laura back against the wall, using a spare hand to shut the study door on the way.

She took a moment to savour breathing the same air Laura was and then spoke.

“Kinda needed to do this. Was a getting a little jealous, I have to admit, with you paying all your attention to those people as I sat ignored in the dark corner.”

Laura giggled. Quietly, so that it wouldn’t carry out of the room.

“You love dark corners. You actively seek them out. If you could, you’d make our home out nothing but dark corners,” she cupped her hands around Carmilla’s face and kissed her sweetly. “I really appreciate you being here and helping. So much. I know this is probably boring as hell for you.”
Boring? No, never. On second thought, she was perfectly okay with listening to those parents drone on for hours. That this sudden realisation occurred to her as Laura kissed her and looked at her with eyes brimming with affection must have just been a coincidence, she was sure.

“It was fine,” she lied. “I’d say we’ve gotten everything we can now though. I can’t imagine these people have anything useful left to say. We have all this new information now. We absolutely should spend some time going over it.”

Laura raised her eyebrows. “Mm-hmm?”

“Yeah, I think that would be an important thing to do. Work out what we’ve really learned today. Obviously, it would be best to do this somewhere quiet, somewhere private, somewhere we can be alone.”

“Oh, of course,” Laura broke into a grin. “That makes sense. Somewhere we can focus you mean.”

“Exactly, we wouldn’t want any distractions.”

“Distractions would be bad,” Laura breathed her agreement.

The door knocked twice and then opened without any further warning. Kellan bustled in, holding up an apologetic hand.

“I’m sorry. I know, I know I was told to leave you alone, but I can’t wait any longer, I have to explain to you how sorry I am about-”

She stopped in mid-sentence, noticing how close they both were

“Oh, wow. I can’t do anything right today, can I?”

They broke apart, the moment over. Desperate mother searching for her child or not, it was becoming really hard for her not to dislike this woman.

“It’s fine,” Laura said. “We were on our way back anyway.”

Kellan nodded politely, before launching back into the apologising she’d begun while bursting into the room.

“I am so sorry to both of you,” she said, her eyes entirely on Laura. “I didn’t think it through, and I should have known they would swamp you like they did. I cannot apologise more. It wasn’t my intention to ambush you. You must believe that.”

Carmilla held back a snort. Must we?

Kellan continued on. “You have to understand, before you took the case I was in such a bad way. I was losing my mind I think. But once you decided to help I’ve felt so much better, it’s been something to hold on to. Knowing that people were trying to find my daughter. I wanted that for the other parents, I thought they deserved to know someone is fighting for their kids as well.”

It made sense. Carmilla still didn’t like it, but it made sense. Strangely, that rankled, as if she was disappointed at having one less solid reason to dislike her.

“It’s okay. I get it,” Laura said. “Maybe tell us what we’re walking into next time though, yeah?”

“Of course,” Kellan nodded. “It’s dumb, but I honestly thought it would be a nice surprise. Motivating even.”
The idea that Laura needed motivation to save children was ludicrous, and the idea of being trapped in a room with strangers would motivate herself, similarly so.

“Now that you’re here,” Laura said. “I did actually have a question for you as well. I don’t know if it’s relevant, but it is something that’s been nagging me.”

“Sure, ask away.”

Laura hesitated, biting her lip as her eyes darted side to side. Carmilla recognised the action as Laura trying to broach a potentially difficult subject.

“Well,” she started. “It’s just, while we were at the school. Both times that is. We saw a fair bit of it and, a lot of it was… well-”

“The school you work at and send your daughter to is a shithole, and she’s wondering why someone rich enough to live in this expensive house wouldn’t go to a better one,” Carmilla said, getting to the point. She had no desire to waste time trying to be polite. If Kellan chose to be offended, fine.

Both Laura and Kellan winced at her words. The grimace that appeared on Kellan’s face seemed light hearted though, and an accepting nod said to Carmilla that she’d expected this question.

“I suppose it’s not winning school of the year anytime soon. It’s not as bad as it looks on the surface though.”

“It was one of the most starkly uncomfortable places I’ve ever been to. And I’ve been to a parallel universe where I died, and everyone was miserable,” Laura said, her tone gentle but insistent. “I can understand the other family’s reasons. But why you? Why not go to a nicer school?”

“First of all, the house is deceptive. I struggle to keep up with the payments now that… I’m alone with them,” she swallowed hard, and a flash of pain flicked across her face before she continued. “But, regardless I did talk to Lexi about moving schools once, but she begged me not to.”

“Why?” Laura asked.

“She didn’t want to leave her friends. Abigail in particular. They really bonded those two. Lexi was always going over to the Bishop’s house. She spent almost as much time there as she did here. I suppose I should have known she’d go after Abigail herself. She wouldn’t abandon her to go to a nicer school, and she’d never abandon her to these monsters that have taken them both.”

Laura reached a comforting hand to Kellan’s shoulder.

“Thank you. I get it. And just like your daughter couldn’t abandon her friends. We’re not abandoning her. This has all been really helpful, I wish you’d given us a heads up, but I think this ended up being a good thing in the end.”

The smile Laura gave Kellan communicated nothing but kindness. Not for the first time, Carmilla marvelled at Laura’s willingness to help those who had wronged her. Now it was Kellan, in the past people like Bolade Okoye, who had betrayed her or Inanna, who had tried to bring about a literal apocalypse.

Or Carmilla herself, the vampire who had planned to hand her over to Mother gift wrapped for sacrifice. Probably shouldn’t forget that one either.

They followed Kellan back to the living room and said their goodbyes. The demeanour of the group had changed dramatically from when they’d arrived. She wouldn’t call it jovial but at least calmer.
She even saw a few tired smiles on a few of the faces. Perhaps Laura had been right in saying they had done some good coming here.

After going through a gauntlet of hugs and handshakes, they made it outside. But before they could reach the motorbike, a car came to a stop in front of the house, fitting neatly between the larger sedans.

The car’s black door opened to reveal Detective Beattie, wearing the same loose yet professional outfit and cowboy hat. She fixed them with smile Carmilla couldn’t quite read when she saw them.

“How about that, the very people I was looking to find.”

“Detective Beattie,” Laura said, a greeting and a question at the same time.

“Interesting morning I’ve had,” Beattie said as she walked towards them, a yellow folder in hand. They met around the middle of the front garden. “Let me tell you about it. It’s an engaging story.”

Carmilla didn’t like the tone or the detective’s demeanour. Not quite hostile but far from friendly. Laura spoke up next to her.

“Well, actually detective, we’re sorry, but we really are quite bu-”

“So first thing that happens,” Beattie said, ignoring Laura. “Real early in the morning. Before I could have my coffee, so I’m already in a bad mood, some guys from IDSS, this security company Salvations is employing show up with some teenagers. They tell me they were throwing firecrackers on school property,” Beattie shrugged. “That’s not surprising. Kids do stupid shit like that all the time. And the extra security doesn’t deter these kinds of kids at all, just makes it more exciting.”

Carmilla hadn’t noticed it before back in the police station, but Beattie gesticulated with her hands a lot as she talked. Big expressive movements. Or maybe she only did them in situations like this.

“So like a few times before, they bring ‘em in, and I read them the riot act, no big deal. Except this time, boy do I get a story outta these kids. According to them, as IDSS escorted them out they heard shouting and screams and gunfire! ‘Not firecrackers ma'am gunshots’, they were adamant about that.”

She tensed up at Beattie’s words, feeling pretty confident in the general direction her story was going.

“I dunno how kids would know exactly what gunfire sounds like, too many video games probably, but I decided it was worth following up on. So I come to the school and ask around. Everything seems fine, ‘no problems at all, never felt safer’ they say. When I want to look around more closely though, they get hyper defensive, and I get the warrant question.”

“That must have been really frustrating,” Laura ventured. Probably trying to regain the rapport they seemed to have by the time they’d left Beattie’s office.

“Yeah, yeah it was,” Beattie said with bobbing nod. “Now, because we’re all detectives here,” she lingered on that for a moment, letting the statement become a question. “I don’t have to tell you how important hunches and little gut feelings are for us. So put yourself in my shoes. Four kids go missing from the same school. Then a mother grabs a couple of people claiming to be PI’s to help. The night after they arrive, kids are telling me about hearing gunfire and screams at the school.”

So you decided to check us out.
“So I thought I’d check up on you, see how you’re doing at that nice hotel that according to the receptionist you staggered into for the first time, oh this is one of the interesting parts of this story, very late last night.”

Laura swallowed next to her, deception not really her forte. She on the other hand.

“First time in Savannah, thought we’d find all the best bars as soon as we could. Took a while.”

Beattie met her sarcastic smile with one of her own. She didn’t comment on Carmilla’s lie. She didn’t need to.

“You were already gone by the time I got to your suite. So, I had a little think about where you might be,” she gestured around her. “Whole party we got here it seems. Hey, isn’t that the Turner’s car over there? And I was so sure that was the new one the Bishops bought recently.”

Beattie waited to see if they had anything to respond to that. When they didn’t, she pulled a piece of paper from the folder.

“Decided to do a little digging. You both seemed strangely familiar. Florence right? The Uffizi thing,” she flipped the paper over, revealing a photo of Carmilla carrying Laura to an ambulance in front of the burning Uffizi Gallery. “You two get around, don’t you? Starting to wonder whether I should have let out of that prison cell after all.”

This was turning into quite the show for anyone looking out of Kellan’s front window. Hopefully, the sound of the conversation couldn’t travel far enough for all the parents to hear.

“That has nothing to do this,” Laura said. “Look, I can get that this all looks kinda bad. But I promise you, we are trying to help.”

Beattie rubbed her hand over her mouth in thought. “Maybe I still believe you. Maybe you are trying to help. Okay, let’s go with that. Then you have to work with me here, tell me what you know. What happened last night at the school? What are all the parents of the missing kids doing here today?”

“Are you back on the case now?” Carmilla asked.

“Are you actually private detectives?” Beattie shot back. She looked to Laura and took a step forwards, her eyes imploring. “Listen, if you want to find these kids, then we’re on the same side here. Tell me what’s going on, and I can help.”

“I’m sorry,” Laura said, shaking her head. “We can’t. You wouldn’t believe us anyway.”

“We’re leaving,” Carmilla said. “Unless you’re arresting us?”

Beattie’s face darkened. She said nothing for a long moment, as if weighing her options up. Carmilla watched her closely. Vaguely worried Beattie would escalate things from just words. But then she spoke.

“Fine, leave. But this isn’t over.”

As they drove away, Carmilla looked back to see Beattie leaning against her car. Arms folded pensively.

Whether it turned out to be helpful or not, Carmilla was sure they hadn’t seen the last of her.
Conversing while riding a bike could be rather difficult, so Carmilla didn’t take them far. She found a quiet spot a few turns away from Kellan’s house. A small block of local shops with a few parking spots in the middle. Hopefully, Detective Beattie didn’t travel this way once she left Kellan’s house as well, or things might get a little awkward.

“If someone told me a year or two ago I’d have this much trouble with the police, I’d never have believed them,” Laura said as she took off her helmet. “I thought I was going to be arrested again for a minute there.”

“Nah, she’s got nothing. What would she arrest us for? According to the school there hasn’t even been a crime.”

They leaned back against the bike together as they talked. Watching cars go by across the road before them.

“I don’t think we have any time to waste. I’ve got what the parents said to us typed down, we can go through it later. The Bishops gave us a key. I say we use it and go take a look at their home. Lexi didn’t have anything hidden in her house, but maybe Abigail left something in hers. Let’s see how much we can find out before things get worse.”

“Worse as in attacked by more monsters or accosted by more parents and police detectives?” Carmilla asked, her words full of wry humour.

“Oh, both, probably.”

“We know where the Bishop's house is?”

“Yeah, the address is on the police reports in the compartment thingy, I’ll go grab,” she trailed off, not finishing her sentence.

“Hey,” Carmilla reached out a hand. “You okay?”

Laura looked around her before responding. “I just realised I have no idea where I am.”

“It’s fine, I know the way back. We’re not lost. Plus we have your phone and your tablet,” Carmilla said, thinking to reassure her.

But she’d misunderstood what Laura meant by her words.

“I mean, I don’t know where we are,” Laura said. “I don’t know this place, and neither do you. In Florence, things went so fast it didn’t have time to sink in and besides, you’d been there before, so I could follow your lead. Here though,” she shook her head. “At least at Silas, at the end of every night I had my own bed and as crazy as it sounds, despite how apocalyptically evil it was, it was still a school. And schools I knew,” she sighed. “I think it’s hitting me that we’re all alone here. There is no one here to help us if things go bad.”

She dropped her head down and rubbed her eyes for a moment. When she brought her head back up, she looked tired.

Brave hero that had stood up to monsters. Determined fighter who had never given up no matter the odds. Woman who had saved the world.

Young girl, missing her home.

Carmilla put an arm around her and pulled her close.
“I’ll be honest. I’m missing our cottage too. Hell, your dad’s house even. But mostly the cottage.”

Laura snorted next to her.

“I miss that nice hill we go to watch the stars on,” Carmilla continued. “That little lake that’s so peaceful at night.”

“Our couch, I love our couch. How many movies have we watched together now on it?”

“How many dumb movies you mean.”

“If by dumb, you mean masterpieces of cinema, then sure.”

Carmilla laughed, conceding the old argument temporarily.

“The kitchen we’ve almost burned down at least four times.”

“The shower we always seem to need at exactly the same moment.”

“Our bed,” Carmilla nodded at the word. “Most of all I miss our bed.”

“Agreed,” Laura then hummed in further agreement. “Nothing but very good times in that.”

They sat quietly for a time after that. Relaxing together in their own memories. Then Carmilla spoke again.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t getting anxious about how dangerous this is all becoming. But I’ve been alone before. I know how it feels,” she kissed the top of Laura’s head. “This isn’t it.”

The drive to Bishop’s house was a long one. They’d been telling the truth when they said it was a ways away. The Meyer kid must have really enjoyed the company if he’d bicycled there and back frequently. Carmilla would have baulked at the distance even back when she could become a panther.

The majority of the travel took place on a long straight highway. Bright green trees stood tall on either side of it. Reminding Carmilla of the old roads she’d take on carriage or horseback in Austria as a girl. Back then, almost every road would be encroached by forests to the sides. Of course, also back then, they’d be every chance of wolves hiding in those forests.

The highway was double laned and not busy, giving Carmilla plenty of room to manoeuvre the bike as she pleased. She didn’t push the bike though, preferring an easy canter. She could feel Laura relaxing into her as the drive went on and she wanted that to last as long as she could.

The tiredness Laura had started displaying concerned her. Yes, the goop covered clothes and adrenaline from last night’s horror show probably weren’t conducive to a restful sleep, but Laura had gotten rest after worse at Silas and in Florence. Yet since coming to Georgia, she hadn’t slept well at all. So much so, she’d almost dozed off in the spa right after waking up, and if Kellan hadn’t so annoyingly shown up, Carmilla would have gotten her back to bed one way or another.

It was these nightmares, Carmilla was certain. They’d started after Laura had been startled at Kellan appearing in her mother’s shirt. As small as it was, something about that had gotten to her. Pushed something out into the open. She felt torn between honouring what she’d said to Laura about waiting until they were ready to talk and pushing harder to try and help.
She still hadn’t worked out which option was best yet, so instead, she focused on what she could help with. The investigation at hand.

On further reflection, the parent’s stories had made at least one thing clear. Whoever was taking these kids were choosing them well. Kids with poor parents, kids that were isolated and disliked, kids that wouldn’t be missed if they stopped turning up at a dump of a school nobody cared about one day.

The tactic was familiar. Mother had never thrown anyone of too much notability her way to seduce and lead to their doom. Noone that the world would notice going missing down the gullet of giant angler fish.

She’d learned an important lesson from that horror though. While the people she’d been tasked with seducing weren’t of note to Mother or the wider world, the more she got to know them the more she’d realised that hadn’t meant they didn’t have value. Some were kind, some were smart, some sang or wrote. They all offered something to the world by being in it. Over time, the pain of watching them die one by one had forced her to push down that lesson. Lest the pain of it turn her insane. Until a certain annoying new year had taught her the lesson all over again and had given her the courage to finally fight back.

These kids were exactly like those people Mother had deemed expendable and sentenced to death. And whatever these kids were being used for, they were worth more than just being forgotten.

Carmilla smiled in her helmet. Imagining the beaming grin Laura would have given her had she said all that out loud.

Once off the highway it took a few twists and turns to make it to the house. The roads up to it lacked the polish of the highway. Brown dirt instead of grey concrete. Their bumpiness stirred Laura behind her. Like the highway, trees were on both sides, though these ones were more densely packed and had a wilder look to them. A bird overhead would probably see the winding roads the same way a human would see the paths of a maze on a piece of paper. The brown lines twisting a path through a green labyrinth.

Aside from its somewhat remote location, the house itself appeared to be nothing special. Long and rectangular, it sat in a small circular clearing. An island of civilisation in the middle of a forest. The trees and other vegetation formed a natural boundary around the property as good as any man made fence or wall.

Carmilla took the bike to the front of the house and parked it lazily. There didn’t appear to be a proper driveway, nor anything resembling a garage.

“Well, we both said we missed our cottage,” Carmilla said as her feet hit the ground, big messy tuffs of grass covered in fallen leaves. “Not exactly the same but,” she gestured airily.

“Yeah, similar feel,” Laura said, taking the house key from her pocket and heading for the front door.

An easel stood near the front of the house, a half completed painting on its canvas. Paint cans and brushes scattered around it. Carmilla accidentally kicked one of the cans over as she followed Laura under the house’s veranda towards the door. Red paint rolled out of it, dry and rubbery from its time under the sun.

Wind chimes, hung from the veranda, jangled softly above them. When Laura opened the door, it was to a bead curtain and further chimes. Once through them, they found themselves in a house filled with artistry. Paintings were everywhere. Some hung on the walls, others scattered around the place.
Many were stacked next to an old piano in the living room.

“Well, at least one of them is an artist,” Carmilla said, enjoying the view. The art wasn’t of the highest standard, but it wasn’t bad either.

“The mother I’d guess,” Laura said. She moved over to a wooden shelf full of old photographs. She picked one up. “Or the mother and the daughter. According to some of these.”

“The kid’s an artist, of course she’s in the group that gets bullied,” Carmilla said. It had been true for her as well.

“Let’s hope she’s not also good at hiding things. With all this stuff lying around it would take forever to search it all for something useful.”

“What’s this? Laura Hollis afraid of a little hard work?" Laura chuckled. “You’re so going to regret that when I have us searching every inch of this house until we find something.”

They found the girl’s room first, judging it the best place to start. But their search came to nothing but more art pieces. Not only paintings but also a few small clay models and what looked like a comic book superhero made from lego.

“What’s the bet she made this with Lexi? Her bedroom was full of this kind of stuff,” Laura said, taking a second to admire it before moving on.

Eventually, they had to admit defeat and try somewhere else. Carmilla lagged behind. She’d found a notebook full of poetry the girl had written down in a drawer next to the bed. It’s writing quite impressive for a high school student. She was starting to like this girl. She flipped through a few pages and only put the notebook down when Laura’s impatient calls came to her.

Then the real search began, room by room. It was dull work, despite the artistry around them. Particularly considering they didn’t know what they could even hope to find. After a short while, Carmilla found her mind start to wander.

“Still thinking we might have done better to just waltz up to Stevenson and beat the answers out of him. Take our chances with whatever he might have up his sleeve,” she said.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. But let’s say we do beat him up and he doesn’t talk? What do we do then?” Laura said the words as she went through a drawer in what appeared to be some kind of study or workroom.

“I think I remember this one time, when you decided to strap someone to a chair for nine days when you wanted information out of them. Why can’t we do that?”

“Yeah, that was at the remote and isolated evil school of doom. There weren’t any detectives bearing down on us at Silas. I’d rather not be arrested again, and that be for a real crime this time. When we make a move on Principal douche face, I’d like to have something legal backing us up.”

Carmilla stopped her own fruitless searching and turned to Laura. “Wait, I get trying to find out what these kids knew. But are you hoping to find evidence against these people? Laura, come on, you have to know by now that that’s not going to work out against,” she struggled to find the word, “this kind of stuff. You can’t rely on police to help us here.”

“I know they can’t help us with banshees or whatever. But however many people are involved at the
school, as far as we know they’re human and so how else are we going to stop them and ultimately,” she shrugged, “bring them to justice, other than by handing them over to the police to be arrested? It’s not like we have a prison cell at the cottage to throw them in. What were you planning on doing with them?”

The question stumped her.

“Okay, I’ll admit it, I haven’t really thought about that. I’ve never had to think about that. Whenever I’ve plotted against enemies, I’ve always just planned on, you know.”

“Yeah, but that can’t be plan A. Never for us. It’s messy, I get that, but I have to believe that there is some way we can bring these people down without murder. And having something to give to the police is better than nothing. Even without the whole supernatural aspect, kidnapping kids is a super huge crime. I think we can find a way to make this work.”

She was smiling and shaking her head again. She needed to come up with a term for it. “Rescue the kidnapped children, defeat the monsters, arrest the evil people and all without sacrificing our moral high ground by following the rules. Anything else on Hero Hollis’ upcoming itinerary?”

Laura didn’t respond, but Carmilla saw her brighten up at the words.

After searching for a couple of hours with no luck, they headed outside for a break. The house’s back yard didn’t look much different from the front. A small, dirty shed that she really hoped Laura wouldn’t demand they search, stood in the corner. On the other side, a clothesline spun slowly in the wind, Carmilla noticed a few paintings clipped to its frames instead of clothing.

“Looks like Kellan is doing a good job entertaining her guests,” Laura said, stretching out next to the clothesline, probably some yoga approved pose. Carmilla hadn’t learned their names, but she’d become very familiar with how Laura looked when she performed them. “Surprised the Bishops aren’t home yet.”

“I’m surprised they gave us the keys at all. They don’t,” Laura arched backwards in a new position and her thoughts scattered for a moment. “They don’t know us at all. Why would they trust us to search their home without them?”

“Their child is missing, and no one else was helping. I don’t think they had a choice. Sometimes you just have to trust people, especially when you’re desperate.”

As Carmilla thought on that, Laura brought her arms high above her head. Carmilla’s eyes followed them, and she caught a flash of orange amidst the trees ahead. Intrigued, she crossed the yard to the treeline.

On first glance, the vegetation seemed impassable. Tall grass, overgrown plants and tightly packed trees. But when she pushed into it she discovered a path through, clearly man-made.

“Hey, Laura,” she called behind her, beckoning her to follow.

Carmilla didn’t have to go far on the path to find what she’d seen from the backyard. A small orange structure sat squashed between the fat branches of a tree. Wooden rungs had been hammered into the tree’s trunk up to it.

“Oh wow, a treehouse,” Laura said, her eyes on the structure above.

“Maybe a little old for a final year high school student,” Carmilla said. “But if you wanted to hide something important, this seems like a decent place.”
“Okay, first thing, you are never too old for something as cool as a treehouse. Second thing, yeah let’s see what’s up there.”

Laura stepped forward and started climbing. As ludicrous as it was, Carmilla couldn’t help but feel a twinge of unease. Even when going up a school kids treehouse she still wanted to go first. Then again, with their luck, there would probably be a monster hiding inside for all they knew.

There were no panicked cries when Laura clambered inside, so Carmilla assumed it monsterless. By the time Carmilla got herself through the small door, Laura had already started searching.

The treehouse’s interior was cosier than she expected. A thick rug on the ground and a tiny bed in the corner.

“This is pretty nice. Maybe we should get a treehouse.”

“Yeah, no.”

“C’mon,” Laura said. “This one is great. Warm and comfy and… possibly super important information having!”

She’d found something under the bed’s pillow. With a triumphant “aha!” she grabbed it and held it out for Carmilla to see.

It was a data stick.

“These guys don’t have a computer. So why would Abigail need a USB?” Laura asked.

“To back up whatever she was doing on the school computers,” Carmilla said, understanding Laura’s enthusiasm.

Laura nodded, a big grin on her face. “My tablet is in the bike. We can plug this into that to see what's on it.”

They hurried back down the tree. Excitement quickening their steps. They went back into the house, but before they got to the front door, there was the sound of a car coming up the road.

“That would be the Bishops. Damn, I kinda hoped we’d be gone before they got back,” Laura said.

Carmilla walked to the front window and pulled the curtain to take a look.

And then immediately jerked it back and ducked away from the window.

“Shit!” she said, before covering her mouth at the noise.

Laura was at her side in an instant. “What? Who is it?”

The upcoming car didn’t belong to the Bishops. It didn’t match any of the sedans parked at Kellan’s house. Instead, it was a black SUV, massive in size and its engine rumbling powerfully. Before she’d ducked away, she’d gotten a look at the letters emblazoned on its side.

IDSS.
“The guards from the school!” Carmilla hissed, urging Laura to stay away from the window with a frenetic hand.

The big car’s rumbling engine switched off. Without the sound of it masking everything else Carmilla felt abruptly aware of every little sound she could hear. The odd chirp of the birds in the trees, the faint jangle of the wind chimes outside. Her own beating heart.

Then the sound of car doors opening and boots hitting the ground. They came with voices.

“The bike’s still here, so so are they,” a man’s voice. She recognised it as the one who had ordered the guards to go after the firecracking teenagers. “The place is a cul-de-sac, nowhere to go.”

In case there was any doubt, that confirmed they had come for them. Had they been following them around?

The voice started ordering some more. “Stross, Bachman go round the sides. Clyne, come through the front door with me, yeah?”

“So four then. Two to go through the front door, one to each side. Could they take four? She’d succeeded against worse odds at the Uffizi. Then again, those goons hadn’t wanted to kill her until she’d defenestrated one of them to a plunging death.

She heard them all start to move, heavy footsteps and rustling equipment. Within moments, two of them would be at the door and an arm stretch or two away from their hiding spot. Could they take four? The question repeated in her mind. She looked around, searching for ideas.

Her eyes found the entranceway to the laundry. From their search, she remembered it had a door that led outside. Two through the front door, one to each side.

Maybe they didn’t have to take four. Maybe they just needed to take one. If they were smart and quick enough about it.

Taking Laura’s hand and staying low, she dashed towards the laundry. A small tiled room with an overflowing washing machine and a sink full of wet clothes no one had bothered to take out to dry yet. Next to the door to the outside was a tiny rectangular window. It’s thick, frosted glass rendered most of the things through it a vague blur. She kept her eyes on it regardless and listened.

The sound of footsteps came close and a dark shadow passed by the window. She jerked the door open and burst through it, barrelling straight into the goon walking by. She struck him in the throat before he could react. She followed it up with a few more. Heavy, crunching blows designed to stop him crying out. He fell to the ground clutching his throat. She finished him off with a vicious boot to his temple and he lay still.

She’d managed to avoid him crying out but she couldn’t do anything about the sounds of the scuffle. The leader’s voice rang out from inside the house.

“Stross?”

She grabbed Laura’s hand again.
“Run,” she said. They had seconds, nothing more.

Stealth didn’t matter anymore, so their dash was headlong and lung-bursting. It couldn’t have taken them more than a few seconds to get around the corner and make it to the bike, but it still felt too long. She plunged her hand into her pocket for the key and jammed it into the ignition before she’d even sat down. When she started up the bike’s engine, Laura’s arms wrapped around her waist tightly. There were shouts now, she could almost see one of the goons bringing up their weapon to line up a shot from the door or one of the windows.

The bike shot forwards, lurching into action as she leant into it to get as much speed as quickly as possible. The wheels dug up a chunk of grass as she swung the bike around the parked SUV towards the exit.

And straight into a second SUV.

She braked hard, cursing in surprise. The car in front of them was identical to the first, a black tank with wheels instead of tracks. It’s driver braked as well. She got a split second look at their startled face as she turned the bike desperately. First to avoid the front of the car and then to avoid one of its doors opening directly into their path. She leant to the side as far as she could without scraping her and Laura’s knees on the ground, willing the bike to turn faster. The bike grazed against the edge of the door, turning barely enough to avoid it.

Once she got passed the car, she needed to twist the bike back the other way to avoid crashing into the trees on the side of the road. Another gut-wrenching turn she barely kept control of the bike doing.

Laura’s grip tightened considerably as she struggled to hang on during these manoeuvres. So much so, that once Carmilla had got them back on a straight line and Laura’s grip relaxed, her explosive sigh of relief was as much about being able to breathe again as getting past the danger.

“We’re okay,” she yelled back at Laura, noticing that somehow she’d found the time to put her helmet on. “All we have to do is stay ahead of th-”

Loud cracks came from behind and puffs of dust exploded around them. She felt a couple of hard impacts hit the bike. A bullet grazed the back wheel and the bike spun wildly. The noise of the gunshots, the sound of the engine and the screeching tyres became a hellish cacophony, as the world around her turned into a dizzying swirl of colour. Mostly brown with flecks of green.

She fought to regain to control. Both of the bike and her own heaving stomach. If she couldn’t stop this spin, any moment they’d be flung off the bike onto the hard ground or they’d crash into a tree.

Trying to keep calm, she rode it out. Fighting the urge to slam on the brakes or overcorrect. Letting the bike correct itself. It was more a matter of holding one’s nerve than skill. What moves she did make were small, gently prodding the bike like a frightened horse.

Finally, she somehow managed to slow the bike down and bring it back under control. Laura retched behind her. Their spin had brought up a cloud of brown dust around them, obscuring them from the world and the world from them. Probably the reason why they hadn’t been shot to pieces yet.

But also the reason she didn’t see the oncoming SUV until it was upon them.

Like some kind of roaring monster, it burst through the brown cloud. She barely reacted in time, pushing the bike forwards and swinging it to the side to avoid the charge. The car brushed past them, it felt like being missed by a tidal wave or some similar force of nature. She doubted they’d have
lived long enough to feel the impact had her reaction been a little slower.

Remembering that there were two of them, she accelerated after the first. They’d barely avoided one charge, she didn’t feel too keen to try her luck with a second.

She heard rather than saw the second car behind them. Her eyes fixed on the one ahead. It’s tyres spat out a small plume of brown dust directly behind it. Potentially blinding if one got too close. But on the other hand, the one to their rear was also a problem. Soon it would be close enough to ram them, or for one of the goons to lean out a window and shoot at them.

They were trapped. Sandwiched between two huge cars to their front and back and the densely packed trees to their sides. She couldn’t try turning around and getting past the rear one, they would end up back at the Bishop’s house with nowhere to go. And even if she found a way past the one in front, the roads here were narrow, they’d probably get lined up for an easy shot before they could get far enough ahead.

She abruptly remembered she had a helmet to put on in situations like this. She reached down to where she’d strapped it to. At least that might help with the blinding dust problem. It had a bullet hole clean through its side, so probably not helpful with being shot at problem.

The car ahead slowed down, trying to hold them up for the car behind to attack. The space between them all diminished rapidly, the springs of a mousetrap closing inexorably down. She tried to sneak around the side of the car ahead and overtake it, but the driver was too crafty. They turned with her, keeping her directly behind them. Dust began to pepper her visor and she had to wipe it away to be able to see.

Shots whizzed past the bike. A few hit the car ahead while others hit the dirt around them. She swung the bike to the other side of the road to avoid the rest. The car ahead turned with her once again.

The car behind’s engine roared to life, clearly deciding on the ramming option after shooting them hadn’t worked out. At the same time, the car ahead braked hard. They were trying to crush them between them both.

Yet another desperate turn. This time she did scrape her knee against the ground, such was her haste. The pain was terrible, and she cried out, though it likely didn’t carry over the sound of roaring engines.

The car behind missed them by inches and slammed into the back of the car ahead. The impact spun the car ahead sideways and it careened off the road into the mass of trees. Black metal met hard brown wood with a very clear winner. The car crumpled and disintegrated against the solid tree trunks, then what was left of it flipped over further into the forest. That was the last Carmilla saw of it, demolished and upended like a half-eaten turtle on its shell.

The surviving car kept on going, apparently caring more about killing them than helping their comrades. Then again, Carmilla doubted the crash had left anyone in the car alive. It’s front now featured an impressive dent, a gash on the metal monsters snout. It appeared to be superficial as its speed didn’t falter. A man with a gun leant out of a back window, trying to get a shot at them.

So their odds had gotten better but the same problem remained. If they got too far away they’d be shot at, too close and they’d be rammed.

She slowed down and matched the bike to the side of the car. She’d gone from being a mouse in a mousetrap to the mouse in a cat and mouse game. The safest place to be was close enough to be
awkward to get a shot at but not so close as to be easily hit by the car.

The car turned sharply into her, trying to ram her off the road. She surged ahead to avoid it and went round to its other side. When it tried to turn into her again she avoided it again the exact same way.

She couldn’t keep this up for long though. Eventually, the car would catch them or they’d get a clear enough shot. How could she get away from it?

The car edged in front of them around the next bend and so when it turned in for yet another ram she couldn’t get ahead of it as before. Instead, she braked hard. As she did so its back door swung open. The door crunched into her arm and she barely retained control. Taking advantage of the moment she needed to keep the bike on the road, the man in the backseat took aim. He had a clear shot and she could do nothing about it.

Something round and black struck the man square in the face. The force of the blow jerked him back and he hit his head against the frame of the car. Stunned, he fell forwards out of the car and his body rolled under its tyres with a horrific squelch and an anguished scream.

It felt like the world took a short pause to appreciate the sudden violence of what had happened. Both the bike and the car cruised along beside each other, neither making any movements. Carmilla looked back at Laura.

She no longer had her helmet and her face was frozen in shock.

“Did I do that?”

“Don’t think about it, you saved us,” Carmilla yelled back. There would be time to process it later.

Guess you were right about getting helmets after all.

She didn’t say it out loud though. She rather doubted Laura would appreciate the joke right now.

The straight they’d turned onto lead back to the highway. Carmilla was happy to see it. The extra room to move on the double-laned roads would be useful. As well as being nice to get off the dirt. The car turned sharply towards them yet again. When she avoided it with a well time brake, the open back door struck a tree. The force of the impact ripped the door off the frame of the car and sent it hurtling down the road. She jerked the bike sideways to avoid it. Before it passed them she noticed it had the IDSS acronym printed on its outside.

“Feel safer already,” she muttered.

When they reached the highway, black smoke starting coming from the car’s engine. Perhaps its collision earlier had done more damage than she first thought. The driver’s attempts to ram them became more frenzied. Swinging from one end of the road to the other, desperate to catch her. After a few evasive manoeuvres, she ended up on its passenger side, slightly behind it.

The passenger side window rolled down and a woman leant out of it, a gun in her hands.

Carmilla lifted her front tyre up into the air and accelerated. Before the woman could start firing, the tyre crunched into her body and pushed her gun against her chest. The gun went off inside the car.

As Carmilla hit the brakes, the car lost control, turning sideways too sharply for it to maintain its balance. Its tyres screeched in protest and the car flipped over and rolled more times than she could count. It bounced down the road like a misshapen basketball and each time it landed, pieces of it fell off. Finally, it ran out of momentum, coming to a stop on its side in the middle of the road.
Carmilla stopped the bike. Without the roaring engines, gunfire and screeching tyres, the world felt oddly quiet. And nothing moved except the smoke rising silently out of the wrecked car. She took her helmet off before turning to Laura.

“Are you okay?”

Laura didn’t respond. She had the same frozen look on her face. Despite the wreckage in front of them, she kept looking back, as if expecting to see something. Or someone.

“Hey,” she cupped her hands around Laura’s cheeks. “Look at me. Cupcake.”

Laura blinked and her eyes focused.

“Yeah, I’m okay, are you okay? It’s just,” she made to turn around again, she was breathing heavily.

Carmilla held her firmly, keeping eye contact. “Laura, they’re gone. There is nothing to see that way. But it was him or us. Do you get that? He was going to shoot us and you stopped him. You saved us. That’s what you did back there. You saved us.”

Laura blinked again and nodded. “He was going to shoot you, he was aiming right at you. So I did the first thing that came to mind. I didn’t think that he would—”

Carmilla hugged her. “Of course you didn’t. All you did was stop me from getting shot. That’s all you did. The rest just happened. You saved my life.” She kissed her forehead.

“I saved you,” Laura repeated, as if she was grabbing onto the words the same way one might grab onto a life raft.

Carmilla smiled and kissed her nose. “My hero.”

Laura’s gaze moved to the wreckage. Her eyes widened.

“Carm, the car.”

Carmilla turned to see someone crawling out of the wrecked SUV.

“They might know something,” Laura said, getting off the bike and breaking into a run.

“Laura, wait!”

But of course, she didn’t listen. Carmilla ran after her. The goon was probably badly injured, but she couldn’t see whether they had a gun on them from this distance. And injured or not, it didn’t take much effort to point and shoot at someone running up to you.

Her concerns proved unfounded. Once she got closer, it was clear the goon was in no condition to shoot anyone, even if he had a gun on him, which he didn’t. He’d propped himself up against the roof of the car, breathing heavily as blood poured out of him in numerous places.

He was conscious though. His eyes flicked between them both as they stood before him. His mouth curved into something between a grimace and a smile.

“Well then, that all went pretty shit, didn’t it?” He laughed. It came out like a death rattle and whenever he opened his mouth blood came out of it. She recognised his voice, the leader.

“We can help you. Get you to a hospital,” Laura said.
Another laugh, more blood.

“Yeah, somehow I think that’s not gonna help.” He banged the back of his head against the roof a couple of times. “My screwup, I knew we should have brought more people. You don’t take on Karnstein with less than a dozen guys, do you? Should’ve spoke up and asked for more.”

He knew who they were.

“Asked who?” Carmilla asked. “Who told you to come out here after us?”

Other than a hacking cough, he didn’t respond.

Laura took a step forwards, her eyes big and soft. “Please, you can still do the right thing. There are four kids out there, people’s children. You can help, just tell us what you know. Who told you to go after us? Do you know where they are keeping the kids? How did they cover up what happened at the school last night?”

“Hah! I don’t even know the answer to the last one. They told us to pull out and that they’d handle it. They said ‘it would cost them another but they still had two spare.’ Whatever that meant.”

Carmilla’s blood ran cold. Two spare, after costing them another.

“Hey wait a minute,” the man said, his eyes lighting up. “Did you say four missing kids? Heh, guess, you two aren’t doing the best job saving them, huh?”

He laughed again, a wild edge to it this time. It continued for a few moments before it, as well as the rest of him, came to an abrupt stop.

Carmilla coughed. The smoke rising from the car had gotten worse, accompanied by a burning smell. She grabbed Laura and pulled her away.

A car drove by, heading in the opposite direction. Was that the first one? Or had there been others she hadn’t noticed during the chase? The car reminded her they were on a highway. They’d been lucky it had been a quiet one so far, but it would only be a matter of time before this would get noticed. If it hadn’t already that was.

She sat Laura down on a concrete lane divider, far enough away from the now clearly burning car that she felt safe. Laura’s face was ashen, anguished.

“Two spare,” she said, her voice hollow. “That means two are left. Which means two… two are gone.”

That isn’t your fault. She desperately searched for the words to convince her of that truth.

“Laura,” she started. But a siren interrupted her. The car it belonged to was coming down the road towards them. It turned through a gap between the concrete dividers to get onto their side of the road. She recognised the car.

“Damn it,” she said. Just what they needed.

Detective Beattie stopped her car a few metres before them. When she got out of it, she had her gun firmly in her hands.

“Yes, okay then. Remember when you asked if I was arresting you? Take a guess at what my answer is now.” She aimed the gun at Carmilla. “On the ground, hands behind your back.”
Carmilla made no move to do either of those things. “How did you get here so fast?”

“Reports of shooting, and I was in the area. There’s more coming behind me real soon, you can be sure of that. Get. On. The. Ground. Both of you.”

Carmilla wasn’t sure if Laura was even listening to the conversation. She remained seated on the concrete divider, staring at her feet.

“Yeah, I’m not lying or kneeling on the ground for you. Gun or no gun,” Carmilla said.

Beattie nodded over to the burning car. “I need to go check for survivors, but before I do that, I need you both restrained. So if you don’t do as I say, we’re going have a problem.”

“Don’t bother checking, they’re both dead in there.”

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say to a police detective. Beattie took the safety off her weapon.

“Get on the ground! How many times do I have to say it?”

“They attacked us.”

“Oh, they attacked you? I see, I guess that’s why they’re dead and their car is burning in the middle of the road while you two seem fine. This is your last warning.” Her eyes flicked to the wreckage. “Wait, does that say IDSS? Is that an IDSS car? What would they even be doing out here?”

“Trying to kill us. What part of ‘they attacked us’ do you not understand? Maybe we’re not real detectives, but at least we’re not complete morons who don’t see what’s right in front of them. Someone at that school took those kids and they got these guys.” She pointed at the wreckage. “To help them cover it up. You got kicked off your case to stop you asking questions and these guys tried to kill us because we were asking questions.”

Beattie’s aim faltered, indecision on her face.

“I told her she’d hold her daughter in her arms again.”

Laura’s words were a mumble, her eyes still fixed to the ground. Beattie’s gaze, but not their gun, turned to her.

“Is she injured? Look, there’ll be an ambulance coming soon. They can check her over.”

Before Carmilla could answer, Laura stood up, her demeanour shifting from distraught to determined like only she could. She walked over to Beattie with strong, confident strides. Resolve radiated off of her, clear in her face and posture. Only someone who knew her as well as Carmilla did would be able to see the pain it was all hiding. She reached a hand into her pocket and took the data stick they’d found in the Bishop’s treehouse.

“I’m fine. But the kids we’re looking for aren’t. They’re in danger and we’re running out of time to find them. You said we needed to work with you, to trust you.” She held the stick out to Beattie. “This is us doing both. We almost died getting this. Without it, all that’s just happened would have been for nothing.”

“What’s on it?” Beattie asked.

“I don’t know, could be homework assignments. But right now I have to believe it’s something
important. And we’re giving it to you. We’re going to trust you. I really hope you can do the same.”

Nothing happened for a long moment. Carmilla braced herself for a fight. She wasn’t going to let Beattie arrest them, no matter what the consequences of that might be. She inched her way towards the detective, trying to get close enough to strike at the gun.

“There’s something off about this whole thing,” Laura said. “You have to know that. Just like I know that it kills you that you couldn’t help those kids before. I saw that in the police station, it was all over your face. There was nothing you could have done then, but you can help now. We are the best chance those kids have. Let us go, please.”

Then Beattie’s eyes locked with Laura’s. Carmilla could see exactly what they were seeing in her own mind. The honest, determined face, the imploring brown eyes full of passionate intensity. She relaxed.

*You don’t stand a chance lady. I never did either.*

Beattie holstered her weapon and took the stick.

“I really hope I don’t regret this.” She pointed past the burning wreckage of the car. “Get on your bike and head in that direction until you see a left turn. Take it and get off the highway. Quickly! Before anyone else gets here.”
Laura

The long drive back to the apartment was a mostly silent one in terms of conversation. Even when they stopped to work out a route that didn’t involve getting back onto the highway they’d left, she barely said anything. ‘Okay’ and ‘sounds good’ were the words she heard herself repeating the most. Usually in response to Carmilla suggesting a road they take.

She couldn’t focus on the physical world around her. Her eyes would scan over the map on her tablet and see nothing but squiggly lines and random letters. Carmilla eventually stopped asking for her opinion, so she must have noticed.

The roads they took were suburban mostly. House after house, garden after garden. The school day had finished, so many had kids running around on their front lawns, playing a myriad of different sports and other games. A lovely sight on its own, but the timing of it felt like a cruel joke the world had decided to play on her.

Or maybe it was more a God’s idea of a joke, from what she’d experienced of them. She thought she was on pretty good terms with all the Gods she knew though.

She pulled the visor down on Carmilla’s helmet and shut her eyes. Carmilla had insisted she take it after Laura had lost hers.

Lost hers. What an interesting way to put it. When her eyes closed, the memory of throwing the helmet at the goon and everything that happened after that replayed in her mind. She immediately opened them again and went back to watching the children. One soul-crushing guilt trip at a time, please.

“You saved me.” Carmilla’s voice said again. She held onto that, put it on repeat in her head. “You saved me.”

At least she’d saved one person today. It seemed she wasn’t doing the best job of saving anyone else.

Two kids lost. That’s what their short conversation with the dead goon heavily implied. Two. Even one was too much for her to stomach. Especially after talking with the parents earlier today. They were all so different and yes, some had been a little hard to get along with, but if one thing rang true for all of them, it was they loved their children deeply. Now it looked very much like she was going to have to tell some of them the worst news they could ever hear.

And as much as she didn’t want to admit it. Deep down she hoped Kellan wouldn’t be one of them. That her daughter Lexi would be one of the two still alive. She wasn’t sure if that made her a horrible person. Was wishing for one child to still be alive tantamount to wishing a different one was dead? Hopefully not, for when she imagined her future self-informing the parents of what they’d learned today, the face she saw the clearest was Kellan’s.

It didn’t make much sense on the face of it, she knew. They’d barely even met really. Known each other for only a few days. But a connection was there. The reason for it pretty clear if she wanted to be honest with herself.

If. If she wanted to be honest with herself. A pretty big if right at this moment. The list of things she wanted to focus on appeared to be dwindling. Don’t think about the probably dead kids you’re failing to save, don’t think about the dead guy you killed, don’t think about m-

Stop it. She shook herself mentally. Maybe physically too, as Carmilla took a hand off the handle to
squeeze her own. This was what Carmilla had tried to get out ahead of. Her going into a spiral of guilt and self-doubt if things went they way currently were. She’d done well to avoid it in Florence. But then again, as evil as Gustav was and as dangerous as the Sarratum could have been, the stakes felt more immediate here. The consequences of failure right in front of her face. The Turners, the Meyers, the Bishops, Kellan. She knew them now, even if it was only a little.

That made things personal, emotional. Scary. Rationally she knew this to more than a little dumb. The Sarratum had threatened the lives of thousands, millions even, in the wrong hands. Yet she’d taken that danger in her stride for the most part. She supposed it was the difference between a vague threat against ‘people’ in general and knowing that someone you knew and cared about was in danger.

The last time the latter had been the case for her, she’d used an extremely dangerous mask to send a horde of violent gargoyles into the Uffizi Gallery and another time she’d made a pact with the literal God of Death and gotten her heart ripped out. So perhaps she didn’t have the best track record with keeping a steady head when the people she cared for were in danger.

Well, she’d need to learn fast, people lives were counting on it.

The sun had begun to set by the time they made it back to the apartment. That surprised Laura, the day had gone by so fast. She guessed high-speed car chases had a way of speeding up one’s day. They didn’t say anything to each other on the way in or up the elevator. Laura started writing a mental script for the apology she needed to give. For not listening to Carmilla’s earlier warnings, for shutting down and not helping them get back here, for dragging her into this mess in the first place.

But once they ambled their tired legs through the suite’s door, she got swept off her feet as arms wrapped around her. She sank into the sudden embrace and let Carmilla take her weight. Hands roamed over her body, rubbing her back, tangling through her hair and then gently turning her forehead to Carmilla’s. Their noses brushed against each other as they moved into the same space with the same air. It was only then that Carmilla spoke.

“I know that there’s a lot swirling around in your head right now. None of it good. I’m not going to tell you something useless and insipid, like ‘don’t feel bad’ or that ‘it’s all going to be okay.’ Instead, I’m just going to say that I’m here and whatever it is you need, you got it. If you want to talk, if you want to crawl into bed and forget all this for a while, even if you need some time alone to think. I’m good with it.”

Laura kissed her for a quick moment and shook her head.

“That last one is a definite no. I don’t want to be alone.”

“Yeah, to be honest. I was totally lying about being good with the leaving you alone option. So I’m really glad you said that.”

Their mouths were so close that their laughs entwined together, like two musical instruments forming a song.

“The couch,” Carmilla said. “I think that sounds real good right now.”

Laura’s agreement was a nuzzle of Carmilla’s neck and a non-verbal murmur. She let Carmilla guide her there.

They nestled up together on the expensive couch. Her head finding a place to rest in Carmilla’s lap. It still surprised her how comfortable it was to do that. She was starting to wonder why she even
bothered with pillows back at the cottage when she had Carmilla.

Time went by in a haze for a while. Carmilla had pulled the blinds to darken the room and their own breathing was the only sound she could hear. It was easy then to drift off, especially once Carmilla started brushing fingers through her hair.

“I really thought we could save all of them,” she found herself saying, the words muffled slightly by being spoken directly into Carmilla’s lap.

“I know you did. You wouldn’t be you if you hadn’t.”

“What if,” she turned her head upwards to look up at Carmilla. “What if we’re misunderstanding what he said? He didn’t know about the kids, all he heard was that they ‘used another one’ but still had ‘two spare.’ What if they meant something completely different? Maybe, they had a to use one of their last vouchers for a super amazing cleaning service that’s perfectly fine with dead bodies and ghost goop? Or, or… maybe they did mean the kids. But by using them, they didn’t mean, you know…”

She trailed off, seeing the look on Carmilla’s face.

“Yeah, maybe,” Carmilla said.

No, her eyes said.

They went back to silence for a while.

Okay, then. If they had to assume the worst, then they had to get back out there. Make sure they saved whoever they could.

“Carm,” she started.

“No,” Carmilla said.

“What?”

“No,” Carmilla repeated. “You’re going to say we can’t stay in this hotel room doing nothing. That we have no time to lose in rescuing whoever we can. Well, I’m saying that for the rest of the day we are staying right here. Unless this place catches fire, I’m not letting us leave to go anywhere until tomorrow.”

A part of her wanted to argue, but she couldn’t quite muster the energy to do so. It didn’t help that Carmilla had begun to massage her shoulders while she spoke. She could play dirty like that when she wanted something, Laura knew.

“Hell, I’ll even do the face if that’s what it takes,” Carmilla said.

Laura looked up to see Carmilla adopting what she could only imagine was supposed to be a mimicry of her own ‘no arguing with me right now’ face. The jutted out chin and over the top serious expression looked ridiculous on Carmilla’s face. She burst out laughing at the sight of it.

“Dork,” she snorted out. She was certain that getting her to laugh had been Carmilla’s intention, but it felt good regardless.

She relaxed. Snuggling her head deeper into Carmilla’s lap and curling up her legs on the couch. There was no denying Carmilla right now, her body too warm and soft to drag herself away from
and back outside.

“Do you have any ideas?” she asked. “I feel like all I’m doing is striking out. Maybe I should let someone else take the reigns.”

“That’s not true. None of this is your fault.”

“Isn’t it? I was the one who decided we should sneak into the school. The mess we made there is because of me. The same mess that guy said they used a kid somehow to get rid of.”

“How could you have possibly known they would do that?”

“And then I said we should go to the Bishops house and now more people are dead.”

“People who were trying to kill us! You saved us back there. Laura, come on. Even for you, this is some serious self-flagellation. You have done nothing but try your best since getting here. And we’ve done a hell of a lot more than anyone else has. Hey.”

Carmilla gently brought Laura’s head up from out of her lap. Finding her eyes before continuing.

“It’s sad enough if some of those kids are gone. And I’m so sorry that you had to do what you did to save us today. But don’t make it worse by putting yourself in chains that belong on some other asshole. You didn’t kidnap those kids and you didn’t order those goons to try and kill us today. Someone else did. They’re to blame, not you.”

The words felt so good to hear, even if Laura wasn’t entirely sure she believed them herself. She lifted up Carmilla’s black shirt enough to plant a few kisses on her stomach. As non-verbal replies went, she was pretty sure it communicated her appreciation nicely.

“I don’t know what we should try next. I was banking on that USB to be super useful. But I don’t think Detective Beattie was letting us go unless we gave her something,” Laura said after a while.

“Sometimes you just have to trust people, right? Especially when you’re desperate,” Carmilla said. “We’ll figure something out. Come up with a new plan tonight or tomorrow while we wait and see if that detective wants to tell us what she finds on that stick.”

Carmilla drifted a hand down the side of Laura’s body. The touch somehow both comforting and teasing at the same time.

“In the meantime,” Carmilla said. “I have a few ideas on how we could relax and recharge.”

Laura looked up again. Carmilla’s eyes were sparkling.

“Why do I get the feeling they’re similar ideas to how you wanted to us to go over what I typed down from talking to those parents?” Laura said.

“What were those ideas again? I must have forgotten.”

Laura moved her arms around the back of Carmilla’s neck and pushed herself upwards.

“Somewhere quiet, somewhere private, somewhere we can be-”

Her phone rang. Carmilla groaned.

“Ignore it.”
“I can’t, what if it’s Beattie?” Laura said, reaching over towards the coffee table for the vibrating phone. Its vibrations were moving it towards the edge of the table and soon it would fall onto the ground. If that happened, she’d have to move a little more to get it. So a disaster was on the cards then if she took too long.

“If you touch that phone, I’m throwing it off the balcony,” Carmilla warned.

“Jokes on you. You already shut the door and pulled the blinds,” Laura said and grabbed the phone as it began to fall. Disaster averted.

Laura looked at the name on the screen. “Kellan,” she said.

The mood shifted. She wasn’t ready for this conversation yet.

“Let her call again later,” Carmilla said.

Sure, she wanted to say. Instead, she shook her head. “No, if she heard about what happened on the highway she’ll freak out if we don’t answer.”

She got up from the couch and answered the call.

Kellan was frantic. Skipping over the greetings and launching into a flurry of words.

“Are you okay? Gianna called. Ah, Mrs Bishop I mean, you might not remember her first na- Are you okay? She said that something happened on the roads back to their house. Two car crashes and both of them were IDSS cars! And when they got home, they said their house had clearly been searched. Did something happen? Did they attack you? Are you okay?”

In case the repeated question didn’t make it clear, her voice communicated serious concern. If they were in person, Laura was sure that Kellan’s face would be pale and her big eyes wide.

“We’re fine. You’re right, they did attack us. They followed us somehow to the Bishop’s house. Oh, we were the ones who searched it, by the way, you can tell the Bishops not to worry. Things got a little, violent. But we’re fine, we made it out.”

“Oh my God. I can’t believe they would actually track you down outside of the school and try to kill you. Who are these people? What, are they hunting you or something? You know what? That’s a bad word to use, that’s way too scary of a word, I’m sorry. Please don’t panic.”

“Trying my best,” Laura said. In the corner of eyes, she could see Carmilla watching her closely, only able to hear her side of the conversation.

“I’m so glad you’re okay. Both of you, that is. Do you think you’re safe where you are? Where are you? Oh wait, you don’t have to tell me that if you don’t want to. Security or something like that.”

She couldn’t help a chuckle. “We’re in our hotel room. And we’re safe. No one followed us.”

She almost said, no one was left to follow us. But that was probably way too dark of a thing to say to Kellan. Hell, it was probably a little worrying that she’d thought it inside her own head even. It must have been another dark ex-vampire thought infecting her. Maybe.

“That’s fantastic, so relieved to hear that,” Kellan said. “And you should know that you are always welcome here if you need a place to feel safe, or just need a place. No more ambushes, it’ll just be me here.”
Just be me here. Laura’s mouth felt dry, she swallowed.

“Thank you. It’s kind of you to offer,” the words were tough to get out.

“Okay, I get that you’re probably tired. I’ll let you go. Unless,” Kellan paused. “Unless there’s anything else you can tell me. Anything you learned at the Bishops or learned at all. Maybe?”

The hope in Kellan’s voice anguished her. She tried to swallow again, but her mouth seemed utterly devoid of any moisture now at all.

“No. I’m sorry, but nothing else yet.”

The hotel they were staying in was one of the highest rated in the state. It’s room service menu better than most proper restaurants. They could have ordered up anything. Caviar, wagyu, foie gras and a whole bunch of other foods that Laura had never heard of until she’d glanced at the hotel’s menu.

Instead, they tossed the menu aside and ordered pizza.

She didn’t need expensive luxury today. She needed something familiar. And so the shiny marble of the kitchen bench was covered up in cheap cardboard with the most average run of the mill pizza one could imagine. She loved every bite.

Carmilla as well, it seemed from the speed with which she went from slice to slice. While she’d probably mostly agreed to make Laura happy. Ever since she’d become human, her food standards appeared to have lessened dramatically. Laura wondered whether the transformation from vampire to human had reset her palette or something like that. Or maybe food had gotten a lot better since 1698.

Whatever the reason, she found watching Carmilla eat now to be incredibly endearing. She sat on top of the bench in the middle of the boxes. Picking a new box after every slice she devoured. Laura found herself staring after a while, her own pizza forgotten.

“What?” Carmilla asked around a mouthful.

Laura shook her head. “Nothing, sorry. I just really like this. What we’re doing right now.”

Carmilla smiled and reached behind her for a box Laura couldn’t reach. “Yeah me too,” she said and lobbed a slice in front of Laura.

If she’d been asked later what they’d done during the next hour or so, Laura would have been hard-pressed to remember. The small talk, the jokes, the comfortable silences. None of it particularly memorable, but all of it so cherished and exactly what they needed. If she had to describe it, the only word that came close was the feeling of warmth.

“Okay, I’m sorry to ruin this,” Laura said. Wiping her hands with a napkin and pulling out her tablet from under a cardboard lid. “But I have to do this now. Before it gets too late.”

“Do what? Laura, I said no leaving the hotel room tonight. I meant it.”

“Relax, we’re not leaving.” Laura tapped on the tablet. “We’re calling someone. Hopefully, they’re not already asleep, I think it will be pretty late in Austria. I’ve been thinking. We shouldn’t be acting like we’re alone just because we’re the only ones here. We have friends, it’s time we should use that. I was actually going to do this yesterday, but then like, ten billion things happened which distracted
“We’re calling them with the tablet? And who are we calling?”

Laura turned the chair around to face away from Carmilla, putting them both in the frame of the tablet’s camera. “Video call. Like old clone club times. And how about we keep it a surprise. You’re going to love this.”

“No, I’m not.”

“No, you’re not.” Laura tapped a couple more times and started the call.

The screen shifted from black to the sight of a classroom science lab. The tablet appeared to be propped up against something at the front of the room, facing a half dozen rows of brown workstations on a clean white floor. There were no people in sight, but she could hear loud voices coming from outside the frame and the faint sound of drilling.

What drew her attention most though, was the grand piano sitting in front of the workstations.

“I don’t care how late it is!” a voice she recognised was shouting. “Someone is going to explain to me why the music room is full of bunsen burners and this science lab has a piano in it!”

“Are you serious? We’re calling her?” Carmilla asked, looking over her shoulder.

“Wait, who is talking through my? Who is that?” The owner of the voice walked into frame. Her face twisted into a familiar scowl. “Hollis and Karnstein?”

Carmilla started muttering behind her, quieter than she could properly hear. But it sounded a little like “Hollis and Karnstein again? Do I get second billing with everyone now?”

Laura lifted up the friendliest hand she could muster. “Hi, Mel. I see the reconstructing Silas thing is… coming along.”

Mel’s scowl deepened. “Great, this is exactly what I needed after everything else today.”

“Seeing your good friends Laura and Carm?” Laura said with a positive upward swing of her arm.

“More problems. That’s what seeing your faces always means. God, I knew this would happen. This is the part where you tell me that the world is in danger, or that we didn’t actually kill Karnstein mother… again. Or some other horrible, horrible thing.”

“Hey,” Laura said, indignant. “Nothing horrible was happening when we met up at my dad’s house.”

“Oh, I dunno,” Carmilla said. “I can probably think of at least two things off the top of my head.”

“That’s because Kirsch and I got out of there before the bad shit could start happening,” Mel said as Laura elbowed Carmilla in the ribs for being unhelpful. “That lady had bad news written all over her. Hell, even Kirsch seemed to know what was up. Called her an ‘npc quest giver’, whatever the hell that means.”

Mel’s eyes narrowed at them.

“That’s what this is about, isn’t it? You’re in trouble, again, like the Uffizi thing. And you’re going
to ask me to bring Kirsch and go over there—"

“No!” Carmilla said.

“—Wherever there is. probably some vampire-infested castle or haunted house.”

“No,” Laura said. “Well, yes.” Carmilla stiffened next to her. “This is about that lady who came to the house. But, no we’re not asking you to come here.” Carmilla relaxed.

Mel’s eyes remained narrowed, suspicious. “Well, what did you call me for then?”

“Your help. But like, of the boring research kind. Not the ‘grab our weapons and charge!’ kind.”

“What am I, your research assistant? Unpaid intern?”

“Wow, I really wish I had one of those back at Silas. That would have been so helpful. But no, of course not. It’s just that A, we’re really swamped right now and B, there is so much more material at Silas than on the internet about this kind of stuff.”

“That kind of stuff being?”

“Well,” Laura started.

It took a good while for Laura to explain everything currently going on. Even considering her lightning-quick word speed. Though on reflection, perhaps she didn’t need to explain exactly how gross Salvation High School was in such extreme detail or go on a tangent about how interesting the bearded trees around Savannah looked. More and more it seemed like she needed to find a ‘How to explain completely insane situations quickly and concisely: 101’ class. Considering what her life had been like since going to Silas, it would probably be a good investment.

When she finished, it didn’t take as long for Mel to process it as she thought. After only a short moment she nodded.

“Yep, that all sounds about right for you two.” She shrugged. “So you’re asking me to use the Silas books to research what weird supernatural shit is happening over there?”

“Yeah,” Laura said brightly. “Though, I’m also very interested in knowing more about these IDSS people. They’re not generic security guards, that’s for sure.”

“And while I’m doing all your busy work, what will you be doing exactly?”

_Getting shot at, being attacked by ghosts. Or sleeping. Hopefully mostly sleeping._

“We’re waiting on Beattie, the detective, to come back to us on what was on the data stick, we have to go through what the parents said to us and, to be honest, so far we haven’t had the time to sit still and research at all yet. I doubt that’s gonna change anytime soon. Please, we could really use some help. Us and those missing kids. We would both appreciate it so much.”

Mel sat down on the piano and sighed. “Guess it would give me an excuse to stop doing this crap for a few days.” She motioned vaguely around her and then tapped on the piano. “I’ve actually been thinking that I didn’t give you enough credit for organizing everyone here before. Credit and sympathy, I know what it’s like leading a bunch of morons now. The people here can’t even work out the difference between a science lab and a music room. I have no idea how I would have gone about taking on a Death God with them.”
Was that a compliment? Laura wasn’t sure how to react to that from her. “Uhh.”

“I’ll do it. I’ll help you out. I’ll grab the meathead too. He’s useless but he can probably bring me coffee and carry the heavy books around.”

“Thank you,” Laura said. She meant it.

Mel closed the chat soon after. Never being one for small talk. Laura was relieved at her answer, but she did wish she would have stayed for a little while. As abrasive as Mel could be, talking to her was familiar. Something that had been in short supply so far in Savannah.

While the conversation was going she could almost pretend they were back at Silas. She found that comforting for some reason. The realization was faintly amusing. Who else but her would want to pretend they were back in a place where they’d almost died hundreds of times? The devil you know, she supposed.

“Well, that went well,” Carmilla said from behind Laura’s shoulder.

Laura lifted herself up from the chair and next to Carmilla on the bench, crumpling an empty pizza box under her as she did so. She then commandeered Carmilla’s arm. Taking it with both hands and wrapping it around her shoulders.

“Yeah, it did,” she said, leaning her head against Carmilla’s chest. “Guess some people I know from Silas are still willing to talk to me.”

“Like I said, back when we were in that jail cell. Only a moron wouldn’t want to be Laura Hollis’ friend.”

“‘Back when we were in that jail cell.’ Oh, my God.” Laura groaned. “I was in a jail cell. I was arrested. That was a thing that totally happened. Then I trespassed on a school and participated in a car chase. What am I doing with my life?”

Carmilla chuckled next to her and kissed the top of her head. “You’re so right. When did I get engaged to this dangerous bad girl? I should get away while I still can, before your dark influence corrupts me.”

Laura went into a fit of giggles. “You were right there in the cell, the trespassing and the car chase with me.”

“Oh, yeah. Damn, it’s already too late. We can only weep for my lost innocence, taken by the rebel Hollis.”

The kisses that came next were deep and passionate. The pizza boxes around them flew off the bench and onto the ground. Laura almost fell right after them as they grasped for each other recklessly. Once Carmilla had dragged her back from the edge of the bench, they laid together on top of the cardboard and white marble.

“I love you,” Laura said.

Carmilla pulled her close.

“We’ll work this out. I don't know how yet, but we will. I believe that.”

“How can you? Considering everything that’s happened so far.”
“Because I believe in you.”

She screamed and struggled in an effort to force herself to move. To get out of this dark room and away from the screen. Words were pouring out of it again. She knew them off by heart by now, but she still desperately tried to avoid hearing them again all the same.

“My, Laura, my darling Laura…”

She screamed louder, maybe she could drown out the words. It didn’t work, she couldn’t scream loud enough. A hand touched her shoulder. She turned her head to find her father standing behind her.

“I am so sorry,” he said.

“I am so sorry,” the voice from the screen said with him.

Laura woke covered in sweat and breathing heavily. On instinct, she looked for Carmilla. She found her immediately, lying next to her on the bed, still asleep. She relaxed, taking a deep breath and placing a hand against her heart. She kept it there and watched Carmilla for a while, listening to her purr softly into the pillows.

At least she hadn’t woken her by crying out or thrashing in her sheets. Carmilla deserved some rest after everything she’d been doing. Deserved to not have to worry about her with everything else going on as well.

It really would be nice if these nightmares could stop for a minute. Memo to brain, knock it off with the nightmares, please. Or at least switch it up with what they were about. Maybe one about being late for a school test or featuring that horrible spider thing they experimented with spells on in Harry Potter.

She kissed Carmilla’s cheek lightly enough not to wake her and got out of bed to take a shower. Her desire to wash away the sweat as quickly as possible was so she would feel cleaner, not to cover anything up, she swore. Afterwards, she ended up on the couch, basking in the early morning sun wrapped up in towels.

Carmilla came out soon after. Her hair wild and messy and content smile on her face.

“Got any more pizza left?” she said as she headed off to the kitchen and it’s surrounding layer of cardboard debris.

While Carmilla hunted for more pizza slices, Laura’s tablet on the coffee table lit up and made its ‘pay attention to me’ noises. She reached for it, wondering how it had found its way there.

It was a video message from Mel. A short one, according to the file size.

“Wow, that was much quicker than I thought. Do you sleep Mel?” she muttered and started it up.

This time Mel was clearly in front of a computer. Laura could tell from the way the monitor lit up Mel’s face in the otherwise dark room. It took her a moment to realize the room was Inanna’s old Dean Room they’d lived in for a while before being chased into the library. Mel must have claimed it for herself. It made sense, she supposed, it wasn’t like there was anyone else there who might object. From Inanna, to a group of psychology TA’s, to Carmilla and her, back to Inanna and now
Melanippe Callis. Quite the string of occupants that room was going through.

“Alright I’ve got something,” Mel said. She hadn’t bothered with a greeting. “I don’t know why I’m staying up this late for you guys when I could be sleeping in the best bed Evil God money can buy, but here I am.”

Carmilla came up behind her, chewing on a cold pizza slice. She handed Laura a second one and sat down next to her.

“I decided to check out those IDSS guys first. The letters seemed familiar and it didn’t take me long to figure out why.” Mel held up a stack of papers. “We have a ton of records here. Every business deal or transaction that Karnstein’s mum ever did probably. Kirsch and I went through them a few times before. Looking to see if there was any money hidden away anywhere we could get our hands on. That turned out to be pointless. But I do remember seeing those letters a few times, IDSS. So I went looking again and I found them easy enough.”

“Why would IDSS show up on records at Silas?” Laura said, wondering out loud.

“They don’t advertise on their website or anywhere else about this,” Mel continued in the video. “But IDSS aren’t their own thing. They’re subsidiary, owned by a bigger corporation.”

She dropped the stack and picked up one page in particular. She then held it up to the screen.

“Innovative and Determined Security Solutions are owned by Corvae. For all intents and purposes, they are Corvae.”
“That’s great,” Carmilla said finally, kicking a pizza box across the room. “Fantastic, just the news we needed.”

Her words broke a good minute or two’s silence after Mel’s Corvae revelation. The video on the screen frozen where Laura had paused it and the two of them deep into process mode. Apparently hers currently involved beating up on innocent cardboard whose only crime was to bear them delicious pizza.

“Do these people follow us around?” She kicked the box against the wall and pushed another off the kitchen bench to the floor. “Or are they secretly involved in every evil thing in the world?”

“Every evil supernatural thing maybe,” Laura said from the couch. “I really hoped we wouldn’t run into Corvae again. I guess blocking them on my Twitter account wasn’t enough for them to get the message.”

“It was so much easier before,” Carmilla said, her tone a whine. “Got a problem with a shitty, evil person? All you have to do is kill them and their shitty, evil friends and family. That would be the end of it. But now, no, they’re always part of some corporation that never dies because it has too many mouth breathers to kill fast enough. I hate corporations.”

“Okay, steady on there, Comrade Karnstein. Is this where you reveal to me your hidden hatred of the Bourgeoisie?”

“I couldn’t care less about politics.” Carmilla kicked one final box and went back to the couch. “I care about having to deal with a never-ending stream of assholes.”

Apparently unsure of what to say to that, Laura tapped on her screen to resume Mel’s video instead of responding.

“I think IDSS is the department they call on whenever they need to get things done by shooting people,” Mel continued on the tablet screen. “According to some of these files, the goons that came here with Belmonde were mostly from there. That’s why there are so many files for IDSS here.”

She picked up the stack again and flicked through them.

“Personnel files, transfer requests. Oh, there’s this one guy, Gustav, no second name. He put in request after request to come over here but they kept getting denied. No idea why anyone would want to travel to Silas so much.”

They both exchanged looks. Unlike Mel, they knew quite well why those transfer requests would have been made. Neither commented on it though. Thankfully, they’d already dealt with that problem.

“Those goons who attacked you in Florence were probably from IDSS as well. I’m guessing that though, I don’t have anything here to back that up. But what I do have is the name of the guy apparently in charge. His signature is everywhere. Mr Gregory M. Roberts. You’re not going to believe this, he actually lives in Savannah. Well, at least he has a house there. Guy like this probably
has like two dozen homes, five yachts and his own jet. But, his first home is in Savannah. I don’t know if that’s a huge coincidence or the universe bending around you two like it always does. Either way, I’ll send the address in an email.”

With that, the message ended as abruptly as it had started.

“Shit,” Carmilla said.

“At least we know now,” Laura said, voice tinged with her usual optimism. Carmilla was glad to see it back after the battering her confidence had taken yesterday. “Better we know what we’re dealing with sooner rather than later.”

“Better not having to deal with them at all. We’ve been lucky that we’ve never been the ones directly in their crosshairs. In Florence, they wanted the Sarratum more than us. At Silas, they wanted, well, Silas. If we keep getting in their way, that’s going to change. We barely got away from them last time, Laura.” Her gaze went to Laura’s left arm. “They’ve already shot you once.”

Laura shuffled across the couch towards her. “Hey, it all worked out fine in the end, see?” She waved her arm around in front of Carmilla. “No big deal. Can barely even see the scar.”

No big deal, said the woman to getting shot and almost dying some months ago. Yeah, she definitely needed a name for her smile while shaking her head reaction to the things Laura often said and did. Without thinking, she reached out a hand and steadied Laura’s arm, before pushing the towel covering Laura’s shoulders away and leaning in to kiss the small scar on her upper arm.

Like every other feature of Laura’s body, she could find the scar’s location with her eyes closed. In the past months since Florence, Carmilla had lavished it with a great deal of attention. As if with enough kisses she could force the scar to fade away completely.

“You got that jumping in front of me,” Carmilla murmured.

“Oh, like you haven’t done that a million times.”

Laura jumped up from the couch, Energy radiating off her. Laura’s ability to bounce back from disappointment continually amazed her. She knew that the pain of potentially losing two of the missing kids, the self-doubt about their ability to save the rest and whatever was going on with her in regards to her nightmares wasn’t gone. But for now, it looked like Laura was pushing past it all to keep going.

At least for the moment, her Laura was back.

“Okay,” Laura said, all business. “I’ll check my emails for this Roberts guy’s address. Then we go see what we can find out. Either from him after we, ask him some questions, or maybe something in his house.”

“This guy is in charge of the people who have tried to kill us multiple times, and you want to go to his house?”

“Well, obviously we’ll be careful. I’m sure we’ve handled worse than anything he can throw at us. And he might not even be there. You heard what Mel said, he could be in a vacation home or on a yacht.”

“When are we ever that lucky?

Laura picked up her tablet again, presumably to find Mel’s email.
“Got it,” she said after a few taps. “It’s not too far away according to the directions. We could get going now and be there in no time.”

Carmilla’s gaze flicked back Laura’s arm. “Okay, how about I go check this Corvae guy’s house while you take some time to go over what we’ve learned so far. With what the parents told us, what Kellan’s told us, what we learned at the school. Probably worth sorting through it all, you know?”

Confusion crossed over Laura’s face. “You want to go without me? Maybe I undersold how dangerous going there might be, with some patented Hollis understatement mixed with, let’s be honest here, probably undue optimism. But yeah, going to that guy’s house is crazy super dangerous. So we should go together.”

Funny, she felt she could make that exact same argument for her going alone and leaving Laura in the nice safe hotel suite. But past experience had taught her there would be no winning that argument.

“Yeah,” she said instead. “Yeah, you’re right. We should go together.”

Despite her words, Laura’s eyes narrowed. She wasn’t dumb. She could work out the real reason for Carmilla’s reticence at them both going.

“Okay, then,” Laura said, her words somewhat stiff. “Good that we’re on the same page. I’ll go get changed.”

Carmilla hit her thigh and mentally kicked herself after Laura left for the bedroom. This was twice in a couple of days she’d without thinking proposed a plan purely on the merits of it making Laura safer to predictable results. She’d been lucky that Laura had indulged her back in the school enough to not get mad. Though her response had still been a resounding no, despite the ‘we can do anything pep talk’ way she’d phrased it.

That overprotectiveness got on Laura’s nerves was something she’d worked out about her as far back as during their first encounters in the old dorm room. But in times like these, the urge to keep Laura as safe as possible could be hard to fight. Another thing for her to work on, she supposed. Or maybe one day she’d give in and make that dragon defended castle with a lava moat after all. She could dream that Laura wouldn’t mind staying in it as long as it was well stocked with cocoa at all times.

As they prepared to leave, Laura started another call with her phone while they were both in the bedroom.

“Ms Kellan?” she said into it, holding the phone up to her ear with a shoulder as she zipped up her jeans. “Hi, yeah it’s me. I was just calling quickly to ask if you knew anything about a Gregory M. Roberts? He apparently lives here in Savannah. It’s fine if the answer’s no, I just thought I’d ch-”

Laura went quiet. Carmilla could hear Kellan’s voice coming out of the phone’s speakers without being able to pick out any actual words. It hadn’t been necessary though for her to work out the gist of the call between the two last night. She hadn’t brought up Laura’s decision not to tell Kellan what they’d learned from the dead goon. Until they learned more, she didn’t see the sense in telling Kellan something that would only upset her. It wasn’t like Kellan fearing for her daughter even more than she already was would help things at all.

For her, it was a no-brainer decision. She felt for Laura though, who she knew would have found the deceit far more difficult to swallow than her.
“Wow, that’s actually super helpful, thank you,” Laura was saying. “We’ll... No, no that’s not a good idea... No really, we can deal with this ourselves. Goodbye Ms Kellan, thank you again.”

She ended the call and turned to Carmilla.

“She wanted to come too.”

“Of course she did. I didn’t realise we needed to check in with her before we did anything now.”

“No, we don’t need to check in with her, I just thought it wouldn’t hurt to see if she knew something. Which, by the way, she did,” Laura said indignantly. “Apparently this Roberts guy is a pretty well known around here. And by well known, I mean popular. Kellan said he doesn’t show his face much but he gives a ton of money to the community. She made him sound like a kindly old grandpa who constantly gives stuff away.”

Carmilla snorted.

“Do yourself a favour and don’t trust anyone who does that. Seriously, the ones who give the most away are always doing it so if anyone stumbles onto the horrible shit they secretly do, nobody will believe them. I still remember that time when Mother got this huge award ceremony on behalf of a bunch of charities. I think I threw up in my mouth all day.”

“So, today I learn that even people who give generously are secretly evil. You know, sometimes it feels like the world gets that little bit darker every day.”

Carmilla laughed and lightly tapped Laura’s nose with her finger. “Sorry, cupcake. How about for you, I’ll dial back on the broody ex-vampire thoughts for a bit.”

That got her a quick smile before Laura pressed for them to get going. So eager was she that Carmilla barely got clothed herself before being pushed out the door and into the elevator.

The drive to Gregory M. Roberts’ house was a strange one. The probability of their destination being a dangerous death-trap completely at odds with the peaceful drive there through quiet and pleasant suburbs in sunny daylight. The situation seemed to call for furtive stalking under the cover of darkness as with how they’d snuck into the school. But instead, this felt more like a Sunday drive to a picnic.

It was also strange that someone as high up in Corvae as this Roberts apparently was would have a home in a place like this. The suburbs they were driving through looked identical to the ones Kellan lived in about an hour away. Idyllic in a stereotypically American way yes, but they didn’t quite fit either the uber rich or uber evil vibes she associated most with the Corvae Corporation.

They parked the bike a few houses back and walked the rest of the way. Probably a pointless attempt to be sneaky, but the idea of driving right next to the house in a loud bike felt moronic.

The house looked exactly the same as all the rest on the street. Two stories, big front lawn, double driveway leading up to the garage. Short green hedgerows ran down each side, separating it from its adjacent houses. If anything it looked a little shabbier than the other houses. Brown leaves, dropped from the tall trees surrounding it, covered the lawn and the driveway. The curtains had been drawn over the windows, blocking their view of anything inside.

“We sure that Mel got us the right address?” Carmilla asked. “Maybe she mixed it up with some
Corvae nobody at Middle Management level or something.”

“No, I don’t think so. Kellan said this was the place on the phone as well. It is weird though, I wasn’t expecting this. It doesn’t give off an evil vibe at all.”

“Yeah.” Carmilla scanned the area around them, suspicious. Half expecting more SUV’s to spring into existence or goons to come out of the bushes. Would it be paranoid to want to check the trees?

“So, should we go knock?” Laura asked, clearly unsure of what to do next.

She got off the bike and turned to her. “Should we go knock? You mean, should we go knock on the guy who’s in charge of the people trying to kill us’ door?”

“Taking that as a no.”

Carmilla pointed to a small wooden gate between the house and the garage. It barred the way to a small brick path that presumably led around the back of the house.

“That’s our way in. If we can’t get it open, you can boost me over it. I always do enjoy it when you lift me up.”

She said the last sentence through a half smirk and started moving towards the gate. Enjoying the glimpse she got of the blush on Laura’s face as she did so.

“You know, if this guy’s so willing to throw money around. It’s strange he couldn’t’ve spared a few dollars for that garbage dump of a school,” Carmilla said, lowering her voice as they came up to the gate.

“How do we know he didn’t?” Laura said behind her. “Maybe he’s funding all that new stuff the school’s getting. Some kind of evil deal between evil people for... evil reasons.”

Once they reached the gate, they found it to be locked by a solid padlock around its handle. Plan B it was then.

“Hey, wait a second,” Laura said as she wrapped her arms around the back of Carmilla’s waist and lifted her up. “How are we going to get me over the other side as well?”

Sorry creampuff, guess you get to stay safe after all.

“I’ll try and find a way to let you through once I get over,” she said. The tips of her fingers reached the top of the gate. She needed to get just a little higher.

“This is usually the part of the movie where the character in your position says ‘not to look at their butt,’” Laura said, straining with the effort of pushing Carmilla higher. This would’ve been a lot easier if they both weren’t so short.

“Look where you like. Or touch for that matter.”

“Oh, my God, this is so not the time to distract me by flirting. I will totally drop you... Stop doing that!”

Carmilla suppressed a smirk. Her fingers reached the top the gate and she began to push herself over it.

“What the hell are you two doing?”
Both startled by the voice, Laura lost her grip around Carmilla’s waist as Carmilla lost her own grip on the top of the gate. She dropped back first onto Laura’s face and they fell to the ground in a tangle.

“Ow,” Laura moaned beneath her.

Expecting to hear gunfire at any moment, Carmilla got to her feet. Her hands and knees brushed roughly over Laura as she did so, prompting a few more groans of pain. She tried to move quickly towards the owner of the voice, she needed to get to them before they could fire off a shot. But her feet were still tangled up in Laura’s body and, unbalanced, she stumbled backwards against the wooden gate.

The gate gave way behind her and she fell with it onto her back. Stunned, she found herself staring up at the sky.

It took her way too long to get back up to her feet. How they hadn’t both been killed yet was a miracle. She had to get moving, had to get to their attackers before-

She looked ahead properly for the first time since they’d fallen over and saw the voice’s owner in front of them. An old lady.

The woman stood a few metres away at the foot of the driveway. She leant with both hands down on a brown cane that looked as old as her. Her mouth lay agape, as if unsure of what to make of what she’d seen in the last thirty seconds or so.

“Oh, hi,” Laura said from the ground. “You wouldn’t happen to be an evil goon disguised as an old lady, would you?”

Her mouth opened and closed a few times but the woman didn’t respond.

“Yeah, didn’t think so,” Laura said as Carmilla hurried over to help her up. She winced and rubbed a few places on her back and chest gingerly.

“Sorry,” Carmilla said, feeling somewhat sheepish. She may have misread the situation slightly.

When they started walking over to the woman, she finally managed to do something other than gawk at them.

“Don’t come any closer,” she said and pointed her cane at them.

“Whoa, hey,” Laura said, opening up her palms and coming to a stop. “We’re not gonna hurt you. Promise. I know that looked a bit bad, but-”

“Thieves!” the woman hissed. “No respect, coming here to rob a good man. I won’t stand for it.”

The woman continued ranting and pointing her cane threateningly. Though the biggest danger appeared to be to herself. Without the cane to lean on, she swayed on the spot wildly. If she didn’t put it back down Carmilla was certain she’d end up on the ground. Such a fall would probably dismantle her judging by how old and frail she looked. In her mind, Carmilla couldn’t help but imagine the woman falling over and breaking into dry dust, leaving only her baggy grey clothes and rusting cane.

She stopped alongside Laura and let her do the talking. This definitely seemed like a situation more suited to her.
“We’re not thieves,” Laura said and went for her I.D. “We’re Private Detectives, actually.”

The woman’s eyes flashed with fear at seeing Laura’s hand go to her pocket. She took a panicked step back and barely kept upright.

“Nancy!”

The voice rang out from behind the woman, its tone a warm greeting. A moment later Kellan appeared from behind the hedgerow, her arms wide. Before the woman could fall, she hurried over and wrapped her up in an embrace. “How long has it been since I saw you last?”

“Mary, you have to call the police, thieves, they’re thieves. Police!” the woman sputtered.

“No, no, no. Nancy, they’re not thieves,” Kellan said through a smile and a laugh. She tightened her hug around the woman. “I know them. They’re friends.”

“You know them?” the woman asked.

“Yeah, she does,” Laura said brightly. “Good friends. Hi, Ms Kellan.”

Kellan let go of the woman and waved back, making a show of it so the woman would notice. “Nancy, this is Laura Hollis and Carmilla Karnstein. They’re private detectives. They’re here helping me.”

It was times like these when she really liked having Laura around. If it had only been her, the old lady would be on the ground with a broken hip by now. Okay, if she was being honest, Kellan’s sudden arrival appeared to be helping a great deal too.

“They were trying to sneak into Mr Roberts’ house. I thought they were trying to rob the place,” the woman said.

“They would never do anything like that. They’re helping me find my daughter and the other missing kids,” Kellan said. She looked at her and Laura. “This is Nancy Pearson. Her house is the one next door. She used to teach at the school before she retired. Isn’t that right Nancy?”

“Yes,” Nancy said, her brow furrowed at the sudden change of topic. “I did, but,” she paused for a second, then looked to Kellan conspiratorially and spoke as if they couldn’t hear her. “Mary, why were they sneaking into Mr Roberts’ house if they’re looking for your daughter? Gregory is a great man, he would never have had anything to do with those missing kids.”

Laura stepped forward, a friendly smile on her face. “It’s a part of our investigation. Something we had to check. But when we knocked on the door we didn’t get an answer so we had to try and find another way in.”

“They’re really in a hurry,” Kellan said. “They don’t have time to wait around. Kids are in danger, including my Lexi. You remember her right?”

This was quite the double team, Carmilla realised. She kept quiet, reasonably sure that the two of them had this handled. To think she’d come here expecting goons, magical traps, maybe a monster. Instead, they’d found an old lady and, so far, a completely regular house on a quiet street.

Once again, Nancy seemed to think by addressing Kellan specifically, only she could hear her words.

“Well, I still don’t understand why they’d need to get into… But if they’re helping you find Lexi and
the children.” She grabbed Kellan’s arm. “You’re sure they’re detectives, not thieves?”

“Yes, I’m sure. It’s okay, you can trust them, just like you can trust me.” Kellan said, encouraging.

Nancy looked at them for a long moment. When Carmilla noticed Laura was smiling back, she tried to do the same. Maybe at this distance and with a probably failing eyesight this old woman would find it as friendly as Laura’s.

“Mr Roberts hasn’t been here for months,” she said finally. “But if you need to get inside I have a key. He gave it to me so I could check on the house when he’s away for a while. He can go years without coming home sometimes, the poor man’s so busy.”

“Could you get that?” Kellan asked. “It would be so useful.”

Nancy shuffled off to her house next door. Leaving the three of them on the driveway.

Kellan walked over to them, a triumphant smile on her face.

“How about that? Tell me that wasn’t helpful. ‘Not a good idea Ms Kellan’ she says when I ask to come too. Betcha ya really kicking yourselves for saying that now, huh? And not at all mad at the whole, ‘me ignoring you and coming here anyway against your wishes’ thing.” She laughed nervously.

She said the last part at pace and a much lower volume.

Carmilla rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. Sure, she could say that now. But had they run into any real danger then she’d not only have been useless, but probably a liability when Laura inevitably insisted they rescue her.

“Super helpful, thank you,” Laura said. “She was a handful until you showed up.”

“Oh, she’s harmless really. It was nothing,” Kellan said, though she beamed at Laura’s praise. Prompting Carmilla to roll her eyes even more.

“I said you coming here was a bad idea because this place could have been dangerous though,” Laura said. “And it still might be.”

Kellan gestured around her at the peaceful, idyllic street currently being shined on by a warm sun.

“Come on, it’s Mr Roberts’ house. He’s a kindly old man who helps the community. And everyone else who lives on this street is as harmless as Nancy. Why are you two so interested in this person?”

“Maybe because your ‘kindly old man’ is in charge of IDSS. You know, the people trying to kill us?” Carmilla said in the most condescending drawl she had.

Kellan looked aghast. “What? That can’t be right. I mean we all knew he was high up in some company but in charge of those thugs?”

“It’s true,” Laura said. “We were hoping we might find out what his people are doing here.”

“You were only going to talk to him?” Kellan asked, her eyebrows raised.

“Okay well, full disclosure, the scenario in my head was Carm throwing him against a wall and threatening to choke him until he told us everything. But it turns out he’s not here so I guess we can put that horribly violent plan on the backburner and pretend I never considered such an awful thing.”
Carmilla suppressed a smirk. Was it a bad thing that she rather enjoyed when Laura advocated a little violence? And to be fair to Laura, the scenario in her own head been a great deal more violent.

The sound of shuffling feet heralded the imminent return of Nancy. Well, perhaps not quite imminent, it would probably take her a good minute to get around the hedgerow.

“You’re looking a lot better,” Laura said, her eyes on Kellan.

Carmilla hadn’t noticed it until Laura had pointed it out, but she was right. Kellan’s clothes were far brighter, not to mention cleaner than she’d worn since they’d met. Her eyes sparkled and colour radiated from her cheeks. A transformation from what she’d looked like when she’d first arrived at Mr Hollis’ doorstep.

“Yeah, being active and knowing that we’re, well you two, are making progress is really helping. I don’t know, I guess your confidence is rubbing off on me. You’ve been saying since the start that we’re going to find Lexi and I think I’m starting to really believe that too.”

Not having known her for long enough, Kellan couldn’t have noticed the struggle that Carmilla saw plainly on Laura’s features. The slight stiffening of her posture, the way her smile became a little fixed and most of all the pain behind her eyes. Laura opened her mouth to say something, but her words were low and garbled.

Carmilla stepped forward, gaining Kellan’s attention. “Yeah, that’s good. We definitely think we’re on the right track too.”

Kellan seemed a little confused at hearing words like that come from her instead of Laura. She nodded politely and there was a short awkward silence until Nancy finally made it past the hedgerow with a key in her hand.

“Alright then,” Carmilla said. “Let’s go see what’s in Mr IDSS’ house.”

The first thing they noticed was the stench.

It hit them all as soon as Nancy got the door open. She’d insisted upon opening the door herself and coming in with them. A demand she was now probably regretting.

They stood in a clump on the doorstep, coughing and bringing up hands around their noses. Carmilla recovered first, having had a fair amount of experience with this particular smell. Many a time she’d even been the cause of it.

She pulled the old woman away from the door and told Kellan to take her back to her house and stay there. Two birds with one stone. Once she and Laura were alone on the doorstep, she placed a hand on her shoulder.

“You okay to come in? You don’t have to.”

Laura coughed into the hand around her mouth and nose but she nodded, her eyes determined. A brave choice, even without Carmilla’s certainty from experience it wouldn’t have been hard to work out what the stench was.

What were they suddenly walking into here?
Carmilla went first. Stepping over the threshold and onto dark brown floorboards that creaked loudly underneath her.

“Make sure to keep the door open,” she said to Laura. “Get some air in to help with the smell.” And to make it easier to get the hell out of here if we need to.

The house was dark and musty. Black shapes wriggled in the cobwebs around the top corners of the ceiling and a vague buzzing sound ahead foretold the presence of flies. It was stiflingly warm and the air so stale that she found it difficult to breathe normally. The single step over the threshold had taken her into a different world. What had looked wholesome and idyllic from the outside had become ominous and menacing on the inside.

She pressed forwards through a narrow entranceway. A set of stairs to the upper story stood to her left and she passed by a small cabinet to her right. On it, were a number of framed photographs. The most prominently placed of them depicting a man holding a little girl. She assumed the man to be a younger Mr Roberts. Did he have a daughter?

Mentally shrugging, she continued on. Her steps took her into a living room. An insect scuttled from under a huge couch to behind the legs of a rocking chair and a fly buzzed around a large window to the front yard currently blocked by curtains. The room was a contradiction. Filled with ancient looking furniture and paintings but the television and other pieces of technology were modern. A house of a man both very old and very rich at the same time.

She spared a glance to make sure Laura remained close by behind her and moved towards an open exit to the next room.

The stench got even worse and the buzzing, louder. She found herself in a dining room. Most of its space was taken up by a large rectangular table. At the back of it, she found the source of the stench and the majority of the flies.

The dead man sat in his ornate chair at the head of the table. A mass of flies buzzed around him and the food in front of him had spoiled a long time ago. His head lay sideways on the table, his arms either side of it. He’d obviously been dead for months.

A grisly scene, even for her.

“Maybe you should stay in the other-” she started, but Laura’s renewed coughs told her she’d spoken too late.

“Well, hello Mr Roberts,” she said. “Shitty to meet you.”

“You sure it’s him?” Laura asked around her fit of coughs.

“Pretty sure. You can tell it’s an old guy at least, even if not… much else.”

“He’s alone.”

Carmilla nodded. “Yep.”

“No, I mean he’s alone, but look.” Laura pointed at something on the table. “There’s another plate of food there, and a glass and cutlery. He’s alone now, but I don’t think he was alone here when he died.”

She was right. A second person had clearly been at least expected at the table. The daughter maybe? A business partner? A friend? The killer?
“Good spot,” Carmilla said and moved towards the corpse.

The ground crunched strangely under her foot. She looked down to see that she’d stepped on what looked like white powder or perhaps chalk. Whatever it was exactly, it went around the body in a clumsy circle. It must have been tricky to make, considering a part of the circle had to go under the table.

“Uhh, I think I might have stepped on-”

“Carm!” Laura shouted. When Carmilla turned to look at her, she was pointing up at the ceiling.

Blue flames engulfed the area above the corpse, or more accurately the strange white circle around it. Her first reaction was to wonder why they hadn’t immediately noticed that the building was on fire. Then she realised that the fire’s colour wasn’t the only strange thing about it.

It made no noise. Like someone had pointed a remote at it and pressed mute. Neither heat nor smoke emanated from it. If Laura hadn’t spotted it, Carmilla doubted she would have noticed it despite being right above her head. The sight of the flame was so eerie that she struggled to accept it as real. The animal part of her brain utterly confused that it failed to register to all but one of her senses.

But while the blue flames didn’t look, sound or smell like regular fire, it spread and burned just as regular fire did.

The blue flames extended quickly along the ceiling and down the walls. Blackening and eventually melting everything it touched. She backed away as a part of the ceiling gave way. A huge piece of flaming furniture, a cabinet maybe, fell from the hole directly onto the corpse with a colossal crash. The corpse of Mr Roberts, along with the mass of flies buzzing around him disappeared into the blue flames.

The flames leapt from the fallen furniture to the table at a frightening speed and within moments the whole table was ablaze. Now that she could easily reach out and touch it, its lack of sound and heat felt especially surreal.

A blue tendril shot towards her from the table, like an animal lashing out. She twisted away, avoiding it by inches. The tendril hit the wall, setting it ablaze and from there struck at her again. She dived backwards in a panic and barely avoided it a second time.

Laura rushed to her side to help her up. “What the hell is this?”

“Run,” she yelled. Her survival instincts, momentarily dulled by the strangeness of the flames, finally kicking in. “Out, now!”

They dashed through the burning house. Racing through the living room towards the entranceway to the front door. Without being able to hear or feel the flames coming, it was difficult to know how far away it was and she didn’t particularly feel like turning around to see. They made it to the entranceway, the door Laura had left open right in front of them.

A tendril of flame skipped along the ceiling above them and got to the door first, setting it ablaze. A moment later another tendril lurched from the handle knob, wrapped around the door frame and wrenched it shut.

“Seriously?” Laura shouted next to her.

“The living room had a window,” she said, turning around and pulling Laura with her.
They ran out of the entranceway and back into the living room. The flames had reached it by now and a great deal of it was already on fire. She heard crashes in the other rooms as more of the ceiling gave way. They were still the only sounds the flames had directly caused.

She ran to the window and pulled the curtains. The sunny peaceful suburb through it was utterly at odds with what was going on in the house. She readied herself to jump right into the window, however badly cut up she’d end up. But then Laura appeared at her side wielding the rocking chair she’d seen earlier. Laura swung the chair hard at the window. The window shattered under the blow and Laura dropped the chair to the ground.

Carmilla grabbed her and together they dived through the opening.

They landed in the middle of the front lawn. Out of the nightmare house and back into the peacefully idyllic suburb. She didn’t move for a moment, catching her breath on the soft grass.

“You okay?” she said into the grass and reached her hand out to find Laura next to her.

“Yeah,” Laura gasped out between panting breaths. “You?”

“Yeah.” She turned herself over onto her back and sat up.

The window had become a wall of blue flame as impossible to see through as the curtains had been earlier. But no tendrils moved beyond it. The house’s threshold apparently as far as it was able to go. Without sound or heat, the sight in front of her looked like an unfinished painting of a burning house rather than the actual thing. The artist not having painted in the smoke yet or gotten the colour of the flames quite right.

“What even was that?” Laura said, her tone exasperated.

“Is ‘magical bullshit’ enough of an answer for you? Because that’s all I got.”

They sat together, watching the house silently burn.

“Okay,” Laura said. “What now?”

Chapter End Notes

Hey there. Really sorry again but they'll be no update next week. No excuses but boring life ones I'm afraid. I hope that this one is enjoyable at least and that this little break will stay just that, *little*

Thank you so much for reading, for kudo'ing and especially the comments. Thank you all so much.
Laura

“What do you think they’ll say happened?” Laura asked as she watched the firemen wander around the black rubble of Mr Roberts’ house.

Maybe as not a firefighter herself, she couldn’t tell what important, professional tasks they were carrying out from her casual observation from afar. But to her, they looked to be mostly confused and milling about at random.

“Gas leak, they always go with gas leak,” Carmilla said next to her.

“Probably wondering why a fire would burn every square inch of a house but nothing else,” Kellan said to her other side.

All three of them were leaning back against Kellan’s station wagon, watching the firemen do whatever it is they were doing. The siren on their fire engine had been silent for some time now. Little point to it considering the blue flames had already done their work and disappeared well before they’d arrived.

There was barely anything left of the house. The blue flame doing a much more thorough job than what a regular fire would have. The garage and front lawn, however, remained untouched, like someone building a home had decided to make the garage and plant the lawn first.

“Well, it really wasn’t a fire,” Carmilla said. “It was probably some kind of destructive magical energy that looked like fire to us because that was the only way our mortal brains could possibly comprehend…” She trailed off at seeing the not now look Laura gave her.

“Yeah, it’s weird and they’re probably wondering why the fire did that,” she finished.

The fire engine’s water cannon began spraying the rubble. It felt like a perfunctory action. As if without any other ideas the firemen had decided they might as well pretend they’d done something before leaving.

“I still can’t believe the house was on fire for so long without me even realising it,” Kellan said. “Before you smashed the window, Nancy and I were in her house without a clue.”

“Where did she go? I can’t see her,” Carmilla said.

“I left her back in her house. She’s for sure watching all this from a window. Probably freaking out over there being silent blue fire like I was.”

“Fire that’s sneaky,” Laura said, rubbing her eyes with both hands. “That’s a new one. What should we call that? Ninja fire? Does that work for anyone else?”

Neither responded. She’d have to work on it, she supposed.

“So, did you find anything in there? Before the fire I mean,” Kellan said.

Laura winced before answering. “Yeah, uh, Ms Kellan I’m sorry. We’re like, ninety percent sure he was a huge douche just by the fact he was in charge of the people trying to kill us for about two years. But I get you and the people here thought he was a really nice guy. Mr Roberts is dead. I’m sorry.”
“What?” Kellan exclaimed and brought her hands to her mouth. “He was in there? Oh my God, did the fire get him?”

“He was already dead when we found him. For months at least,” Carmilla said. Then, after giving Kellan a moment to process that. “I saw a photo of him and a little girl inside. Does he have a daughter?”

Laura turned her head to Kellan in interest. She’d also seen the picture and had wondered the same thing.

“No, never mentioned one. He did get a divorce though. I remember when that got dug up by a local journalist. He got very upset by that, I think that was the only time he was angry in public,” Kellan said.

“Hmm,” Laura hummed in thought. She shrugged. “But we’re not trying to discover this guy’s family history. So it doesn’t matter anyway. What does is we lost another lead.”

“I guess you could say it came to a dead end,” Carmilla said.

Laura shook her head and groaned, but a smirk snuck its way onto her face. “Not funny. Someone is dead… and it's a bad pun. So that’s like double negative points.”

Carmilla didn’t reply but instead found Laura’s hand with her own. Their eyes locked for a long moment. Laura felt the question being asked. A quick non-verbal check in after being in a room with a grisly dead body and then almost killed by magical blue flames. Laura smiled lightly and nodded, her forehead brushing against Carmilla’s, certain that she would feel the answer.

“Well, I actually have something. If you two are still in the world right now?” Kellan said.

The bubble burst. They really needed to do something about falling into those with other people around.

“Have something?” Carmilla asked, her tone becoming sharp.

“Ellen came to my house right before I left.”

Kellan said this as if it should have been obviously exciting.

“Ellen?” Laura searched for the name. “Oh, wait Eleonore Gravenberg? The Vice Principal came to your house?”

Kellan nodded. Her eyes bright and her next words came in a rush.

“She said she couldn't ignore her conscience anymore and to give you this.” She reached into her pocket and handed Laura a letter. “You seemed a bit busy before, so I thought I’d wait until you’d finished up with Mr Roberts house.”

“Well, we’re pretty finished up with it now, that’s for sure,” Laura muttered as she took the letter and placed it between her and Carmilla.

*Detectives Hollis and Karnstein.*

_I know I told you that I had to stand behind the decision of Principal Stevenson to not help your private investigation into our missing students. But I no longer in good conscience can stomach such a decision. I have come to believe that members of our faculty, in particular the Principal himself_
May be hiding something about the disappearances. I can’t stand by and watch any longer. I want to help. If you could meet me at my home we can talk further there.

I hope that we will see each other soon and I pray that together we can bring our students back to where they belong.

Eleonore Gravenberg

Underneath her name, she’d written her address. After she and Carmilla finished the letter, Kellan spoke again eagerly.

“Isn’t that great? Ellen is far more important at the school than me. She could be so helpful to us if we go and talk to her.”

Laura couldn’t help but notice that she’d said *us* and *we* instead of *you*.

“Wait a second, how did she know to come to you to get a hold of us?” Laura asked.

A guilty look came across Kellan’s face. “She’s not a dumb woman, she had a hunch that me disappearing and coming back at the same time you guys showed up weren’t disconnected things. And I may have told her she was right.” She put up a palm and raised her voice at seeing Laura and Carmilla’s faces. “But she wants to help! And as you saw in the letter, I kept to the private detective story and only told her that you were still investigating. I’m not dumb either.” She crossed her arms somewhat indignantly.

“I suppose she could be useful,” Carmilla said after a moment. “Might be worth a visit.”

The water cannon stopped and the firemen began to pile back into their truck. Other than watering the front lawn’s grass and plants, Laura was hard pressed to think of anything they’d actually done. Her eyes lingered on the rubble.

"No," she said and pocketed the letter. "We went to the Bishop’s house and got followed by armed goons. We went to this house and now it’s a burned down rubble. Nevermind the mess we made at the school. Could you imagine what would have happened if the Bishops were home when we got there? Or if Nancy had come in with us like she’d wanted to?"

“Char-grilled elderly?” Carmilla offered.

“It’s too dangerous to bring other people in on this. It’s nice if this letter is true and Gravenberg wants to help. But I’m not putting anyone else at risk if I can help it.”

“So what do we do then?” Carmilla asked. “Kinda running short on options here, sweetheart.”

“I don’t know,” she said without thinking. Not remembering Kellan was right there. She turned to her. “Uh, what I mean is, we have so many good options right now it’s tough to choose which lead to follow. We’ll work something out soon-”

“It’s okay,” Kellan interrupted. “I get that you’re struggling at the moment. You don’t have to lie, I’m not going to freak out on you.”

Laura wasn’t quite certain if either of those last two statements were true, even if she found herself nodding at them.

“It’s almost noon,” Kellan said, checking her phone. “Why not think about this while we’re having lunch? I know a good place near here.”
Again with the casual we. Kellan was doing everything she could to neatly turn their pair into a trio. She even was using Laura’s own tactics against her. Inviting them to have lunch while talking about the investigation reminded her strongly of how she’d gotten Kellan to eat something by phrasing it as a chance to hear what they’d learned.

It didn’t irritate her. She didn’t mind Kellan’s company, nor could she blame her for wanting to be as involved in finding her daughter as possible. But the more involved Kellan got in their investigation without Laura telling her the truth of what the goon had said, the more it felt like an active deception rather than a small omission.

Plus, what she’d said about Gravenberg applied as much to Kellan as well. She trusted Carmilla and herself to get through any danger by this point. But bringing anyone else into their adventures made her feel uneasy.

She opened her mouth to politely decline when Carmilla spoke first.

“Lunch sounds good.”

Laura almost jumped in surprise. Certain she’d misheard. If anyone wanted new company less than Carmilla, she didn’t know them. She threw her a questioning look that Carmilla answered with a shrug.

Kellan took Carmilla’s words as an agreement from both of them. Probably ecstatic about the chance to stick with the people who were most likely to find her daughter. She invited them to go in her car and rambled on about how great the food was at the place she’d suggested.

“Whoa, okay no,” Laura said. She didn’t know what Carmilla’s game was here, but she wasn’t going to let this happen. “We haven’t got time for something like this. We need to keep focused and work out our next move. Not go to a restaurant. No, this isn’t happening. I said no—”

“Oh, my God, this is the best steak I’ve ever had in my life,” Laura said around another juicy mouthful.

After finishing the bite, she relaxed back against the cushy double seat. Her steak sat barely half finished on her plate, but her stomach had already tapped out. Never mind the mountain of fries next to it and the stack of bread in the middle of the table. Were portions in America all this large?

Carmilla gave a grunt of agreement next to her on the seat. Her steak, a great deal redder than Laura’s own, mostly devoured with everything else on her plate left untouched.

“Glad you liked it,” Kellan said from across the table. “On the way here, I got a bit worried that you might’ve been vegan.”

“In another life, definitely.” Laura patted her stomach. “But not this one.”

The restaurant Kellan had taken them to was small and comfy. Its doors and windows were left open, allowing the breeze and the odd bird in. The tables were covered in white and red checkered pattern cloths that were matched by the uniforms of the staff. It had a cute old-timey feel that Laura found charming.

“This has always been our favourite restaurant,” Kellan said. “We’ve even come here for birthdays. It’s quieter than all the more popular places. We always found it comfortable and—”
“Cosy,” Laura said, flicking a breadcrumb towards a sparrow near their table.

Kellan smiled. “Yeah, exactly.” She wiped her mouth with a napkin and leant forward on the table. “I didn’t suggest we come here because it’s so nice though. I genuinely thought this might help.”

“You thought coming to this restaurant would help us?”

“No, not this restaurant specifically.” Kellan chuckled lightly. “Hear me out. For the longest time, I would notice that as the day wore on, my students would get worse and worse at figuring things out. They’d struggle with questions that in the morning they’d have no trouble with. At first, I thought they were tired, but then I realized how poor the families so many of them were coming from. They weren’t tired, they were hungry. Most weren’t bringing anything from home or had any money to buy something at the cafeteria.”

She became animated during her story, passion in her eyes and her voice strong and full without falling into the nervous babble they’d seen from her a number of times.

“So, I started bringing snacks into my classroom. Fruit, little sandwiches, crackers, anything really. That increased grades more than any teaching class I ever took. And so I learned that when you’re struggling with a hard problem, sometimes the best thing to do is sit your ass down, eat something and then take another look at it.”

Laura thought on that for a moment. She decided she liked it.

“Sounds to me like you’re a pretty good teacher. Bet your students love you. A genuine Ms Honey,” Laura said.

Kellan waved the words away. A humble gesture.

“Not good enough. The last few months things had gotten better, but.” She sighed. “It’s been hard not to feel like I was failing. We weren’t helping the students enough at all.”

“Kept trying though, that’s worth something.”

“I like to think so,” Kellan said through a small smile.

“Yeah, I found I learned a lot better when I was alone and no one could bother me,” Carmilla said somewhat abruptly and went right back to her steak.

Kellan chuckled again. “That probably works too.”

The conversation petered out for a while. All three picking at what remained on their plates.

Screw it. What was the harm in letting Kellan in on a bit of their planning?

“Alright.” Laura moved her plate to the side and brought out her tablet. “Then let’s take another look at this.”

Kellan leant forward eagerly and Carmilla shifted sideways towards them.

“Let’s start with that Roberts guy. It can’t be a coincidence that he’s lying dead in his house with all this going on. This has Corvae written all over—”

“Corvae?” Kellan interrupted, confused.

“Oh, right. Well, you see.”
The next five minutes were spent detailing the broad points of what Corvae was and their experiences with them at Silas and Florence.

“So, they’re assholes who don’t much mind killing people to get their hands on whatever shiny magic thing they want,” Carmilla summed up at the end.

“And these IDSS people are a part of it?”

“Yep.”

“I’m not surprised that Corvae is here,” Laura said. “What doesn’t make sense is why one of their head guys is dead. He had to have been dead for months at least right?”

Carmilla nodded.

“And the first kid was taken a couple of months ago. There’s no way there isn’t a connection, but I can’t see it. Who murdered him?”

“The magic blue fire thing points in the same direction as whoever used a Banshee as a security feature,” Carmilla said.

“But we are so sure that was Stevenson. I mean, it was his desk. But why would he murder the boss of the people who are helping him?”

Carmilla shrugged. “The bad guys don’t only disagree with the good guys, Laura. Often they fight other bad guys just as much, if not more. Corvae and Stevenson working together, doesn’t mean this Stevenson and Roberts didn’t have a falling out. Assholes often find ways to get into arguments with each other. Maybe this argument went bad.”

Laura mulled that over. It made sense, but there was more guesswork to it than she liked.

“Yeah, it’s a good theory. It sucks that there’s nowhere to go with it. Can’t ask Roberts, can’t search his house. Can’t ask Stevenson or the IDSS goons either, ‘cause, you know, they’d try and kill us. Like you said before, dead end.”

“Well, we still have that data stick with Beattie,” Carmilla said.

“We found a data stick in Abigail Bishop’s tree house, but we had to give to Detective Beattie,” Laura said to Kellan before she inevitably asked. “She hasn’t gotten back to us yet. Maybe she changed her mind and decided to cut us out. I don’t really want to push her by going back to the police station or calling. It was probably a huge decision for her not to arrest us.”

“What about Mel? She might find something in those Silas books if we give her some time.”

“I’m sure she’s doing her best, but we haven’t got time to wait on seeing if she can find out more.”

“So, a dead end with Roberts and unsure about Beattie. Can’t go back to the school or go after Stevenson directly because it’s too dangerous for us and can’t go to this Gravenberg because it’s too dangerous for her. What’s left then?” Carmilla asked. From her voice, it was clear she didn’t expect an answer.

The table went quiet again. A thought struck her.

“The swamp,” Laura spoke into the silence.

Both Carmilla and Kellan looked to her with puzzled expressions.

“Okefenokee,” Kellan corrected.

“Yeah, that. The swamp that the Turner boy got taken in. The police couldn’t find anything, but they weren’t looking for what we would be. We should check it out, see what we can find. If we can work out what took the Turner boy. That might get us closer to finding out what’s really going on.”

Carmilla seemed less than enthused. “You want us to go to a swamp? And it was probably another spirit like the banshee or a spell like those flames.”

Laura shook her head firmly. “No, those things are temporary right? The flames did exactly what they needed to do and left. And the Banshee was a onetime use, you said that yourself. This monster took Phillip Turner over a month ago and was seen by Lexi and Abigail before they got taken as well.” She tilted her head to Kellan. “They described it right? You said so in the car on the way to the airport back in Canada.”

Kellan face lit up at being involved in the conversation. “Yes, it howled like a wolf-”

“But stood up on two legs, yeah,” Laura finished, finding her notes on the tablet. “Did they say where they saw it?”

“No,” Kellan said. “I should have let her tell me, but I was so mad that she’d gone out there with Abigail alone. Even without a monster, the Okefenokee is not a safe place to wander around in. They shouldn’t have even been there. The place was shut to the public after what happened with Phillip. The people in charge there want to be certain of what happened to the Turner boy before they open it up to visitors again. Lexi and Abigail must have really got up to some mischief to sneak their way in.”

“It’s not a spirit or a spell, it must be some kind of animal, magical or not. Which would have to mean it’s trained in some way right? To grab a kid and take them to where Stevenson or Corvae want them? This is worth a little look.”

Surprisingly, it was Kellan and not Carmilla who spoke a dissenting voice first.

“Okay sweetie, I think you might be a little confused about what the Okefenokee actually is. We’re talking about the biggest blackwater swamp in the entirety of the United States. I think something like a hundred miles each way. It’s not something you can have ‘a little look’ at. Oh, and there’s like a billion ‘gators there.”

“So, not worth our time. Got it,” Carmilla said.

“Yes, worth our time. Absolutely worth our time,” Laura insisted. “Okay, so it’s a big swamp, we’ll get a boat. It’s closed to visitors, so we sneak in. These aren’t impossible problems for us.”

“We’re going to sneak in a boat?” Carmilla asked, her tone amused.

“Okay, so I haven’t quite thought it through yet. But I’m sure we can find a way. This is worth checking out. Even if takes some effort doing.”

“Well,” Kellan said, her face thoughtful. “Phillip’s father, Peter Turner pretty much runs that swamp. I bet he’d let you in if you told him it was about finding his son.”

“See? We’re getting somewhere already. Can you call Mr Turn-” She paused and took a breath, before looking to Carmilla. “What do you think?”
Carmilla squeezed her leg under the table for a second in appreciation before she spoke.

“You certain the Turner guy can get us in?” she asked to Kellan who nodded. She turned to Laura. “This thing, according to what the Turner’s told the police, can apparently create fog at will and ‘shake the ground.’ Are you sure you’d rather get on its trail than try talking to Gravenberg or wait a little longer to see if Beattie or Mel comes through for us?” Her question sounded almost like a plea.

Laura held firm and shook her head. “It’s too dangerous to bring any more people in on this and we don’t have time to wait.”

Carmilla gave a long sigh. “Swamps are most definitely not my thing. But fine, if we’re too moral to take up Gravenberg’s offer then I guess it’s all we got right now. I agree, let’s go to this swamp.”

Laura planted a kiss on her cheek. She dragged Carmilla into a lot of things she didn’t want to do and travelling to a swamp probably ranked pretty high on the list of things that she would normally avoid like the plague. It was important to Laura to never take Carmilla doing these things for granted. She followed up the kiss by finding Carmilla’s hand and taking into her own, massaging the back of it with her fingers. Then to Kellan, she said.

“Can you call Mr Turner?”

“Yes, but.” Kellan paused. Somewhat melodramatically so and for a moment Laura worried there would be another wrinkle. “Only if you agree to try the cheesecake before we leave.”

The levity was well timed and Laura chuckled before they both agreed.

“Ever been to a swamp before?” she asked Carmilla after Kellan left the table.

“Once or twice. My main memory is when Mother sent Mattie and I into one to find some… thing, I don’t even remember what it was exactly. Neither of us particularly enjoyed it. One night we started sniping at each other and she pushed me off the boat. When I finally got back on board I was wearing even more black than I usually do. Found out then that vampires aren’t the only things that suck people’s blood.”

Laura made a sympathetic sound and shifted closer to Carmilla on their seat. “I promise to never push you off a boat. Even if we’re arguing about something.”


Laura smirked and teased Carmilla with a couple of probing fingers, walking them across her chest. “Well, I mean, unless you said something really awful like Harry Potter was a moron who should have died in the first story or that Princess Bride was dumb. Oh, wait, you did say those terrible things.”

“Suppose I should be thankful we haven’t watched any movies on a cruise yet.” Carmilla’s eyes glittered in enjoyment.

“You’d be at the bottom of the ocean. Where all the Slytherins and people who don’t like Princess Bride belong.”

Carmilla laughed and kissed her.

“Thank you for backing me up and agreeing on this,” Laura said once Carmilla eased back. “I know it’s not exactly something you’d be looking forward to. But it’s all I can think of right now.”
“It’s not that bad of an idea. Try and find out what that monster is and see if that helps us work out what else is going on. And anyway, Kellan did initially come to us to track down a monster. I guess we’re finally doing just that.”

“Hollis and Karnstein: Monster Hunters. We should get uniforms.”

They relaxed on the bench, slowly but surely leaning towards each other. Every second that past, Carmilla’s shoulder seemed more and more inviting.

“Have to admit, Soccer Mum didn’t have such a bad idea in coming here,” Carmilla said.

Laura tilted her head. “Still wondering why you agreed so easily to it. Unless you’re warming up to ‘Soccer Mum’ after all?”

Carmilla shrugged. “Maybe I was hungry.”

Laura didn’t press. Carmilla was pretty good at being vague and noncommittal when she wanted to be.

The dessert ended up being as delicious as the main meal. The mood of the table became relaxed. Much like it had when they’d had dinner at Kellan’s house. The conversation turned light and casual. A break from the seriousness of the current situation.

“I’m glad, you both enjoyed the cheesecake,” Kellan said after Laura had completed the last bite her stomach would allow. “Considering I blackmailed you into trying it.”

“It’s fine,” Laura said. “You know, my parents actually used to do something similar at a restaurant we’d always go to back in Canada.”

She felt Carmilla perk up next to her.

“Really?” Kellan asked

“Oh, yeah, I, it’s nothing really. Boring story.” She felt suddenly self-conscious at the immediate interest both Carmilla and Kellan had taken in her offhand remark. But both their faces showed such curiosity mixed with encouragement, that she found herself continuing regardless.

“Well, next to the restaurant was this playground. And by playground I really mean ‘play wonder palace of fun’, it had everything a kid could ever want. I would have been around seven or eight back then, which by the way, is a totally appropriate age for enjoying playgrounds so you can’t make fun of me.”

She glared at them both as if they were about to do just that.

“I was always trying to eat the food we ordered as fast as I could. So I could get out there and play on it. But my parents didn’t like me going alone so I’d pester them to eat faster. God, I must have been so annoying. Dad, he would try to eat faster, but Mum.”

She stopped abruptly and the word hung in the air. For a second the relaxed mood of the table threatened to shift before the words refused to stay in her throat.

“Mum was smart. She’d order dessert for me. Whatever I wanted. And every time, it took just long enough for me to eat it for them to finish as well. And then we’d all be ready and we’d go. I’d stay on that playground for hours. I remember trying to find out how fast I could go through everything, timing myself like I was training for the Playground Olympics or something.” She laughed. The
words coming out easily now.

“It would usually be dark by the time I was finally willing to leave. Dad would need to get back home, work stuff. Mum would be there the whole time though, as long as I wanted to stay. It’s not like she didn’t have things to do, she worked as well. I can’t imagine how much of her free time she had to waste watching over me while I was on that dumb playground. I probably should have thanked her for that.”

Her eyes had glazed over at some point without her realizing. She shook herself out of the memory. “Sorry, like I said, pretty boring story.”

But neither of the faces looking at her showed the slightest sign of boredom. Rather, Kellan had a kind smile and Carmilla’s eyes were adoring.

“Or maybe it wasn't, I don't know.” She shrugged and felt herself redden.

“I liked it,” Kellan said. “Lexi wasn’t that big on playgrounds but there’s this little park passed the the house across the street from ours. A minute or two away.” Kellan leaned an elbow on the table and brought a hand up to her chin and mouth as she reminisced. “She’s always loved going to it. There’s a duck pond that when she was little, she’d run around over and over, chasing the ducks from one side to the other. And there’s a barbeque that’s been around for years yet works so good. We must have cooked an entire farm on that grill by now. Oh, and that goddamn tree!”

Kellan’s cheeks seemed to glow as her smile grew wider.

“This grumpy old oak tree right in the middle of the park that Lexi decided one day that she wanted to climb. Every single time. All the way to top. The heart attacks from that were so brutal. Years off my life every time I turned around to find her halfway up it.”

The restaurant wasn’t empty. There were diners at other tables, staff walking about and a cacophony of sounds coming from the kitchen. But by now Laura had tuned them out to such a degree it might as well have only been the three of them in the room. Her ears hearing only Kellan’s reminiscing and her eyes seeing only her imaginations version of Kellan’s park. The words were pouring out Kellan, who seemed as unable to stop them as Laura had with her own story before.

“Do you two still go there now?” Laura asked.

“Yeah, not as much together. Not since…” She trailed off. “But she goes by herself a lot as well. To do her homework or one of her runs. Which is fine now of course but, I remember the first time she tried to go herself. She was maybe six? Seven? This tiny little girl up and deciding she wanted to go to the park and if her parents weren’t taking her she’d go herself.” She stopped to chuckle. “Spotted her from the window already across the road. No fear at all.

“I remember being so terrified she’d try it again. I turned into one of those old grannies from a folktale. I told her there was a monster that took little girls that went to the park alone. Which was insane, I have no idea why I went with that instead just punishing her. But there I was, describing this imaginary girl snatching monster. It worked though, she never did it again.”

Her face darkened and the mood darkened along with it. There was a long pause before she spoke again.

“When I didn't find her when I woke up that morning, the park was the first place I went. Didn’t even call the police first, I ran right out the door in my pyjamas. I can try to rationalize it by the fact she went there so often, it wasn’t a bad place to check. But if I’m honest, I couldn’t get that memory
of telling her about a monster out of my mind.”

She shook her head and looked upwards.

“It’s so stupid. I made up that story on the spot years ago and yet as ran towards the park, I wasn’t thinking about kidnappers or her running away or anything like that. I was thinking about that made up monster, taking little girls in a park.”

The glow around her cheeks and the smile were gone, as well as the positive demeanour she’d presented to them since showing up Mr Robert’s house. It should have been obvious how much of a mask it was but seeing it fall away so suddenly to reveal the same desperate, distressed mother underneath still shocked Laura. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and sniffed.

“I don’t know if she got taken at that park. But I do know that a monster was what took her. Whether it’s a human one or a literal one. And I know that I have to get her back, no matter what.”

Laura found herself unable to meet Kellan’s eyes. Instead, she swallowed and tried to speak.

“Ms Kellan, I, I’m sorry but I have to-”

Carmilla stamped on her foot and squeezed her hand sharply.

“Go to the bathroom,” she finished abruptly and got up from the table.

Laura barely glanced upward the whole way to the bathroom. Apparently, meeting the eyes of even random strangers was too difficult right now.

*Cost them another one, still got two spare.* The goon’s words rang through her mind.

She went up to the nearest sink and splashed water on her face. The bathroom door swung open and Carmilla entered holding a small cardboard sign with ‘Out of Order’ scribbled on it. Without saying a word, she hung the sign on the door’s front handle and shut it.

“How did you even manage to steal that without anyone noticing?” Laura asked. “Wait, nevermind that. Why did you stop me back there? She deserves to know, it’s not fair to her for us to not to tell her what we found out on that highway.”

“What’s not fair, is that her daughter's been taken,” Carmilla said, moving forward into the bathroom and leaning against a stall. “The only thing that’s going to make that right is bringing her daughter back. How is telling her that we think two of the kids are already dead going to help make that happen?”

“It’s not about what would help or what would be the…*pragmatic thing* to do. It’s about what’s right. Telling her is the right thing to do because to do otherwise, is us lying. We can pretend it’s not, but that’s what it is. I know having secrets is second nature to you, but keeping ones like this, is the same as lying.”

Her voice had started to rise and her face felt hot. Carmilla, on the other hand, appeared perfectly calm, the heat from Laura’s words washing over her.

“You’re right, not telling her is lying. I’m not going to pretend anything else. But that lie is what’s keeping that lady going. And only barely. She’s one of the only people willing to help us here and-”

“So what, we lie to her to keep her *useful*?”
“It sucks. It really does. But right now it sucks for us, not her. Well, okay, more you than me because of how ridiculously much you care. Right now, you’re the one who feels bad. But if you tell her, all you’re going to do is make her life worse, Laura. And I think you need to ask yourself whether you’ll be doing that for her, because it’s the right thing to do or for yourself, so you don’t have to feel guilty.”

The words hit home. She hadn’t thought about it that way. Too wrapped up in her own sense of guilt to realize that maybe wanting to tell Kellan the truth was more about her than either what was right or what was best for Kellan. Despite everything she’d learned since going to Silas, it was still so easy for her to fall into the trap of seeing the world in black and white, good or bad.

Lucky then, that her fiance was someone with three centuries of life experience to help her out with that problem.

“Well, look at that,” Laura said after a long pause. “Hypocritical selfishness wrapped up in self-righteous proclamations of right and wrong. A Laura Hollis special.”

“Hey.” Carmilla pushed off from the stall and walked over to her. “Trying her best to do the right thing, even when she isn’t sure what that is. That’s the Laura Hollis special.”

Laura slid her arms around Carmilla’s waist. “I’m sorry. You were trying to help and I bit your head off. Thank you for stopping me at the table. You’re right, telling her would have been for me not her. We probably should have discussed it more than not all, now that I think about it.”

“Eh, most of the arguments I’ve had were with people who could literally bite my head off. So that was no big deal. And you’re welcome.”

Laura rested her forehead on Carmilla’s shoulder. So many desperate people were counting on her and Carmilla. The brave happy facade that Kellan had tried to put on. A facade that Laura imagined was what she was actually like during normal times. Kellan would never be truly like that again without her daughter. They were shells right now, she realized. Kellan and the other parents. Their cores ripped out by Stevenson and Corvae for a purpose she didn’t yet know.

Those were the stakes then. Succeed and they could heal them, bring back what they’d lost. To give them the chance to have more happy memories like the ones Kellan had described at that park. Fail and they would remain broken shells forever.

She sighed and buried her head deeper against Carmilla’s shoulder. “We have to find those kids, Carm. These people are broken without them.”

“I know. And we will.”
The Okefenokee’s main car park was currently such in name only as Carmilla drove the bike through it, the only space already taken of the many available in the wide open park being claimed by a small group of birds fighting over a plastic bottle.

Not bothering to pick a particular spot, she stopped the bike in the middle of the park. Who was going to tell them to do otherwise?

The drive from where they’d left the bike to eat lunch with Kellan to here had taken a few hours. Most of which had them travelling down an expansive interstate highway similar to the one they’d taken up to the Bishop’s house and ended their skirmish on with the IDSS goons. A wide flat grey surface with trees as far as the eye could see on both sides.

A comfortable drive filled with lovely views, the journey would end up being nicer than their destination she was certain. She’d spent most of the time driving here trying to find a reason to turn back and go in the other direction. She felt a little bitter that she hadn’t managed to think of one. Not with Laura hell-bent on taking immediate action and to avoid placing anyone else in Corvae’s crosshairs by bringing them into their investigation.

So instead, here they were. Barrelling head first into potential danger for the sakes of others. It wasn’t as if she wanted to give up and forget the missing kids and their parents, but the danger she and Laura were putting themselves in apparently all alone was beginning to grate.

Or perhaps her issue right at this moment was a little more shallow than she wanted to admit. She’d downplayed her last experience in a swamp with Mattie at the restaurant. While she barely remembered why Mother had sent them to whatever cursed bog they’d gone to, what remained vivid was the stink, the sticky and wet humidity, the mosquitoes and most of all the damned leeches.

And that swamp didn’t even have a monster in it.

“Guess Kellan was right about the place being closed,” Laura said. “I thought there would still be some people here.”

“Or at least one. She also said the Turner guy would be here to meet us,” Carmilla said, looking around at the entrance area.

Onwards from the car park, the road curved into a cul de sac, at the end of which sat what Carmilla imagined was some kind of entrance building. She couldn’t see or hear anyone around. The place felt more abandoned than closed.

Without much else to do, they began moving towards the building. A small brown structure that looked bigger than it was due to its large roof that extended much further than its walls. Trees and bushes encroached upon it on all sides. As they walked, Carmilla took a moment to take in the sheer amount of greenery in all directions. It felt like everything man made here was in danger of being swallowed up at a moment’s notice.

Laura let out a gasp and grabbed her arm.

“Holy crap.”

An alligator lumbered out of the bushes in front of them. Its sudden appearance caused her to tense up, but it ignored them entirely. Instead, it manoeuvred its body onto the path towards the building.
with slow, lazy steps. There it stopped, a few metres before them, so still that it may as well have been a large black shiny rock.

It’s disinterest in them clear, it didn’t seem much of a threat. But neither particularly felt like testing that disinterest by getting closer.

“Yeah, thanks, buddy,” Laura said. “All the places you could have chosen, but you had to plonk yourself down there, huh?”

Carmilla shrugged. “Oh well, the guy’s not here and this thing is blocking our way. Guess we’ll have to leave and try to think of something-”

“Don’t be afraid,” a voice called out. “It’s fine, he’s not gonna hurt you.”

She looked up from the alligator to see a man coming from around the back of the building. His voice and moustache were familiar.

“No danger at all, I promise,” Mr Turner said as he walked towards them. His hands pointing upwards. “Just wants the sun. Isn't that right, Trevor?” He reached the alligator and crouched down to give it a couple of rough pats to its underbelly. Its jaws opened slowly in response, but it seemed more out of mild irritation than anger. “Trevor’s always finding the most awkward places to lie down. We think he secretly seeks them out. We’ve had to get him out of the parking lot more times than I can count.”

“How do you know this one’s ‘Trevor’?” Laura asked. “Aren’t there a lot of alligators here?”

“Oh, you learn to tell them apart after a while.” He stood back up and stepped over ‘Trevor the Alligator’ towards them.

“Kellan called to say we were coming?” Carmilla said.

Despite her efforts to persuade them otherwise, once Kellan had driven them back to where they had left their bike they’d parted ways. Laura adamant that a potentially dangerous journey into a swamp was not something she was okay with bringing her along on.

Turner nodded. “Yeah, but I was already on my way. I still have some staff on hand here in the swamp. A few for general maintenance, but most are here on their own time looking for my boy. The police might have called off the search, and everyone seems so sure that whatever took him is connected with the other kids. But if they turn out to be wrong and he’s still here, then I’m going to find him. One way or another.”

She wasn’t sure if she saw determination or resignation in his eyes. It might have been both.

“If you two think coming here yourselves will help us find him then absolutely you can come in. Whatever it is you need you got it. But first I gotta check in with my people. They-”

A radio on his belt squawked to life. “Peter, where the hell are you? I’m telling you again, we’ve got a serious goddamn situation and we need you here.”

Turner brought up the radio to his mouth. “Yeah, I heard you the first ten times. I’m coming as fast as I can, five minutes and I’m there.” He switched off the radio and put it back on his belt.

“So, that doesn’t sound good,” Laura said.

“No, it doesn’t,” Turner said. “That’s why I was already on my way here. I can't fathom what the
issue is. We’ve been searching for weeks and found nothing. Now suddenly I’m being shouted at to get over there pronto.” He rubbed his eyes for a second. “I was supposed to stay home today, my wife’s not doing too well without our son. But, we’re already short handed from this virus going around and now there’s whatever this problem is.” He waved his hand vaguely.

“How about this? You can follow me to where we’ve set up a camp and after I find out what’s going on, we’ll see about getting you two a boat to where my boy got taken, that sound good?”

“Sure, fine with us,” Laura said.

As Turner started walking back the other way while beckoning them to follow, Carmilla spoke in a sotto voce to Laura.

“Why, do I get the feeling that whatever that problem is, it’s going to become our problem?”

“Because you’re cynical and always jumping to the worst conclusions. Also, because you’re probably right,” Laura answered.

Despite Turner’s assurances, Carmilla couldn’t help but place herself between Laura and the alligator as they walked quickly around it with as wide a berth as they could manage. It snorted as they went passed as if it were amused by their unease.

“C’mon, it’s actually looking pretty peaceful right now, even ‘Trevor’ back there,” Laura said. “It hasn’t gone all ‘Black Lagoon’ or ‘Dread Marshes’ on us yet.”

“How many pop cultural references relating to swamps should I be expecting from you today?”

“Oh, just all of them.”

The trek to the camp didn’t take long. A short walk around the edge of the swamp and over a couple of boardwalks that seemed way too close to the water considering the number of dinosaur-sized jaws attached to stumpy legs and a tail were apparently swimming around.

“That building you saw is for new arrivals,” Turner had said as they followed him. “Where you can buy tickets and maps and stuff like that. Not useful when the place is closed, so it’s empty right now. Our camp is where most of us are staying when they’re here.”

The camp, sitting in a clearing of brown dirt in the midst of the oppressive vegetation, turned out to be much bigger than Carmilla had expected. Two caravans sat in the back of it and the area was filled with benches full of equipment, colourful tents and at its front a large wooden jetty. A half dozen canoes were attached to it on the water.

The place was abuzz with activity. Carmilla counted at least ten people, all wearing loose-fitting clothing and sturdy looking boots. Most of them were clustered around a bench with radio equipment on it. While another two were readying a canoe.

They were arguing, that much was clear from their raised voices and animated body language. Carmilla could feel the tension in the air. Whatever the ‘situation’ was, it wasn’t a minor issue, she was certain.

“Alright, I’m here,” Turner announced.
At that, every pair of eyes turned to the new arrivals. Followed by what felt like a collective sigh of relief from the whole camp.

“For Christ sake, Peter,” one of them said. “Took you long enough.”

“I got here as fast as I could, so shut up,” Turner said.

“Who are those people?” another asked, motioning towards Laura and herself.

“Don’t worry about that. Tell me what’s going on.”

One of the two who had been readying a canoe answered him as they both walked back to the group. “Greg hasn’t answered his radio for hours. He went out early in the morning and no one’s heard from him since. But Jess-

“I heard howls,” another interrupted, a woman with a white face and wide eyes. “Like you described to us. ‘Twas so chilling, like nothing I’ve ever heard. I was out near where he was and I called on his radio. Nothing. I tried to get a closer look but there was this fog-

“How could there have been fog?” one asked derisively, motioning at the sky. “It’s a clear goddamn day. You heard something that spooked you and you imagined it.”

“I imagined fog? Do you even hear yourself? How about this, asshole, you go out there and tell me how much I imagined it-”

The camp exploded into argument. Too many raised voices to work out what anyone was saying.

“Enough!” Turner shouted. It had an immediate effect. They all stopped and looked to him.

“Where was this fog?” he asked the woman.

“Same place where Phillip was taken. Greg wanted to check for tracks again. Idiot, it’s been weeks, but you know how he is. Never wants to admit defeat.”

Turner went silent. The people here clearly were desperate for him to tell them what to do. But from his face, Carmilla didn’t think he knew himself.

“Uh, Mr Turner, Peter,” Laura spoke and when he turned around to look at her, she continued. “I know this will sound crazy, but you have to let us handle this.”

Oh hell. She knew this was why they’d come here, but her stomach still churned at Laura’s words.

“What?” Turner said, confusion on his face. “What do you mean by that? Let you two go up there yourselves? That’s nuts. You’ve never even been here before and what exactly are you two gonna do anyway?”

“Like I said, I know this sounds crazy, but none of you here can go looking for whatever that thing is. It’s not something you can handle.”

“Oh, but you two little girls can?”

“I am trying to keep you all safe.” Annoyance flickered across Laura’s face but she kept her voice even. “Please listen to me. You said all you saw was fog that day but I don’t think that’s true. I think you saw something that didn’t make sense, just like the fog and the howling and the earth shaking didn’t make sense. It’s okay that you and your wife didn’t say anything. You didn’t want to sound insane, I get that. But if you keep ignoring what you saw and go up there with any of these people.
You’re putting them all in danger.”

Turner said nothing. Carmilla could see a battle behind his eyes. If she was honest, she half hoped Laura would fail to convince him and someone other than them would have to go up there, though from her experience that seemed unlikely.

“We deal with this kind of weird stuff all the time,” Laura pressed. “We are the best chance that guy up there has if he’s still alive. And us going up alone is also the best chance of us being able to find those kids, including your son.”

That did it. Turner took a deep breath and looked at the ground. “I only saw it for a moment, a shadow in the fog. It was tall, taller than any man. I thought it might be a bear at first but the, the shape was all wrong and... its head.”

Laura reached out and placed a hand on his arm. “It's okay. We can handle this.”

He looked at them both. “You two know how to canoe?”

“Yeah,” Carmilla said and received a grateful smile from Laura in return. “I’ve done it before.”

The people in the camp broke out into argument again. Most of them voicing a mix of confusion and disapproval over who they were, why they were being listened to and why they would be going up the swamp alone. Turner silenced them again, though this time with a raised hand instead of a voice.

“Still my swamp, still my decision. I don’t care if none of you understand. Get them a canoe ready and as many supplies as it can take.”

Half an hour later and they were on the water, Carmilla paddling their borrowed white canoe over the dark water while Laura studied the map they’d been given.

Tall trees, springing up from the water and many of them with the strange shaggy leaves that Laura had taken a liking to, were on both sides of their canoe. Channeling would be canoers into narrow, snaking paths through the swamp.

Turner had used a bright red marker to trace over the paths they should take to get to where his son and now another man had gone missing. A small island, Carmilla hadn’t bothered to remember the name Turner had called it by, surrounded by wetland that was only possible to get to by canoe. Unless one wanted to swim with the alligators. Why exactly a place like that, surrounded by millennia-old predators in the middle of a swamp, was considered such a great camping spot for tourists would most like end up an eternal mystery to her.

Some of the tree’s branches reached across the water paths above their heads, forming a canopy that was at once beautiful but also constricting. More than a few times they needed to duck or manoeuvre the canoe around them.

Water lilies floated around them by the thousands, adding colour to the otherwise black surface of the water. Small shapes in the corners of her eyes were constantly flashing from one lily to another. Every so often a bird would swoop down and one of those shapes would be in its beak as it flew back up.

They weren’t the only things hunting out here.
“Okay,” Laura said. “This looks pretty simple on the map. Follow the red line to the little island.”

“Once we get there that might not be the only thing that’s red.”

Laura put the map down. “I’m sorry I got us into this without asking you first. But I was afraid if I didn’t speak up right away those people were about to go looking for whatever this thing is. Couldn’t let them do that, it’s way too dangerous for them.”

“It’s pretty dangerous for us too, Laura. Remember what I said back in the spa? About us not being invincible?”

“Of course, I remember that. But who has a better chance of dealing with this kind of thing, us or those people back in that camp?”

Carmilla grunted, Laura had a point there. Plus, she had agreed to come here, so technically they had already talked it through.

“And look at all this cool stuff they gave us.” Laura started rummaging through the equipment. “Flares, flare gun, more flares, okay a lotta flares here, a radio, flashlight, that scary looking knife that I’d imagine Rambo would use if he was out here.”

Laura motioned to the survival knife Turner had given to Carmilla specifically right before they’d set off. Saying that she looked the more violent of the pair. She wasn’t sure whether that was a compliment or not, but she appreciated having a weapon all the same. Turner had also given her a neat little holster to hold the knife in on her hip.

“Apparently Lexi and Abigail, a couple of high schoolers, encountered this thing and lived. I bet they didn’t have anything like the things we have in this canoe. Nevermind our… our”

“Our?”

“Our experience in dealing with this kind of thing and our, uh, talents and… skills.”

“Oh, our experience and talents and skills. I’m sorry, is this real life or one of those, what did you call them? Character sheets for that game you wanted us to play sometime. You know, the one with the little toys you move across a table.”

“Oh, so I’d rather the term ‘role-playing narrative experience’ than game and I think you’d really enjoy it you gave it a chance. And if we could find a couple more players.”

“I think I’d prefer to be the one in charge that tries to kill everyone.”

“I think you mean the GM that tries to make the game fun for everyone.”

“The dumb characters all die horribly violent deaths, what isn’t fun about that?”

Laura laughed. “We’ll have to get back to that some other time. Seriously, though. Am I wrong in thinking that we’re getting pretty good at handling ourselves? Look at all the stuff we’ve survived through. It can’t all just be luck.”

“We’ve done some pretty impressive things, I’ll grant you. But we don’t even know what we’re dealing with here.”

Laura nodded. “Yeah, that’s true. Are you sure there’s nothing that comes to mind from what we know? Anything at all?”
It wasn’t that nothing came to mind, it was that what information they had was so vague that too much did. Large howling creature? Perhaps a Minotaur or any number of beasts she’d encountered over the years. Something that could create fog? An ignis fatuus maybe.

She shook her head and Laura sighed.

“Well, at least if this random island in the middle of a swamp is where it finally ends for us, we’re getting to see some beautiful sights before it happens.” She gestured around them. “When I heard swamp I basically pictured Dagobah. But this is really nice. The sun’s shining through the canopy, cool breeze, the water’s dark but it’s not dirty and look at these lilies. It’s like being in a water garden.”

She wasn’t wrong. So far the Okefenokee had turned out to be far more pleasant than Carmilla had expected. Less evil noxious bog full of insects and leeches and more idyllic outdoor getaway one might put on a postcard.

“It is a lot nicer than I thought,” Carmilla conceded. “Though the fact we aren’t being eaten alive by mosquitoes or being swarmed by alligators makes it nicer than I thought it would be.”

Abruptly, Laura reached down a hand and plucked one of the flowers out of the water. After shaking it a little to get the water off, she leaned across the canoe and tucked it behind Carmilla’s ear. When she went back to her side of the canoe, she had a bashful smile on her face.

“You’ve given me so many flowers back in Styria. My turn to give you one.”

“How does it look?” Carmilla asked in a purr. Her voice seemed to default to that whenever Laura got even remotely bashful.

Laura blushed and nodded. “You look good. I mean it looks—” She smirked and bit her lip. “You look good.”

For someone so formidable, Laura could be so endearingly cute. Even after being together for a good while now she could still get tongue-tied around her.

She flashed Laura a smile. “So do you.” And was rewarded with Laura blushing even darker.

The swamp turned out to be as big as Kellan had warned, and they quickly realised this canoe trip would not be a short one.

Luckily, among the many flares they’d been given, which along with the radio Carmilla was certain were Turner’s unsubtle way of telling them to call for help if they ran into trouble, were a few bottles of water and a pack of food bars.

Ever helpful, Laura had insisted on taking turns with the paddling. She picked it up quickly and a couple of hours later it was Laura paddling as Carmilla relaxed with her knees up in front of them. She crisscrossed her hands behind her head to make something of a pillow. When she closed her eyes she could almost pretend she was sunbathing on a beach.

“Make sure to tell me when you get tired,” she said. “I’ll take over.”

“And ruin how relaxed you look right now? I’d sooner wake up a sleeping kitten,” Laura said. “But, now that we have a bit of time. Maybe I can ask again why you were so okay with going to lunch with Kellan? It’s only that’s kinda super not like you.”

Carmilla opened one eye.
“You like her,” she said simply.

Laura misunderstood that so completely it was actually quite comical. To her anyway at least.

“Wait, what? No! That's ridiculous. Of course, I don’t—”

Carmilla laughed. “I meant as a friend, Cupcake. Like with Mel and Kirsch and Amaya. You like her, you two get along.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, I guess so. She’s been nothing but kind and helpful to us and yeah, I get that might mostly be because we’re looking for her daughter. But.” She paused her paddling to shrug. “She seems nice, and a great mum. Look at how hard she’s trying to save her daughter. Now, I know you probably find her boring, banal even.”

“Boring and banal?” Carmilla said through a chuckle. “Sweetheart, let’s be honest here. I’ve basically felt that way about every single one of your friends since we first met. But that’s not important, how you feel about them is.” She sat up and leaned forward, finding Laura’s eyes as she did so. “I mean what I say in all those ‘don’t be a dark loner like me conversations.’ You deserve to have more people than just one person in your life. As much as I like having you all to myself.”

She sighed.

“So maybe I can brave a lunch or two with Kellan, or a get together with Mel and Kirsch or going off to the middle of Italy to check on a Satyr and her goat kids. And their weird friend in the woods for that matter.”

“Friend in the woods? What friend? I don’t remember that, must not have been that memorable, moving on,” Laura said quickly.

“Laura Hollis has too big of a heart not to share it with the world. Even if I’d like to think I’ve captured a large part of it.”

The sun may have been shining down upon them through the canopy, but the expression on Laura’s face was warmer.

“How is it, that you can start a speech by saying you find all my friends boring and end it with me wanting to kiss you?”

Carmilla chuckled. “Ancient former vampire seductress remember?”

The twisting narrow waterways began to widen after a while. The tall trees and the canopy they provided making way for yellow and green reeds as far as the eye could see. It made navigation a little more difficult but they’d been told that would happen and there were enough recognisable landmarks that the map was still an effective enough guide.

She saw their first alligators not named ‘Trevor’ then. Silent nostrils and the hint of a body and tail floating languidly in the still water. They were difficult to keep track of and soon her imagination was running wild over the idea that they were being circled around like sharks scoping out a sinking ship.

“They said they haven’t had a single alligator attack in years,” Laura said, noticing her discomfort.

“Yeah, something tells me things are happening in this place that don’t usually happen. What if one of them decides they want to find out what human tastes like after all?”
“Then I’ll use this big paddle to persuade it to stick with its non-human diet.”


“Hey, I’ve been on nature walks and camping trips. Even scared off a bear with Dad once. He wanted me to run but it was rummaging through the tent that had my chocolate chip cookies...”

“So you, of course, had no choice but to stand your ground against the savage bear. Not when the alternative was to lose something so precious.”

“Exactly.”

Laura would always listen to her stories with such passion, to the point of writing them in those notebooks back at the cottage. But Laura’s weren’t without charm, almost always they would bring a smile to her face.

The playground story Laura had told back in the restaurant had been riveting to her. She could count the number of times Laura had mentioned her mother on her fingers and none of those mentions were as long as that one had been.

As well as being pleasant to listen to, Laura’s story had given her an idea.

“That’s two stories in one day from you I’ve really enjoyed,” she started casually. “Maybe I need to get a notebook of my own.”

“It would be a pretty boring one. If it was only stuff from before I met you in Silas.”

“The one at the restaurant wasn’t boring.” She kept her tone light. “Wouldn’t mind hearing some more stories like that.”

Laura glanced at her dubiously. “About me going to playgrounds as a kid?”

“Well, maybe more about.” She paused. To hell with it, stop beating around the bush, she’s your fiancee, not a puzzle box . “About your mother.”

Laura didn’t respond and for the next few moments, the paddles in the water were the only sound to be heard.

“I know I said I wouldn’t push,” Carmilla said. “And I don’t want to. Hey, this is me you’re talking to here. If there is anyone who knows about wanting to keep things bottled up inside and getting annoyed when others ignore you and pry anyway, it’s me.”

She took a breath and forced herself to press on.

“But this has been bothering you. Ever since you saw your mother’s shirt again. I think there’s more to it than that, but that’s what started it. You’re not sleeping well, as much as you’re trying to hide it. And those nightmares are getting worse.”

Laura kept silent. She stopped paddling and the canoe began to drift slowly on the water. Her eyes travelled down and locked on to the apparently suddenly very interesting pile of flares in the middle of the canoe.

“Back at the restaurant,” Carmilla continued. “That was the most I’ve ever heard you talk about her and I think it helped. So, considering we kinda don’t have much to do until we get to this island. I’m saying that if you want to talk, only if you want to, I’m right here.”
Rarely had she ever said so much in a conversation without Laura getting a word in. It felt strange, unnatural even.

Laura’s chest was heaving, rising and falling at great pace. If Carmilla were still a vampire, she was certain she’d be hearing a very rapid heartbeat right now. When Laura spoke, the voice was shaky and uncertain. Her eyes stayed down.

“It’s not that, I don’t want to, it’s just that—”

Carmilla raised up a hand. “You don’t have to justify or defend yourself. If the answer is no, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” Laura’s voice became stronger and her eyes came back up, full of emotion. “It’s not okay. You have trusted me with so much, opened up to me despite how hard I know that is for you. And here I am, unwilling to do the same. I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” Carmilla rushed forward, too quickly on so small a boat and she almost fell into the water as the canoe rocked wildly. She took one of Laura's hands into her own. “You don’t need to apologise for anything. I already know everything I need to. I’m trying to help, nothing else.”

Laura leant their forehead against hers. “I’m afraid that if I start talking about it, I’ll turn into a mess. That it will all come out and I won’t be able to focus on what we’re doing. Which would be pretty bad, you know, with the whole people’s lives at stake thing. When this is over, I’ll tell you everything about her. It’s something that I want to do. But I can’t right now. Does that make sense?”

It did. She told Laura so with a kisses to her forehead and cheek. *I’m so sorry, whatever happened. I’m so sorry.*

What was Laura holding back? The question raced through her mind, but no answers came to her. It hit her that she’d divulged so many of her horrible experiences over the centuries but had never given much thought to asking Laura about any of her own until a few days ago. Why would she? She was the centuries-old vampire with the tragic backstory, Laura was the naive young woman from happy sunshine land Canada with her whole life still ahead of her. That was the dynamic right?

Carmilla cursed at herself silently. To think she had so often chided Laura for jumping to conclusions and making snap assumptions. And yet she had done that exact thing herself. Laura had a life before Silas. It had been moronic of her to assume it had all been happy and sweet.

Her arms found their way around Laura’s neck and shoulders as she brought their lips together. The kiss a wordless apology, even if there was no way for Laura to know that’s what it was. Whatever else happened, they would talk through it all once this was done, she’d make sure of it. She briefly wondered whether Laura would find it charmingly nostalgic if she put on a puppet show during it.

Telling Laura to take a break and relax, she took the paddle back and got them going again.

As the hours dragged on they switched turns multiple times. The lengthy journey becoming draining as the sun’s at first pleasant rays turned beating now that they were no longer under the shade of a canopy. She’d had a short moment of panic at one point when she felt a dampness at the bottom of the canoe, thinking they had a leak. Only to realize that it was their own sweat.

She considered finding another spot to rest for awhile before reaching the island with a potential monster. It would do them no good to be exhausted by the time they arrived. But with a man missing out here, Laura probably wouldn’t approve of any rest breaks. Despite the very doubtful odds he was
still alive.

Beyond the harsh sun, the increasingly difficult navigation and the draining effort of constant paddling, perhaps her hardest challenge was staying focused. In an effort to cool down they’d been slowly but surely removing layers of clothing. The result of which being she was inches away from a sweaty, flushed, and entirely too attractive for the situation they were in Laura Hollis. More than once she’d had to fight her eyes wandering as she paddled, causing the canoe to veer in the wrong direction.

Three centuries old, yet still a teenager in so many ways it seemed. What did she want to do, have sex in this small, uncomfortable canoe with alligators swimming all around them? She laughed inwardly at the part of her that immediately answered yes.

The light from the sun turned a warm orange as it made its way down on the horizon. The orange light contrasted with the now dark reeds and trees and reflected prettily on the water. The sight was so beautiful that not even the ominous black shapes of swimming alligators could ruin it. Exhausted as they were, neither could resist taking a moment to appreciate it. They sat together facing sideways in the boat to get a better look.

“What a beautiful place,” Laura said.

“Yeah, I suppose I’m starting to see why people come here now.”

Laura relaxed against her. “You did say you’d take me places.”

“I did,” Carmilla said through a smile. “Not quite what I had it mind compared to Paris or Amsterdam, or if you want something more natural there’s always of Seljalandsfoss or even the Ngorongoro. But this isn’t so bad, I’ll admit.”

As nice a moment as it was, it didn’t last long. Soon Laura was exhorting them to continue.

“We’re losing light and that guy could still be alive while we’re sitting here doing nothing.”

Luckily for their tortured muscles, only a few minutes later did they finally spot the island they were after. From a distance, it appeared to be nothing but a clump of tall trees in the middle of the wetlands. As they approached, the island itself was revealed to be small and covered in trees and bushes. It looked like a giant furry animal floating in the middle of the swamp.

She patted the knife at her side to make sure it was there and gathered up the flashlight and some flares.

“Alright, time to go monster hunting.”

The island was green.

Moss covered every inch of the ground and the trunks of the tall trees. It looked different to all the other vegetation they’d seen so far. She couldn't describe exactly how, but it stood out. A strange shade of colour in a picture where everything else matched.

“I don’t see anything,” Carmilla said, shining the light of the torch around as Laura brought them close to shore. “Definitely no fog.”
“Yeah I don’t see anything either,” Laura said. “What was the missing guy’s name again? Maybe we should call it out- Wait, is that another canoe?”

She paused her paddling to point at what Carmilla had taken to be a moss-covered rock on the island’s shore. Laura was right, on the shore another canoe lay on its top, clearly heavily damaged. The moss had grown over it.

“Is that the guy’s canoe?” Laura asked.

“No way, that one must have been there for ages for that to happen to it.”

Laura looked around. “Yeah, I guess.” She didn’t sound convinced.

“It’s a small island, won’t take much time to take a look around it before going straight in yeah?”

The idea made sense in her head, but she couldn’t help but wonder if she’d actually suggested it because she didn’t really want to step on that island. Despite not seeing or hearing anything, something felt off.

Laura grumbled at the extra paddling but didn’t argue.

It proved fruitless. The island looked no different from any side and they learned nothing new from the extra effort. Laura turned to her.

“I’m going to take us to shore.”

With nothing else to be tried, there was no choice but to agree.

But as soon as Laura began to paddle, Carmilla’s flashlight finally caught something. One of the trees closer to the shore than the rest had branches extending far out over the water, the tips of which only a few arm stretches away from their canoe. Hanging from a few of the branches on strands of moss were dozens of twigs bundled into a variety of shapes.

She remembered seeing something like this before back at the High School. The twigs there had been hanging from strands of spider web rather than moss, but otherwise, the shapes were exactly the same.

“Laura, stop.”

“What?” Laura sounded confused, but she did so immediately. Carmilla appreciated the trust.

“You see those twigs hanging from those branches? I have the flashlight on them.”

“Yeah, what about them?”

“You still got your phone? Can you take a picture?”

Laura dropped the paddle and dug her phone out of her pocket. As she lined up and took a few snaps of the strange symbols, Carmilla looked around them anxiously, the feeling of wrongness was overwhelming.

And then it hit her. They hadn't seen or heard anything on this island. No birds flying between the trees, no alligators lounging around. Nothing. That’s why it felt so strange beyond the weirdness of the moss.

“Laura, I think we should leave.”
A piercing howl came from the island, chilling the blood in her veins and shocking them both into freezing up for a long moment.

And then she couldn’t see.

At least that’s what it felt like at first. The world turned a swirl of murky grey. As if a storm cloud had descended upon them. It swallowed up the flashlight and everything beyond the canoe. She thought of the flares and looked down to grab one.

Instead, she found vines wrapping themselves around the canoe like thin tentacles. It took her a moment to process that they were moving on their own.

“Laura!” she yelled and rushed to grab her.

The howl pierced through the fog once more, and the vines jerked the canoe violently towards the island.
Carmilla

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Silas One Year Ago ‘The Pit’

She couldn’t let go of her.

Her body literally would not allow her to break contact, her hand glued to Laura’s arm as they made their way through the long narrow tunnels back to the surface. It was a long walk and three times already she’d stopped to wrap Laura up in a hug. Some part of her still disbelieving that they’d made it and demanding she bring Laura close again to make certain this was real. That she hadn’t lost her mind at witnessing Laura’s death as she’d predicted the night before and this was some kind of hallucinatory escape.

During every embrace her eyes and hands would roam over every part of her. She could feel Laura’s hands and eyes do the same back, accompanied by happy squeaks that sent jolts straight to her now very much beating heart. Then she’d blink and realize that she was in the middle of kissing her. Intense and passionate, and lasting for as long as they could manage. After which they’d get back to walking for a few more steps until they found themselves doing it all again. Perhaps they wouldn’t make it out of this pit after all. Though, that seemed now a much kinder fate than what that had meant before.

She’d become a pale moon in Laura’s orbit, as unable to move away from her as she could escape gravity itself. It felt natural. Besides, what was a moon to do if not revolve around a sun?

She discarded the thought away, she wasn’t even sure if it made any sense. Most of the whirl storm of things going through her head right now didn’t. The sheer number of huge events happening in such short order proving difficult to process. She’s alive, Mother was a God again, yet also Mother was gone, she’s alive, her sister had said goodbye most likely forever, the sword hadn’t worked but Laura had found another way, she’s alive, they had stopped the apocalypse.

She’s alive.

Another embrace, this time straight to the kissing. She’s alive. Laura giggled and spoke for the first time since Carmilla had picked her up from the floor. Some babble about them needing to make sure everyone else was fine. After everything that had happened, including having her own heart ripped out, she was still worried about her friends and the people at Silas.

“They’re fine,” Carmilla said. “You don’t have to worry. About anything.” Because you’ve just saved the world. Because you’re a stubborn fool. Because you’re the bravest person I’ve ever met. Because you’re a miracle.

Because you’re alive.

“I love you.” The words tumbled out. “I don’t know why I didn’t say it back in the library before. I love you.”

“I love you t-” Carmilla surged forwards once more and Laura’s mouth and tongue became otherwise occupied.

Holding her arm as they continued upwards suddenly wasn’t good enough. She needed to be closer,
to feel more of her. Could she carry her? She wasn’t sure what she physically could do anymore. There were probably some rather important questions regarding this humanity thing. Was she an ordinary human now? How old was this body technically? Did she still have any of her abilities?

As important as they probably were, she didn’t much care to think about them at this moment. She knew that she could kiss Laura, hold her in her arms, tell her how much she loved her. Right now she really didn’t feel the need to do much else.

She’s alive.

“What do we do now?” Laura asked. The question was genuine but it came out of a smile.

“Whatever we want,” Carmilla said as she cupped Laura’s cheeks in her hands. “Wherever we want. I’m free. Thanks to you.” Her hands glided to the back of Laura’s head and pulled her back in. She couldn’t get enough of her. Every taste, no matter how long, making her hungry for more.

This time they didn’t get back to walking, preferring instead to stay in the embrace. They placed hands to each other’s hearts. For Laura, to feel a heart beating in Carmilla’s chest for the first time. For Carmilla, to assure herself Laura’s was still there.

“I love you,” she said again, breathing the words into Laura’s ear and following them up with soft kisses to her neck.

She had no idea how they’d managed to survive this and never in her wildest dreams could she have imagined being human once more. And while she had suffered long and hard for this freedom herself, she still owed so much of it to the woman she held in her arms.

When Carmilla leant back so she could look at her properly, she found Laura smiling at her. She was so beautiful. It hit her then that it was now possible that she could see that face every day for the rest of her life. They could build a life together now, nothing was stopping them. The realization left her so giddy she almost felt light headed. She wobbled on her feet slightly, but Laura’s arms held her up.

She promised herself to never screw this up. To never let the life that was suddenly possible for them to have slip away. She wanted it too much and they had both fought too hard to let that happen.

“I love you,” she said yet again. Those three words were going to get quite familiar very soon it seemed.

It probably took them an hour at least to make it out of the tunnels and up to the surface. Where the world was brighter and sharper than it had ever been. The difference between how she saw the world as a dead woman compared to an alive one immediately clear.

The whirl storm of thoughts finally began to fall away. The regained humanity, the averted apocalypse, her freedom from her Mother. All replaced with one clear thought that superseded all else.

She’s alive.

Before Carmilla could blink the canoe crashed onto the shore.

Its side hit the moss covered ground and it tipped over onto its top, catapulting them violently out. Carmilla landed hard and Laura bounced out of her grip to roll away into the murky grey fog.
Head swimming from the impact of the fall, she struggled to stand up and go after her. She’d gotten to her knees when her eyes caught something through the fog. A shadow of what at first appeared to be weirdly shaped tree branches, except they weren’t attached to any trunk. Instead, they hung high in the air, their ends sharp and pointing upwards to the sky.

Antlers.

Another howl. This one from close by, almost as fear-inducing as the banshee’s and it froze her just the same. The antlers advanced towards her, to be joined seconds later by two sets of hideously sharp looking claws, each individual one as large as a cruel curved sword.

Her heart stopped and her breath caught in her throat. She backed away from the sight. The reactions instinctual, her body reacting naturally to the sight of oncoming death. A couple of steps were all she got before the world attacked her.

All at once a bird landed in her hair and began pecking away madly, something wrapped around her legs and some kind of animal latched onto her arm with a savage bite. Whatever was around her legs pulled her to the ground and forced her onto her back. Vines, more vines like the ones that had pulled their canoe to shore, she realised. They pinned her to the ground as the bird pecked and the animal, a wildcat she discovered when she turned to look, bit into her arm.

The pain was horrendous. Each stab of the bird’s beak drew blood and her arm screamed in agony. The wildcat was small but its teeth were razors, ripping and tearing away at her arm’s flesh and muscles with a wild abandon. What made it worse was the fact she could do so little about it, her arms pinned to her sides so securely that she could barely lift a finger.

Laura was shouting in panic and pain somewhere she couldn’t see. The same thing must have been happening to her. She struggled to free herself but the vines held tight. The knife Turner had given her was still in its holster and when she turned her head to the side she saw a couple of flares nearby. She awkwardly worked on pulling the knife out with a hand stuck to her side.

Footsteps.

The antlers and the claws were getting closer and despite how bad things already were for her, the heavy oncoming footsteps scared her most. The primal part of her brain screaming that the owner of those footsteps getting too close meant certain doom. She could hear its rumbling growl now, deep and ominous. She fought the urge to close her eyes as it approached, her subconscious desperate for even an illusionary escape from what was coming.

The wildcat scurried away and the bird flew off, both having done the jobs required of them. For a long moment, the only sounds were of Laura struggles and the growling.

The monster appeared above her.

It was in no hurry, apparently certain in the vines ability to hold her down. Its casual demeanour gave her a long unwanted look at it. The monster stood incredibly tall, taller than any human. Its body flat and elongated, as if someone had taken a person and stretched them out. Black fur, covered in all kinds of vegetation hung from all of it like a coat.

It watched her with hungry yellow eyes as saliva dripped from its open jaws. A few of the drops hit her legs, the liquid so hot it almost hurt. She had no doubts of what this thing wanted from them and it had nothing to do with kidnapping. Its head was strangely narrow and equine looking for a being that stood up on two legs, but its teeth looked as sharp as its massive claws and antlers.
Then she noticed its tail, as long as its body was tall and a serrated blade at its tip. It held it up like a scorpion would. The blade hovered near its head, swaying this way and that as it decided on the best place to strike. Despite the claws and the teeth, she was sure this was what it intended to kill her with.

Her fingers finally found a way into the holster and clasped around the knife. It cut through the vines with ease and once she’d freed both her arms, she reached out for one of the flares. She twisted the cap and activated it.

The vines immediately retreated away from the heat. In the same moment, the tail flashed downwards at her chest. She rolled to her side to avoid the blade and then threw the flare at the monster. It screamed as the hot flare struck its fur and its own claws drew bloody scratches on its chest such was its haste to knock the flaming missile away. It stumbled back, disappearing into the fog howling in pain.

“Laura!” she yelled, picking up the second flare and activating it. “Hang on, I’m coming.”

She ripped off a branch covered in moss near her and held the flare to it, creating an improvised torch. Then she flung the flare in the general direction of where the monster had disappeared into and picked up the knife again. Despite the fog, Laura wasn’t hard to find. The sounds of her shouts and struggles guiding Carmilla to her.

The bird and the wildcat were on her. They must have moved on to her after they’d left Carmilla to the monster. Laura had somehow managed to keep an arm free as the vines held her down. When Carmilla found her, she was using it to try and keep the cat from biting her as the bird pecked at her chest.

The bird flew off as she approached and a savage kick from her sent the wildcat flying into the fog.

“I’m here,” she said, holding the flaming branch to the vines to get them off. “I’m here, I got you.”

Laura hugged her tightly as soon as Carmilla helped her up. “Thank you,” she said into her chest.

“It’s okay, it’s okay, I’m here.” Carmilla hugged her close with her injured arm while keeping the one with the torch away from them. “Listen, we have to leave. Please no arguments, we have to go now.”

Laura looked up at her and nodded.

“It doesn’t like fire, so I’ll keep it off us with this.” Carmilla motioned with her head to the torch. “While you get the canoe ready. Then we get in and leave, okay?”

They ran in what they hoped was the direction of the canoe. It took a few seconds to find it in the fog. While they searched, vines slithered towards them from the ground and the bird circled overhead. But with the torch in her hand, nothing got too close.

“I don’t think it’s too badly damaged,” Laura said. “Just gotta tip it over and get it back in the water. Oh crap, better find the paddle too.”

“Can you do that, lift the canoe over and push it?” Carmilla asked, watching the vines closely as she ripped off another nearby branch and made a second torch.

“Yeah, I got it. I-”

“I do yoga”. Carmilla said in her head at the exact moment Laura said it out loud.
The antlers appeared again through the fog accompanied by another blood chilling howl. The monster wasn’t going to give up so easily. It charged this time, its claws out and its antlers pointed down like a ram or a bull while its tail blade hovered in the air. From her perspective, it looked less like a beast charging and more a mass of disembodied blades flying towards her in the fog.

Despite the terror, she held her ground. It wasn’t like she could run anyway, the monster was clearly faster than her and she had nowhere to run to anyway on this tiny island.

It came close, incredibly close. It’s outstretched claws inches away from her face before it baulked at the flame she thrust at it. It didn’t retreat far this time though. Instead, it hunched its long back as it curled up its claws and beat its knuckles into the ground like a gorilla, snorting and howling in frustration. It bounced around on all fours from side to side, watching the flame intently.

The tail struck out, fast and whiplike. The monster cleverly lashing out with it from its right side as it bounced to its left, drawing her eyes away from the strike. She barely stumbled to her side to avoid it and the second her torch dropped, it charged again with its antlers.

She ducked under the blades and pressed the torch into its chest. It fell back howling in pain. Once again, its own claws did more damage than the flame, tearing bloody chunks from its chest to make sure the fire didn’t spread on its fur. Spittle flew from its jaws when it howled this time and it took an angry swipe at a tree, felling it in that single blow.

But beyond a few false charges, it didn’t approach her again. She picked up her second torch as the first one grew short.

“Found the paddle and the canoe’s in the water!” Laura shouted behind her. “We can- Carm, your left!”

She turned at Laura’s words. On the nearby tree, a snake had wrapped its tail around one of the branches. Too late, Carmilla noticed that its neck had reared back in preparation to strike. It launched itself at her, its fangs extended. She batted it away with the torch, but in doing so she had to turn her back on the monster.

She heard its charge and knew there was no way she could stop it this time. It's howl as it charged almost sounded triumphant. She dived to the ground to give herself another moment of life before it impaled her.

A loud cracking sound rang out followed by a quick pop! and the monster howled in agony. Carmilla could smell burning and when she twisted over onto her back she found the monster stumbling away into the fog, rolling and dragging its flaming chest on the ground as it did so.

She looked back to Laura. She’d found more than the paddle. The flare gun was in her hand, hanging loosely at her side.

“I think we’re good,” Laura said. “Those vines don’t seem to like your torch and that thing is busy finding a fire extinguisher. There’s nothing that can-”

A set of massive jaws rose from the water and closed around the side of the canoe, a hairsbreadth...
away from Laura’s arm. The boat shuddered as dozens of sharp teeth crunched into its wood. Using her shoulder, she pushed Laura back from it, the need to get her away from the death those jaws represented overriding everything else.

“Oh, come on!” Laura said as she fell back, apparently unaware how close a call she’d just had.

The alligator kept its jaws tight around the side of the canoe. It pulled downwards with a terrifying strength, tilting the boat onto its side and dragging it down into the water bit by bit. If it sank or capsized their canoe they were dead. Either back on that island or in the water with those huge dinosaur jaws. In desperation, Carmilla made to thrust the torch into its face before Laura stopped her.

“If the torch gets wet, those vines will pull us back.”

“If this thing gets us into the water, we’re dead anyway.” But she kept the torch held up all the same.

Handing the torch to Laura, she pulled out the knife and stabbed at the alligator’s snout. She struck again and again, the knife sliding easily through its scales. The alligator rumbled in pain but it didn’t let go, despite the terrible damage she was inflicting. The boat continued to sink, a moment or two more and the alligator would have them.

She stabbed its eye.

That did it. It slunk back into the dark water and the canoe righted itself. She retook the torch and stood up in the boat, knife in one hand, torch in the other.

She didn’t sit back down to rest until Laura had taken them out of the fog and to what they hoped was safety.

No map, no radio, no food, no water.

The canoe had teeth sized holes in its side, the flashlight was missing and the torch had gone out, Laura’s phone had run out of battery, Carmilla’s arm had been so torn up by the wildcat Laura refused to let her paddle no matter how long they’d be out here and after taking most of their layers of clothing off under the heat of the sun, now they were freezing in the dark.

So all in all, things could have been going better.

“How many flares do we have left?” Laura asked, exhaustion clear in her voice.

“A couple”

“Screw it, let’s use one so we can actually see where we’re going.”

She hissed in pain when she activated the flare. Back on the island, adrenaline had mostly masked it but now her arm throbbed terribly. As Laura paddled, she’d been curled up in a corner of the boat with a hand on the bite. A cat licking its wounds. She’d bitten more than her fair sure of victims in the past, she didn’t much like being on the receiving end for once.

The flare helped. Thanks to it, they navigated around a floating log they’d otherwise never had seen before hitting it and the light gave them a sense of direction.

“Maybe we should save the last one when this goes out. So we always have the option of a Viking
funeral if this gets any worse,” Carmilla said darkly. Laura didn’t respond, she likely didn’t have the breath for it.

But they soon spotted the dark shapes of trees in front of them. Whether they’d found another small island or a dry land in general they couldn’t be sure, but either way it was a much-appreciated stroke of luck.

Which the world balanced out immediately by them realising the canoe wasn’t going to last much longer. Water they had no way to bail out, poured through the holes caused by the alligator. The canoe was sinking fast and it seemed doubtful it would make it all the way to shore.

“It’s okay, we can swim the rest of the way,” Laura said, throwing the paddle away and stretching her arms. “Hold onto me, I can get us there.”

“I’ll be fine, Cupcake,” she said. The response automatic, shrugging off the idea that she’d need help swimming so short a distance. She almost started saying that Laura should hold on to her when her arm throbbed again, stealing the breath from her.

Laura was having none of it. She turned Carmilla around to face her and found her eyes. “Please just hang onto me, okay?”

As always, there she couldn’t argue with that face, or the throbbing of her arm. She nodded and Laura kissed her cheek. They gathered up what little they had left and abandoned the canoe.

The swim was short, barely more than a pool length. It felt like a marathon, and she wasn’t even the one doing most of the work. She couldn’t imagine how tortured Laura’s muscles were now that they were being asked to drag two people across the water after a day of canoeing and everything that had happened back on that island. She helped as best she could, paddling with her good arm as her injured one held on to Laura grimly.

Had she been relying on anyone else, even Mattie, she’d have been certain that they weren’t going to make it. But Laura wasn’t anyone else. One arm stroke at a time, she got them there. Just as she said she would.

When they made it to shore Laura’s breaths were desperately laboured. She squeezed Carmilla’s hand with her own for a second but otherwise made no further movements. Lying face down in the wet dirt.

Carmilla sat next to her and gently turned her over, before dragging her up into her lap. Laura let out an appreciative noise and melted against her.

“You did it,” she said into Laura’s ear. “We got here. You were so good.”

“Never could get on the swim team in High School,” Laura said, her voice barely above a murmur. “Didn’t matter how fast I swam, they always said I was too short.”

Carmilla chuckled and kissed the top of Laura’s head. “What assholes.”

“Yeah, I know right?”

They sat there for a while in the dark, catching their breath. But when she realized Laura was falling asleep she shook her.

“Hey, can’t stay here all night. Not in these wet clothes, we’ll freeze. Come on.” She stood up and brought Laura to her feet with her. “Have to find someplace warmer.”
“This place gets tourists all the time,” Laura said. “Gotta be a rest station or something like that around.”

They used the last flare to see where they were going. Carmilla found another branch to make a new torch and held it up high with her good arm. A wall of vegetation was before them with a small dirt hiking path through. They huddled together for warmth as they walked. Warmth, and also for support, she was certain that they both would have been stumbling and falling on their own such was their exhaustion.

Darkness, cold and fatigue combined to give their surroundings an intimidating atmosphere. Two girls lost alone in the woods. But there was no sign of the strange green moss that had covered the island, which she hoped meant no monster. She was sure the two things were connected in some way.

“So we didn’t really have time to talk about it,” Laura said through chattering teeth. “That guy that went missing. I know this goes against every tv show ever as we didn’t see a body, but he’s like super dead right?”

“Yup.”

“Right, just checking.”

Laura’s prediction of there being shelter around turned out to be true. The path eventually led to a cabin. Small and rectangular, it sat at the back a clearing. When they approached they discovered an old burnt out campfire in front of it.

“People visiting probably rest or stay overnight here. This is perfect!” Laura said, despite everything that had happened, optimism laced the tired words coming through her chattering. She dragged Carmilla forwards towards the cabin’s wooden door. “Come on, if there’s a fireplace we should light it with the torch before it runs out.”

They bundled through the door and into a small living area. She caught a glimpse of a kitchen and some closed doors to their right and some very comfy looking chairs scattered around before her gaze locked onto fireplace on the far left side of the room.

That ended any need for further exploring as far as she was concerned. A while later they were huddled as close as they dared to the flames, a blanket pillaged from a nearby chair covering them both. They lay sideways, Laura closest to the fire and Carmilla, her wounded arm wrapped up tight with bandage Laura had found in a first aid kit, holding her around the waist.

She tried to relax, but every time she closed her eyes the alligator was snapping its jaws again or she was back on that island pinned to the ground. Soon the memories started morphing and the alligator was snapping that inch closer to crunch into Laura’s arm or the monster was deciding to go for Laura first while she lay helpless to defend her. Her grip tightened around Laura’s waist. She’s alive, she’s still here, we’re both still here.

Then Laura spoke the question they’d probably both been asking in their minds since they got to that island.

“What was that thing?”

“I don’t know. Something bad. I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“It was controlling everything, the ground, those animals.”
“Yeah, and it wasn’t exactly a little lamb itself. Even as a vampire I think I’d have been running in the opposite direction from that thing.”

Laura turned over to face her. “Your arm okay?”

It throbbed, the bandage was already damp, moving it too quickly caused her agony.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“We have to find out what it was, maybe ask Mel now that we can describe it pretty well to her, and we have to tell those people at the camp not to go up there and—”

“Shhh,” Carmilla shushed her and brought their heads together. “Not now.”

Laura didn’t seem to have the strength to argue. She snuggled closer and the rest of the night passed for Carmilla in an exhausted but thankfully dreamless sleep.

Laura’s sleep was apparently not so dreamless. Her strangled cry woke them both in the morning. Another sleep, another nightmare. Laura's kiss was remorseful for waking them up, but otherwise neither commented on it. Now wasn't the time.

The Okefenokee had become sunny and tranquil again outside. Back to an idyllic getaway after turning into a nightmare last night. Their movements were stiff and accompanied by groans and winces. Laura made one attempt at a yoga pose to loosen up and ended up slumped on one of the chairs. She didn’t try again.

The cabin proved much easier to explore in the daylight. Though it still took longer than it should have, as Carmilla found her body unwilling to stray far from Laura's side. Which meant she mostly was just checking the last place Laura did. A map on the wall told them where they were. Another small island as it turned out. They scavenged some utterly tasteless but still edible food from the small kitchen in the main room and the doors to the right led to a bathroom, which they both really rather needed by this point, and a storeroom.

The storeroom turned out to be most useful. Another first aid kit with fresh bandages for her arm and a working radio that after a little tinkering they managed to call Turner with. His voice sounded angry and relieved at the same time.

“Where the hell have you two been? We’ve been waiting for you all night, I wanted to go out there looking but—”

“No!” Laura said sharply. “You can’t go out there, in fact, you should all leave. I’m sorry, I really am, but wherever your son is, he isn’t here and your guy… there’s no way he’s still alive.”

A barrage of obscenities came crackling through the radio. “What the hell did you two find up there?”

“I’ll be honest, we don’t know. But it almost killed us and if you go over there it will definitely kill you. Please, believe me on that.”

There was a long silence before Turner responded. “Alright look, you gotta at least tell me where you are. We’ll come get you and we’ll leave together.”
They used the map on the wall to give him their location and the conversation ended with him promising to be there as soon as he could.

Laura winced and began massaging her shoulders once she placed the switched off the radio on the kitchen bench. “Alright, we have to work out what to do next.”

Laura couldn’t be serious, after everything they’d gone through last night. Except of course she was. By way of response, Carmilla found the comfiest chair in the cabin and sank into it. “What we do next, is wait for this Turner guy, leave and order room service from our hotel for the rest of the week.”

She got a laugh in response, Laura taking her words as a joke. They weren’t. She fixed Laura with a serious stare.

“Laura, my arm feels like it’s about to fall off. You can barely stand. The only reason its not way worse, by which I mean the only reason we’re not dead, is that whatever that thing back there is, it’s a predator, and predators like to hunt but they don’t like to fight. We hurt it a bit and it backed off, nothing more. And that’s not even the worst part.”

Laura ambled towards her and leaned against a nearby chair. “There’s a worse part?”

She let out an exasperated sigh. “There is no way that thing took a kid and didn’t eat them on its own. It’s a beast, despite everything it can do. You were right, it must be being used by someone else. Which means whoever or whatever we’re facing, is powerful enough that it gets to tell that thing back there.” She pointed her good arm vaguely in the direction they came to the cabin from. “What to do!”

Her voice had risen without her realizing. Laura shrank a little from it, her arms wrapping around her stomach and her eyes turning downwards. “I'm sorry about your arm.”

“It's not about my arm. It's about the fact we could have died a million different ways on that island. It's about the inch, the inch! That alligator was from getting you. And if it had, it would have dragged you down and there would have been nothing I could have done. Nothing, except jump in the water and die with you.”

She stood up and shook her head, partly to stop her imagination from showing her that exact thing.

“Can you imagine that? After everything we’ve been through, that we’ve survived. Silas, Florence, my Mother. Only to die in a swamp in Georgia. Can’t you see how insane that is? What are we doing here, when we could be anywhere else?”

Laura’s voice became small but she didn’t back down. “There are kids out there, scared and alone. Parents who have lost everything. Kellan, she’s already lost her husband. Her daughter is all she has left in this world.”

“And you’re all I have!” The words burst out of her. “You said before about how broken those parents are, about how we need to heal them. As if I wouldn’t be exactly like them if ever…” She trailed off, not even wanting to say the words.

Laura’s eyes came back up, shining bright. She looked as if she’d had a eureka moment, finally working out what the conversation was really about. She slowly walked towards her, arms outstretching.

“No no no, you can’t solve this with a hug Hollis, this is seri-”
It wasn’t just a hug.

The passion in Laura’s kiss overwhelmed her, the words she had ready for the argument fell away and the dark imaginings in her mind disappeared. To be replaced by warmth, both physical with Laura’s mouth and tongue against her own and the other kind. The kind that she felt every time they fell into bed together, whether it be at the cottage or anywhere else.

“She sometimes I wish I could switch off the part of me that sees something bad and immediately wants to help,” Laura said. “Kids in danger? Not my problem. Evil God about to destroy the world? Let someone else deal with it. Spend the rest of our lives together without any danger or worry.”

Her shake of the head and slow shrug were almost apologetic. “But I can’t. It’s a part of who I am. I can’t put it in a box and hide it away.”

“And I’d never want you to.” Carmilla’s voice had quietened and calmed considerably.

Laura gave her a smile. “Just like I’d never want you to pretend to enjoy being around people you don’t or be anything that isn’t you. I don’t think the take away from surviving so much already is that we should count ourselves lucky and hide away from the world for the rest of our lives. I think it means we owe it to ourselves to live our lives as fully as possible. To take risks, to be brave, to make the most out of every moment we have.”

Carmilla felt Laura’s hands come up around her cheeks.

“I can’t promise you that I’ll always be fine, or that nothing bad will ever happen to me. But I can promise that no matter what, I’ll fight as hard as I can to stay right here. How couldn’t I? When every moment here is a moment with you.”

It simply wasn’t physically possible not to kiss her after that. She doubted that even the coldest, emotionless person on the planet could have resisted. Not for the first time, Carmilla wondered who the real seductress between the two of them was. Three centuries of beguiling young women to fall for her and she’d never come up with a speech as good as that.

They fell back on the chair. The large comfy recliner more than big enough for the both of them.

“I’m sorry, I think I was the one spiralling for a second there,” she said.

“It’s okay. I get it. It’s not like I don’t get scared too. I remember a time at Silas not too long ago when I thought I’d never try to help again, that after all of my mistakes it would be better to run away. Luckily I had someone to remind me who I was.”

They sat together in the chair for a while. God she felt good in her arms, feeling her skin on hers and Laura’s breath on her face and neck. Her body reacted and suddenly she wanted the opposite of an argument.

Carmilla turned to look at the discarded radio they’d used to call Turner, then she looked back to Laura.

“Make the most of every moment, huh?” she husked out. “You know, I bet that it will take them awhile to get here.”

Laura cottoned on quickly. “Yeah, a couple of hours at least.” She bit her lip and pressed closer.

“That’s time for a lot of moments.” Carmilla slid her hands under Laura’s shirt. “I have a few ideas on how to make the most of them.”
Hey guys,
I just wanted to really apologize for not being able to keep to a regular update schedule like I really wanted to and started off with. You have all been so fantastic for reading, kudos'ing and commenting and you deserve better than haphazard updates. All I can say is that I will try my absolute best to keep updating at least somewhat regularly. This isn't going to turn into one of those fics that don't get updated for months on end, I will make sure of that.
Thank you all again and I hope you enjoyed this chapter :)}
“Supta Padangusthasana”

She said the name of the pose as if that would somehow help her perform it. Perhaps by reminding her brain that she’d done it so many times that she could recite the actual Sanskrit name for the pose, she could trick her body into performing it no trouble now.

She had no such luck. The muscles in her leg screamed in protest and she could barely hold the pose for more than half a minute. Normally she could do three. Her chest heaved up and down and sweat ran down her body onto the yoga mat she lay on.

Just as in the previous few days, she didn’t give up. Half a minute was better than the twenty seconds yesterday and the five seconds the day before that. She was recovering, she could feel that. After holding the pose for her other leg, she stood up and prepared herself for the next.

“Andanamasana.”

And so it went for the next hour. Twice daily for the last four days since getting back from the Okefenokee, this had been her routine. It was the best way she knew to get herself going again.

Carmilla on the other hand had a somewhat different approach to recovery. One that meant Laura would hear the occasional snore or purr from the hotel's bedroom as she exercised. In the past four days, Carmilla had probably slept more than a lion after a hunt. She’d become nocturnal like one as well. Only being roused from bed during the day from strenuous efforts on Laura's part. And half the time she would lose that battle so completely, that she'd end up in the bed with her.

She couldn't blame her. Snoozing the days away was about as productive as Laura's yoga sessions in regards to finding those kids and stopping whatever had taken them. They both were taking the break they'd needed after the Okefenokee.

Turner had arrived as promised and they'd all left together. As far as she was aware, no one had entered the swamp again since then. She hoped that was so, there’d been way too much death already and that was all that awaited anyone who met the monster there unprepared.

The monster. They were still calling it that. Their research online had done them no good in terms of working out what the creature really was. The symbols too had led nowhere. With their research failing big time, Mel finding something in the Silas books seemed like their best bet right now. After Laura had sent the pictures of the symbols she’d taken and described the creature to her through an email, Mel had promised to call them again today. Until then, it didn’t seem like there was much she could do.

Or perhaps that was an excuse. She probably hadn’t researched as hard she could have since getting back and deep down it felt good to put the burden on someone else for a change, if only for a little while. It certainly couldn’t last. Even in the past few days, she’d felt guilty the couple of times Kellan had called to check up on them. While she was sure Kellan was legitimately concerned for their welfare, she definitely detected disappointment in her voice when those chats ended without Laura giving an indication of what their next step would be.

If Mel hadn’t come up with anything when she called today, then it was time to get moving again. This break was needed, Carmilla had argued that repeatedly and persuasively once they’d gotten back here. But it had to come to an end now.
Garudasana

Oh, this was a hard one even when she was fully fit. It required a lot of concentration as well as stamina. Yoga wasn’t only about the body, after all, the mind was just as important. When she was younger, she’d often imagine Yoda sitting in the room as she exercised, telling her to ‘concentrate your mind!’ Sometimes she’d even pretend to be levitating objects. Imagination had never been a problem for her.

She assumed the pose, hoping she could keep it for at least a minute or two. Her legs shook but she held firm. This was nothing she hadn’t done before. All she had to do was keep it together and concentrate.

I am so sorry.

She fell in a heap on the mat, her arms and legs tangled beneath her. The imaginary floating objects dropped to the floor. Breathing hard and wincing, she untangled herself and lay on her back. Not a Jedi yet then, young Hollis.

“Hey, steady on there, Cupcake. We get into enough trouble without trying you to kill yourself on a yoga mat.”

Carmilla stood in the doorway between the bedroom and the main room. Her injured arm had a clean bandage over it. Laura still heard her wincing from time to time, but like her own muscles, the wound seemed to be healing well. She yawned and stretched her arms above her sleep frazzled hair before lying down next to her on the mat.

“Can’t pretend seeing you so hot and bothered isn’t a nice thing to wake up to though, even if I would rather it be because of me instead of some yoga pose.”

Laura turned to her side to face her. “I’m sorry I woke you up.”

Carmilla shrugged the apology off. “Eh, I was getting up anyway. Aren’t we expecting a call today? Who’d want to miss another scintillating conversation with Ms Callis?”

Laura snorted. “You. I’m pretty sure. But thanks for breaking out of your sudden turn for the nocturnal and getting up for it.”

“Of course.” Carmilla leaned over and for the next few minutes, Laura was very happy she’d woken her up.

Everything took longer than it should have. Getting up from the yoga mat, showering, getting dressed. Every little banal thing feeling like an immense task to complete. Her usual energy had dimmed from these sleepy past few days and it didn’t matter how much extra caffeine she shoved into her coffee, it was proving hard to get it back.

They needed a win, something to celebrate, or even a sign they were making progress. Right now it didn’t look like they’d had much to show for almost being killed so many times since arriving in Savannah.

By the time Mel called, she’d been slowly melting into the couch as she found a barrage of cat videos and Twitter posts to distract herself from the tabs she should have been focusing on. Carmilla lay curled up next to her, taking any opportunity to snooze before the call.

“She’s calling,” she said loudly to rouse Carmilla.
Mel’s eyes were red and puffy when she appeared on the tablet screen. It looked late in Styria, or perhaps early.

“Next time, ask me to help with the fighting. This research stuff sucks,” she said and when she coughed, a spray of dust leapt off the big book in front of her.

“Trust me,” Laura said as Carmilla sat up next to her. “If you’ve seen the things we’ve been fighting lately, you wouldn’t say that.”

“Well, maybe it all just sucks then because if I didn’t finally find something useful, the dust from these books was going to give me Bronchitis.”

“Hey!” a voice whined from offscreen. “I was the one who found the book you said was useful.”

“Yeah, yeah and I let you go make a sandwich as a reward. What more do you want?” Mel yelled back at the voice without looking.

“I see you got Kirsch to help you after all,” Laura said. “Wait, did you say you two found something useful. Because I’d really, really like the sound of that right now.”

“You bet your ass I found something after all this searching.” Mel picked up the book and pressed it to her screen. “This look familiar?”

It did. On the right page was a drawing of the creature they’d encountered on the island. Her pulse quickened even at the picture. The artist’s sketching was eerily accurate and Laura wondered if they had the thing burned into their brain like she did.

“Wow, yeah it does. Holy crap Mel, you found it.”

“Well, I guess technically Kirsch found it.” Mel put the book back down. “He’s better at researching when there’s pictures involved I think.”

“Does that book happen to have a name as well as a pretty picture?” Carmilla asked.

“Sure does, it’s like a Wikipedia page but really, really scary. Who the hell writes in cursive anyway other than psychopaths?”

Carmilla mumbled something to her side but Laura couldn’t quite catch it as Mel continued on.

“According to Friar and Sapkowski’s European Bestiary -”

“Oh, I remember that one!” Laura interrupted. “We used it while we were researching in the library. Isn’t that the one with the vomit stain that somehow stays fresh despite being hundreds of years-”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

Perhaps Mel had a good reason for her usual scowl today.

“According to the bestiary, what attacked you in that swamp is called a Leshy. It’s a Slavic name, it means-”

“He of the forest,” Carmilla said.

“Right, exactly. There’s a lot of mythological stuff going on with it. Apparently, people back in the day considered them to be deities of forest Gods or at least spirits that defended woodlands from greedy humans.”
“Yeah, I don’t think we got attacked by an environmentalist,” Carmilla said.

Mel nodded. “The guys who wrote this book agree. They say it’s more likely an ancient breed of beast that people made up stories about to teach their kids not to go out into the woods. Oh, this bit here is good.” She placed her finger on a spot on the page and moved it along with the words. “‘Wherever a leshy chooses to make its home, slowly but surely the area’s many forest-dwelling denizens, whether they be creature or plant and eventually even the very earth beneath will fall under its power.’ Sounds like pretty much what you guys dealt with, right?”

“Leshy,” Laura said, testing out the word on her tongue. “Leshy.”

“Does it say how to kill one?” Carmilla asked.

Mel bit her lip. “Uhh, well not really. It does say that as it’s a living creature, it should have a heart, lungs, brain, you know stuff that you can hurt. And you did say that Carmilla saw it bleed.”

“Should? Should have those things?” Laura said.

“Well, it’s a hypothesis, because they’ve never actually… killed one. The last few lines suggest that if you ever encounter one, burn down the whole forest and hope it’s gone when the fire goes out.”

Not exactly the easy step by step guide for killing Leshies for dummies she was hoping for.

“Fantastic,” Carmilla said. “So very helpful.”

“Wait a minute,” Laura said. “‘He of the forest’ you two said. And everything else you’ve been telling us, forest deities and burn down the forest and all that. This sounds like no one’s ever seen one anywhere that isn’t a forest. So why’s this one in a swamp?”

“He of the forest does seem to be pretty far from home,” Carmilla said. “A swamp in Georgia is a ways away from Slavic woodland.”

“Unless of course, something even scarier told it to leave its forest and help them kidnap kids.” She looked to Carmilla. “Like what you said before.”

From Carmilla’s face, Laura guessed she’d hoped to be wrong.

“I haven’t found anything to suggest why one would move to a swamp,” Mel said. “I’ll keep looking. And no, I haven’t found anything that matches those symbols yet. You try just telling Google to search for the image?”

“I would like to remind you that I’ve researched Gods, vampires, spells, medieval weapons and the very best recipes for those cupcakes with fudge in the middle,” Laura said. “I have many professional research methods and tools and-”

“It was the first thing you tried wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it was the first thing I tried. Didn’t get anything.”

Laura sighed as Carmilla yawned and stretched beside her. The light banter was a clear signal that the conversation was winding down. All three of them could tell there weren’t much more practical things to be said.

“Well, this has been fun and all but it’s late, I’m slowly getting a respiratory disease and this book smells like vomit. So I’m going to sleep now.”
But when they said their goodbyes she lingered for a few seconds before ending the call. A pained look crossed her face for a moment and she let out a deep breath.

“You two be careful, okay? Don’t do anything dumb like getting yourselves killed.”

Laura put the tablet on the table and sank back into the couch when the screen went black. Carmilla placed her head against the couch’s armrest and slid her feet over Laura’s lap. Right back to lounging for her.

“Is there a word in any of the languages you know for a conversation where you learn a bunch of interesting things but nothing actually immediately useful?” Laura asked as she stared the ceiling.

“I’m gathering from that you hoped for a little more from her?”

“I guess so. Yes.” She shook her head. “But I shouldn’t have. She found about as much as we could have hoped, it was dumb to think she’d hand us some critical piece of information that would make this easy for us.”

“I wouldn’t have said no to something like that.” Carmilla scratched her stomach. The idle action bringing her shirt up slightly and revealing an amount of skin Laura fought hard not to notice.

“Yeah, me neither. But if we want to solve this, we can’t wait for anyone else to hand us the solution. How’s your arm now?”

“Guess it will have to be good enough. I can already tell you’re about to get back out there today no matter what, so I’m coming too no matter what.”

Laura wasn’t sure if she liked the sound of that. Her voice went soft when she spoke back.

“Hey, if it’s hurting we can go back to a doctor. You come first.”

Carmilla laughed. “Relax, it’s fine. I may have just been trying to emotionally bribe some tender attention from my adoring fiance.”

Laura picked up the injured arm and kissed it close to the bandage. “No bribing required here.”

The bubble they so often fell into could be an insidious thing, when they had things to do. She shook herself out of this one early, otherwise in a blink, the day would be gone and they’d still be on this couch. Or back in bed.

“Okay, so we need a new plan. Again,” Laura started wryly. “I’ve been thinking. You’re going to hate this, but as going back to that swamp for Leshy v Hollis and Karnstein II sounds like a terrible idea right now, we got nowhere with Roberts and have no other real leads-”

“Stevenson. You’re thinking it’s time we have a long chat with Principal doucheface.” She smiled at Laura’s surprise. “Honey, I can see the same things you do. We don’t have any other options. Unless you’ve changed your mind on putting people like Gravenberg at risk?”

She hadn’t. In fact, recent events had probably made her even more averse to bringing new people in. The thought that had they been slightly later in going to the Okefenokee, Turner and his people would have gone to that island themselves was a scary one.

The idea of going after Stevenson had been on her mind since getting back from the swamp. While after the whole episode at the school they’d decided it was too dangerous to go after him without learning more, now that the options were between him, Corvae goons and this Leshy, she’d
reconsidered that decision. She hadn’t realised Carmilla had done the same.

“I thought this would be a tougher argument,” Laura admitted. “You know with the whole ‘Banshee in his desk almost killing us last time we went after him’ thing. Had impassioned speeches, assurances we’d be as careful as possible, a whole lineup of stuff.”

“And we both know that eventually, you’ll win the argument.” There was some resignation in Carmilla’s tone and face but also good humour. “So how about we skip all that and get to working out a plan.”

“Is this what happens to people in long-term relationships? They get super efficient at these things?”

“Oh of course. It lets them focus more on the fun stuff.”

As it turned out, the added time to plan didn't amount to much. They decided quickly on getting Stevenson at his home, where hopefully they wouldn't have to deal with more Corvae goons. Night time would better than day for obvious reasons. And no, Carmilla was not allowed to turn into the Punisher if he didn’t want to talk. She wanted Stevenson in jail by the end of this. Not in a hospital or worse, in the ground.

As for getting his address, Laura was pretty sure who would know.

“What? But I thought you said it was too dangerous?” Kellan said over the phone after Laura had explained to her what they were planning.

“We did. But then we encountered Bambi from the Upside-Down and suddenly Principal douche-face doesn't seem so scary by comparison anymore.”

“That thing sounded like a nightmare, I’m so glad you escaped it. Do you...do you think that's what took…”

“We don't know anything for sure really. But that's going to change tonight if we can get Stevenson to tell us what he knows, which I’m guessing is a lot.”

They talked for a little while longer. The majority of it Laura rebuffing Kellan’s attempts to slide her way into the plan. ‘I can show you where his house is’ or ‘I could wait outside in my car in case you need to leave quickly.’

“Listen, Ms Kellan this is important,” Laura said once she finally pried the address out of her. “If this goes badly. Like really badly, you need to get in touch again with Detective Beattie. Tell her everything, even the part where we’re not really Private Detectives. Though I think she already knows that anyway. She’ll be your best bet if we’re gone, okay?”

“Please be safe, please come back. Both of you.”

The emotion and sincerity in Kellan’s voice caught her off guard and her throat caught her words of goodbye until she could clear it.

“Thank you, we’ll try.”

“We'll try.” Perhaps not the most comforting of things she could have said to her. But it was honest and that felt good as far as Kellan was concerned. Considering what she was holding back from her.

That was two people in a row imploring them to be safe. From one, it was uncharacteristically sentimental and from the other, expressed so emotionally it wouldn’t have been out of place being
said to a soldier going off to war.

Okay, so the guy had a Banshee in his desk. Okay, he was working with Corvae and one of the most horrifying monsters they’d ever faced in the Leshy. Okay, if this went wrong they had no real backup they could rely on.

“This is all going to go fine,” she said to Carmilla as they got ready. “Nothing but confidence here.”

Another simple looking house on another peaceful suburban street. Though after the last one, neither of them were fooled into thinking that meant it was safe.

They arrived late, near midnight. If Stevenson was sleeping when they arrived, all the better for them. His house was first on the street, around the corner of the road they took to get there. Carmilla parked the bike on the far side of the road.

“Slow and quiet till we get to the door,” she’d said to Laura before they left. “Then really really fast once we get in.”

Holding hands, or in Laura’s case the gloves Kellan had given her back when they’d snuck into the school, they moved towards the house. The street was dark and empty. Other than a few crickets and their own footsteps she couldn’t hear anything. Only one of its public lights appeared to be working and it stood all the way down the other end. The darkness and the quiet felt foreboding, but perhaps that was more her own nervousness warping what was actually a pretty regular atmosphere for a suburban street late at night.

Despite her nerves, it felt good to be doing something again. It might have been mostly adrenaline but the energy was flowing again.

A car was parked in the driveway and noises came from inside the house as they approached. A television blaring out a sports game. The curtains were drawn but yellow light could be seen around the edges as well as bright flashes from the television.

“Guess he’s still up,” Laura whispered. “Do evil people like sports? I don’t know many people that like sports.”

“I once knew a psychopathic sadist that loved kittens,” Carmilla answered back. “Everyone has layers.”

They stood at the door for a few long moments, neither particularly sure how to proceed. As ridiculous as it was, she caught herself absentely listening to the commentator's voices on the TV. Her brain latching on to something banal and unthreatening to calm her down.

“You have some kind of ancient lockpicking method?” she asked.

“Do I look like a common burglar to you?”

“Sorry, former undead creature of the night, I kinda assumed you had ways of getting into places you weren’t supposed to.”

“I do, my favourite one goes like this.” Carmilla rammed the door with her shoulder. It took a couple more barges, but the door was thinly built and it gave away easily.
“Is this the really fast part now?”

Carmilla responded by dashing through the doorway into the house. Panicked cries came from inside and then as Laura followed Carmilla in, sounds of a scuffle.

Across the room from the door, Carmilla was slamming Stevenson’s face into a dining table. He squealed in pain and a phone dropped from his hands to the floor.

Phone? Not a magic stone or a wand or even something more common like a gun? Had his first instinct when they came through the door been to call someone? Who, the police?

Carmilla now had his arm twisted behind his back and was threatening to break it. Stevenson responded mostly with more panicked squeals.

“Please, please don't hurt me. I have money, you can take whatever you want. I won't stop you.”

This wasn't right. No traps, no monsters, no threats of any kind. Just a scared man pleading for his life as a sports game played on the television.

“Carm,” she said. Only one word but her tone communicated the rest.

Carmilla relaxed her grip and told him to stay still. He complied with a strangled sob.

Laura took a moment to look around. The house had a sloppy untidiness to it. Not a complete mess, more the home of someone too lazy to properly clean. The kitchen to her right was full of dirty plates, the floor hadn't been vacuumed in a while and general stuff lay everywhere haphazardly.

This was the home of a lazy slob. Not an evil mastermind.

She walked over to the dining table and found the remote to turn off the television. Next to it, a cheap microwave dinner sat oozing on a plate. Stevenson must have been eating it when they'd burst in.

“Let him get back in his chair,” she said.

Carmilla’s version of ‘let’ was to roughly haul him onto it before giving him a final shove in the back. She then hovered behind him like a dark spectre. Ready to attack if he did anything she didn't like.

“You remember us?” Laura asked.

At her question, Stevenson raised his head to look at her. He had a gash on his forehead that dripped blood on his white buttoned down shirt. A black suit hung around the back of his chair. Working late? It seemed strange he would be wearing work clothes at this time of night in his home.

After a moment she saw recognition in his wide eyes. “You're the Private Detectives. You came to my school. What the hell are doing here?”

His surprise seemed authentic and it had taken him a second to recognise her. Which didn't make much sense if he had been sending goons after them. But more importantly, the goons knew who they really were, yet he had referred to them as Private Detectives.

“We have a few questions for you,” Carmilla said, either not noticing how wrong this all was, or pressing on regardless. “Let’s start with the best one first. Where are the kids?”

“What kids? Which kids are you talking about?”
Carmilla didn’t raise her voice but when she spoke again it promised more violence than a panther’s growl.

“Playing dumb is not going to work out for you here. Maybe you should try answering that again.”

“The missing kids? Right yeah, the missing kids, that makes sense.” He looked everywhere in the room except for Carmilla above him. “I have no idea, if I did I would have gone to the police obviously.”

And then he was screaming and his right hand had a fork in it. Laura stared dumbfounded at the fork until she worked out what had happened. Carmilla had stabbed him with it so quickly she hadn’t even seen it.

“Carm!” she shouted. “That is not-”

“Okay, okay,” Stevenson said through pants, his eyes locked on the fork buried in the middle of his hand. “I really don’t know, I swear, they didn’t tell me. I didn’t wanna know.”

“Wait what?” Laura said as Carmilla’s face turned smug. “Who didn’t tell you, who’s they? Corvae?”

His reaction to that was terror. “No, I can’t. I’m sorry I can’t, please don’t hurt me. These people would kill me.”

“Corvae? You mean Corvae, right?”

When he shook his head, his whole body shook with it. “No, no I can’t tell you anything. Please don’t stab me with the fork again.”

“Why would I do that again?” Carmilla said in a low dangerous voice. “When there’s a perfectly good knife I could use instead?”

Stevenson blanched and devolved into unintelligible splutters. This was definitely not how she’d expected this to go. Everything she’d built up about this guy in her mind since their meeting at the high school was proving to be all wrong. Whatever else he might be, the man was scared and while that didn’t necessarily make him innocent, it was enough to make her uneasy about what they were doing.

“Carm, enough,” she said, her voice soft. “Look, if you’re scared of Corvae we can help you. We’ll work something out. But you have to do the right thing here. Even if you don’t know where the kids are, you must know something. You can tell us who does. Or tell us about the Leshy. Something.”

“Leshy? What the hell is a Leshy?” Once again he seemed legitimate in his confusion.

“I don’t understand. You’re the Principal and you’re clearly involved. You kicked us out of your school when all we wanted was to ask some questions and you had a Banshee in your desk. Why wouldn’t you know what’s going on?”

He laughed bitterly. “I have no idea what the hell you mean by a Banshee, isn’t that a ghost or something? And the school was going nowhere with me at the wheel. I lucked into this shitty job at that dump of a school. I didn’t know what I was doing and everything I did made it worse. So when she…”

“She? She who? When she what?” Laura said, her voice rising with impatience. Her subconscious was screaming that she was missing something. Her eyes continuously being drawn back to the food
on the table and the suit on the chair. Why would he be eating dinner in his work clothes this late at night?

Then she noticed that while he looked everywhere but Carmilla, his gaze kept returning to the front door. The phone was still on the ground, she picked it up and looked at the screen. A group of back and forth text messages were on it. Stevenson had sent the second to last one, asking angrily where the other was and that he’d been waiting all night for them.

The last one, from the other person, said they were only a few minutes away. She checked the name at the top of the screen.

Eleonore.

She looked up at Carmilla. “Carm, someone’s coming—”

A figure came through the open doorway. They stretched out a hand holding a small black rock in their direction.

“Unleash!”

A blast burst out from the rock. A long ripple in the air that barrelled straight into Carmilla, lifting her up and slamming her backwards against the wall. The wall cracked where she hit it and she slowly slid to the ground.

“Carm!” Laura yelled and ran to her.

She hadn’t moved since sliding to the ground and her eyes were closed. When Laura repeated her name and shook her, the only response was a soft groan.

“She’ll be fine, Hollis. The lethal version of that spell costs a fortune. Right now, I’d be a little more worried about yourself.”

Laura recognised the voice. She turned towards it.

Eleonore Gravenberg stood in the middle of the room. The rock she’d used to blast Carmilla red and smoking on the ground next to her.

“Only a single shot,” she said, glancing at the rock and stepping over it. “Luckily I always keep something a little more durable on hand as well.”

In her other hand, she brought up a gun and pointed it at her.

“Take a seat. We have so much to talk about.”

Stevenson started babbling as Gravenberg approached them with her gun raised.

“Oh, thank God!” he said, standing up from his chair. “Ellen, I didn't tell them anything. I—”

The gun barked twice and he crumpled to the ground.

“I have wanted to do that for so damn long.” Gravenberg said as Laura stared at the lifeless body on the ground.
“People would have heard that,” she heard herself say as her ears rang from the shots, her thoughts immediately becoming words. “Would be calling the police.”

“For a couple loud bangs that might have woken up one or two neighbours? They’ll lift their head off their pillows for about ten seconds before going back to sleep. Hey, focus on me, Hollis. Come on, I know that’s not the first dead guy you’ve ever seen.”

Laura wrenched her eyes away from the corpse to see Gravenberg waving her gun towards the seat Stevenson had vacated. She didn’t move. Instead, her hands tightened around Carmilla’s arms.

“Come on, come on. I said take a seat.” Gravenberg’s waving became more impatient. “She can’t help you.”

She squeezed Carmilla’s hand and kissed her forehead before reluctantly complying. When she sat down on the chair, Gravenberg walked to the other side of the table and took a seat for herself, keeping the gun trained on Laura the whole time.

“Head of the table,” she said, gesturing to the seat she’d taken. “So like Harry, to take the foot position on it, even when alone in his own damn house.” She shrugged slightly. “Some people just aren’t leaders. It’s simply not in them.”

“It’s you,” Laura said. “Lexi and Abigail knew someone at the school was involved. I thought it was Stevenson but it’s you. Did you really ‘happen to be on your way home’ that day we showed up at the school? Or did those goons call you as soon as they saw us?”

“They called me. They recognised you. Everyone who works for Corvae does by now. Private Detectives? What a fun story to tell, I was more than fine to play along. I didn’t want you snooping around though, luckily all I had to do was mention Private Detectives to Harry and he freaked out. He never had much of a backbone, you might have noticed.”

“He didn’t know who we were, so Stevenson wasn’t Corvae.”

Gravenberg laughed. “Of course not, Corvae doesn’t employ utterly mediocre trash like Harry. He was only told enough to not get in the way and considering how the school was going before all this in his incompetent hands, he was more than happy to let me take the reigns.”

Laura’s mind raced to connect the new dots she was getting. She’d been putting the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle together with the wrong picture in mind. Now her brain scrambled to process all the new information she was learning right now.

“Man dies alone at his dinner table, either with somebody or waiting for somebody. Killed by someone who knows magic. This seems pretty familiar. It didn’t matter that you found him here with us, you were going to kill him tonight anyway.”

Gravenberg’s nod was strangely respectful. “Smart, quick. I knew that about you already, but well done. Yes, Harry had to go. It was only a matter of time until you two got to him and to be honest, I just really didn’t like him, so that’s a nice bonus.”

“And Roberts? I don’t understand, you’re working with Corvae, he’s Corvae. What could you possibly gain—”

At the mention of Roberts, Gravenberg’s face twisted in anger. The gun tightened in her hand and her nostrils widened. After a moment it fell away, an emotional reaction to hearing the name that she brought back under control. A thought struck her, a hunch even, perhaps she should tell Beattie she was a detective after all.
“The daughter, the one in the old picture at his house. You’re her.”

She felt it was true as she spoke it, despite not having any evidence. Gravenberg’s reaction confirmed it.

“Yeah, like I said. Smart.” Gravenberg’s nod and tone was more begrudging this time.

“Okay, so that actually makes even less sense. Nevermind why would you kill someone on your side, why would you kill your own father?”

Gravenberg curled her free hand into a fist and slammed it into the table. “He was never on my side! He kept me down at every turn. Wanted me to stay at home and breed him grandkids like it was still the 1800’s. He disowned me when I tried to join Corvae myself. Intervened to make sure I got nowhere there. Had to accept an associate position, nothing more.”

The outburst left her shaking. Her face’s severe features filling with colour. The gun never wavered from Laura though.

“Okay, family feud. Got it,” Laura said. “I’m used to those by now. I would like to float out the word ‘therapy’ though. You know, as an alternative to killing you dad and setting a magic fire trap around his dead body like a psychopath.”

Gravenberg chuckled at that, she seemed to be calming from her outburst. “To be fair I didn’t set that trap for you. Set it months before you even got here. I honestly thought that old lady would trigger it, or maybe some of father’s closest Corvae friends. Either worked for me.”

“But the invitation you gave us through Kellan was for us. Tell me, were more goons waiting for us at your house? Or more magic traps?”

“Traps,” Gravenberg said matter of factly. “Mostly given up on the goons, they seem to be pretty useless. Didn’t work out for Corvae in Florence, and they’re not working out now.” She held up her free hand. “I didn’t mean to kill you though, what I wanted was a chat. We don’t have to fight each other, there’s no reason for us to be enemies. I have no ill will towards either of you, quite the opposite actually.”

Somehow Laura didn’t quite believe that, yet Gravenberg’s small eyes held no deception.

“Alright, let’s talk then. How about we start with where are the kids you’ve kidnapped.”

Another laugh. “Funny, that’s funny Hollis. No, I’m hoping after this conversation we’re about to have you won’t care to know that anymore. And that you will decide that it would be best for everyone if you and Karnstein forgot about all this and went back to that nice little cottage in Styria. Otherwise…” She gestured to Stevenson on the ground with her eyes.

“Why are you doing this? What could possibly be worth taking kids? What are you doing with them?”

Gravenberg leant back in her chair and responded after a short moment. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to be sidelined your whole life. To know that you’re capable of so much, that you belong in the highest places of power. But to be shunted aside and ignored. I was born to be in Corvae, it’s in my blood. I should have been rubbing shoulders with the most powerful beings in the world. Instead, I woke up one day and the majority of my life was gone. And my job was to play nursemaid to a moron at a dump of a high school in Savannah.”

“Wow, I’m so sad that you couldn’t properly join team corporate evil. I can totally see now why you
Gravenberg waved her words away. “You're young, you don't get it yet. I was wasting away, much like Salvation Hill really. But then a miracle came to me.” Her face shined at the memory. “I was so terrified at first, thought a monster had come into my home as a slept. But then she spoke to me. She offered so much. A partnership. All the people she could have come to and she came to me. She recognised me after everyone else had cast me aside.”

“Who came to you? What partnership?”

“She wanted kids to feed on. Youth, vitality, that's her diet, what she needs to survive. I would supply them and in return, she would use her power to make my school better. Funds, academic success, renown, everything that makes a school the best and I would be at the heart of it.”

“That's it? That's the evil master plan? That's what's worth killing children? Getting a High School of the Year award?”

Gravenberg shook her head, she was smiling now. Her face full of happiness as she talked about sacrificing children for personal gain while pointing a gun at her.

“No, that’s just the first step. Don’t you see? This is how I finally buy my way into Corvae. When you want a job, you need to convince your employer that you have something they want. And, soon I will.”

That lost her and the confusion must have shown up on her face as Gravenberg quickly carried on.

“A school of course! Thanks to you and Karnstein they lost Silas. One of the most renowned schools in the world. Sure, a few of the kids would get fed to a Deep One every so often, but the school was otherwise second to none. And Corvae would get first dibs on the best and brightest. You two hurt them big time by wrenching the school away from their grasp. Not to mention removing one of their most senior board members.”

“Happy to make their lives worse in any way we can,” Laura spat.

“Not as happy as I am. Thanks to you I have an opening. I can offer them a new school. Sure, it’s a shithole right now, but soon it will be something amazing.”

Laura remembered the trucks they’d seen bringing in new equipment for the school. *These guys are giving us contract after contract right now,* the worker had said. And the parents at Kellan’s house had talked about how much better the school had been doing recently.

*But we’re doing better in so many things now, it’s been so exciting.*

Had Mrs Turner known the truth, she probably wouldn’t have used that word. Laura felt bile in her throat, this was monstrous. Made even more so by how very petty it all was.

“I guess daddy wouldn’t have liked that much. You finally getting in. But I guess you took care of that problem, huh?”

“He found out about what was going on here. Bastard was going to take her away from me, take her to some Corvae run lab to study.” Gravenberg’s nostrils flared. “No way was I going to let that happen. He wasn’t going to take away my last opportunity to finally get what I deserve. Baba Yaga came to me. Me! Not him.”

Baba Yaga. The name sounded familiar but Laura couldn’t quite place it.
“I had to deal with my father before contacting Corvae. She was right, it was much easier than I thought it would be and so very cathartic. Corvae found my proposal interesting and even sent me an IDSS team to keep things running smoothly.”

“And then you started finding kids to feed to whatever this Baba Yaga is,” Laura said. “The Meyer’s thought you were going to help them after you came to their house and asked them about the bullying. Instead, you were making sure the kids you chose were as friendless and their parents as powerless as possible.”

“None of the students at my school are particularly valuable or important. But there was no harm in selecting the very lowest of the bunch.”

“And then you send the Leshy after them.”

Gravenberg nodded. “Baba Yaga’s pet brute does its job for the most part. Got a little greedy with the Turner boy, but I took care of the annoying Nancy Drews and Corvae smoothed things over with the police.”

So that’s why Beattie had been taken off the case. Laura had no doubt that the ‘mysterious’ new group of investigators taking over the case was in fact no one at all.

“So you killed your own father and are planning on killing kids. To destroy families forever. All so Eleonore Gravenberg can join the cool kids at Corvae, is that right?”

Gravenberg seemed more amused by Laura’s words than angry. When she spoke, her tone was of a teacher explaining a basic concept to a struggling student.

“This is your first real visit to the States right? You and Karnstein are new to America, so you probably haven’t realised how things actually work here. Maybe there was a time when we worked together. Supported each other through thick and thin. If there was such a time I wasn’t born in it. It’s every man and woman for themselves now, or soon will be. All I’m doing is what any intelligent person should be doing. Taking as much as you can and holding it so tight no one can pry it from you.”

She leaned forward, her small eyes locking onto Laura’s.

“I finally got an opportunity to get what I deserve after half a century of waiting. Thanks to what you did at Silas and Baba Yaga coming to me for help. I’m not letting anyone take that from me, no one.”

Laura glared straight back.

“And I thought Inanna was evil. At least the kids she sacrificed were to stop an ancient being from rising and killing us all. What are you doing this for? A career opportunity?”

“My apologies if my evil plan isn’t exciting enough for you.” She shrugged. “I want more than I have, don’t care much how I get it.”

“You’re killing children!”

“So what? Why do you care?” Gravenberg’s face showed genuine confusion. “These kids, their families. They’re not worth your time. Meaningless chattle destined for lives so vapid and meaningless they might as well never have lived at all. They’ll achieve nothing, do nothing of any value to the world. Why go to all this trouble to save them? After everything you and Karnstein have gone through, why put yourself through more pain on account of these nobodies you barely know?”
The casual callousness shocked her. The utter apathy at the suffering she was causing and the lives she was taking. Laura couldn't find words for a moment and Gravenberg seemed to take that as a sign her arguments were getting through.

“We should not be enemies. So far you've done a lot more to help me, however indirectly, than you have to impede me. I have no ill will for either of you. So despite everything, I am giving you this opportunity to walk away. You don’t owe these people anything, certainly not your lives. The lives you fought so hard for at Silas. Take your lover, walk out that door and fly back to Styria or anywhere else you want to go. If you do that, we never need to meet again.”

She even gave her a thin smile then. Like she’d proposed a generous and gracious offer that Laura should be thankful for receiving.

“You want me to walk away as you murder children?”

The smile died.

“Think carefully here, Hollis. I watched those videos you made at Silas. They were riveting. All those dangers you faced, the trials you endured. It’s so astounding that you lived through them all and got the chance to live happily ever after with the woman you love. It would be such a pity if you threw that chance away because you couldn’t quit while you were ahead and kept trying to play the hero. Let me make one thing perfectly clear. Unlike Inanna, you’re not going to beat me with a fortune cookie and a hug, little girl.”

The last sentence seemed to reverberate around the room as neither spoke for a long moment. Gravenberg pointed with her free hand behind Laura.

“If I kill you, I’ll have to kill her as well, Hollis. You get that, right? Is her life worth fruitlessly trying to save people of no worth or consequence at all?”

Those words hit hard. Breaking her gaze away from Gravenberg and her gun, Laura turned on her chair to look at Carmilla. She was still unconscious but Laura could see her chest rising and falling softly. Gravenberg’s threat to her was far more persuasive than their shockingly poor attempt to be friendly.

*To take risks, to be brave.*

*I love you,* she mouthed before turning back to Gravenberg. She took a deep breath and focused her gaze on Gravenberg’s eyes rather than the gun pointing at her.

“You know, one of the hardest things for me at Silas wasn't the long hours researching, the constant dread or even the physical danger. It was realising that the world wasn’t black and white, that what was right and wrong isn’t always obvious. I struggled with that, still do if I’m honest.” She sat straighter in her chair. “So I guess I should be thankful for people like you. You make it so much easier. With people like you, I'll always know exactly where I stand. It’s directly in front of you, blocking your way. You can take your offer and shove it.”

Gravenberg’s face went still and her eyes cold. “That's a real shame,” she said in a monotone. “I honestly didn’t want to kill you. But I won’t lose much sleep over it either.”

“I’ve faced vampires, stopped Inanna from destroying the world and beat the God of Death at a game of Scrabble, lady. Why exactly should I be afraid of you again?”

“Because you’re alone. No friends to help you, no moronic TA to take a blade for you, no vampire to protect you.” Gravenberg’s tone had become a hiss. “You’re alone and I’m the one with the gun.”
She stood up from her chair. “I did want to ask one thing though, given that you’ve made the decision to die. After watching your videos, do you know what intrigued me the most? After all you did for your friends. Fought for them, died for them. What did they do when they saw you dead in your lover's arms? They walked away.” Her laugh was short and derisive. “That’s what those good deeds get you in the end. Nothing.”

Laura stood up as well. If this was it she’d rather be standing than sitting in a chair.

“So if this is where all that heroism leads you to,” Gravenberg continued. “Dying alone far from home with the knowledge that your lover is next. Was any of it worth this?” She leant forward with the gun. “Or are you now realising how pointless it all was?”

She was close enough to see Gravenberg’s finger curve over the trigger and start to depress it.

“Where is my daughter, Ellen?”

Kellan stood in the doorway, breathing heavily as if she’d been running. Her face a mask of rage.

“I said where is my daughter?”

Gravenberg swung the gun from Laura to Kellan. Laura reacted with the only thing she had. She pulled her phone from her pocket and pitched it at Gravenberg’s face.

The phone hit with a splat and the gun started firing. Laura dove under the table instinctively as a few of those bullets came her way. She heard running and when she looked back up over the lip of the table Kellan was charging into Gravenberg. But as soon as Kellan touched her, another blast like the one before pushed Kellan away across the table. She flew straight into Laura and they fell in a tangle to the ground.

Trying to get Kellan off of her, Laura saw Gravenberg run for the exit as another smoking rock fell from her body. By the time she’d gotten back to her feet, the two rocks were the only sign of her. Laura briefly considered chasing after her, but that seemed like a poor idea for a variety of reasons. Not the least of which the two possibly injured people still in the house.

With a start, Carmilla snapped back awake. She shot up to her feet and looked around in surprise at Stevenson’s dead body and the unconscious Kellan.

“What did I miss?” she asked.
**Salvation Hill High School**

“I love you. Why shouldn’t that be something good?”

The video played from a laptop in front of her. But all Gravenberg heard was the audio. Her eyes were closed and her breaths deep and contemplative.

She needed to think, that was all.

That was all she ever needed. She’d solved every major problem in her life like this. Not through panicked rash actions, asking others for help or throwing money and other resources she’d never had at them. But by using her brain and coming up with a solution. A pity that so few others seemed to have that ability.

Tonight was a setback. There was no point in denying it, that wouldn’t be helpful to her at all. She’d made a mistake. Not only had she missed out on dealing with Hollis and Karnstein for good but through overconfidence, she’d given herself away to them. As well as a bunch more information she’d rather they not have.

Had Hollis taken her offer or had she managed to kill them both, none of that would have mattered, but she hadn’t countered on Mary showing up as well. Yet another mistake, they’d probably gotten Harry’s address from her and with her daughter missing, of course she would’ve decided to go herself.

The videos continued up to the part where the vampire was yelling at Hollis to run from Inanna and her cronies. But Hollis didn’t run did she? No, she stayed and fought the Ancient God with her lover, despite how small her chances of surviving would be. On reflection, it had been foolish of her to think Hollis would take the offer. This girl didn’t run from fights, no matter how daunting.

After knocking out Karnstein, she should have immediately shot them all and left, not doing so could only be considered hubris on her part. That wasn’t like her, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d made so many mistakes in so short a time. Some of that was in Hollis and Karnstein she was finally dealing with people who weren’t complete idiots. Spending most of her life in this backwater dump had dulled her wits more than she’d realised. Yet another reason to curse the injustices that had left her to rot away in this damn school.

**Even in death, you still hinder me, father.**

Noise. A voice from behind had started prattling away at her. It took her a moment to realise it was one of the IDSS nobodies. The voice was different from the one she’d grown used to, but the words and tone remained mostly the same. Replacement gear, same job. They were all interchangeable she realised.

She dimly remembered that she was supposed to keep them out of this room. She must have left the door open and he’d let himself in.

“...seriously consider calling Corvae for help. It’s clear that we’re losing control of the situation,” they were saying. His voice had the nasal tones of someone suffering from hay fever and was
interrupted frequently by hacking coughs. “I have barely half a dozen people left who can still stand and do a job. Whatever virus you have going around here it’s vicious. If Karnstein waltzed in here right now I can’t guarantee security.”

*Karnstein,* he’d specifically said. By not even mentioning Hollis he made it very clear which one the goons were worried about. In that, he was like all the rest. Inanna, Vordenberg, Belmonde, Corvae, they all saw the two of them, one the ancient ex-vampire and the other, a college first year and decided that it was the former that mattered. That Karnstein was the one they should concern themselves with.

Had they bothered to watch the videos Hollis had so helpfully made like Gravenberg had, they’d have known their mistake. It was Hollis that motivated those around her, Hollis that made the plans, Hollis that worked shit out. Granted, Karnstein could be physically intimidating, but without the girl, her mental state ranged from passive apathy to self-destructive misery. Hardly something to fear either way.

Together, they were a force. The key then was to eliminate one, didn’t even matter much which. But how to do it?

She could figure out the answer, but not with this moron talking to her.

“I’m sorry that you all got the sniffles, but I’d like to think Corvae’s finest can handle a cold,” she said. Her tone dismissive and she didn’t bother turning around or opening her eyes.

“This is more than just a common cold, this is worse than the bout of Dengue Fever I had in in the Philippines. What the hell is wrong with this place?”

His tone lacked respect, Corvae had placed her in charge, but that hadn’t stopped them from second-guessing every little thing she told them to do.

“We don’t have control here. I once again suggest we call Corvae for help. I’d ask my boss what he thinks, except you sent him and a bunch of my colleagues up against Karnstein and now they’re all dead.”

“I can hardly answer to the incompetence of others!” she snapped.

“You don’t know what you’re doing.” The matter of fact tone of voice he used infuriated her. “But you won’t admit it because then Corvae will see that you’re not worth their time. Well screw that, I’m not dying for you lady. I’m taking over and we're calling for help.”

Her eyes opened to the sight of Harry’s office. Her office, she supposed now. It looked far better now than it had ever looked with him as its owner. Spotless and tidy. The walls and floors clean and the desk shone with polish. she felt the urge to run a finger over it. The lie her eyes showed her so convincing that for a moment even she forgot the reality.

There was no desk in front of her. Instead, it lay scattered around the room in pieces after her banshee had exploded out of it. That’s why the laptop sat on a filing cabinet at the back of the room instead of sitting on what appeared to be a perfectly good desk.

Baba Yaga’s magic was truly awe-inspiring. Regrettably, it had cost them the Turner boy to fuel the spell, but that seemed a fair trade, they still had two left regardless. Once Hollis and Karnstein were out of the way, they could start acquiring more.

Kidnapping the Turner boy hadn’t even been in her plans. Not so soon after the first boy anyway. But Baba Yaga was greedy as it turned out. When the Turners had camped so close to her old home,
she hadn't been able to resist sending her pet out for dessert.

And so one missing kid quickly turned into two and only Corvae’s intervention stopped the police from investigating further.

Two had needed to become four when Gravenberg had realised how close the girls Abigail and Lexi were getting. Too panicked to wait for Baba Yaga’s pet, she’d taken Abigail Bishop herself. It wasn’t a difficult thing to do, the girl stayed so late at the library every night that nobody else was around by the time she’d leave.

And then her friend had so generously delivered herself to Baba Yaga. While it was disconcerting that she’d known exactly where to go, Lexi Kellan had proven to suffer from the same affliction Laura Hollis did, sentimentality. Instead of finding an effective use for the information she’d gained, the girl had tried to rescue her friends by herself.

That would have been the end of it, except the girl’s mother had somehow bumbled her way into Hollis and Karnstein’s path and suddenly Gravenberg had found herself contending with two people who had defeated a God and saved the world.

It didn’t matter. Whoever tried to stop her from getting what she deserved would be dealt with, one by one. Speaking of which.

“Can you repeat that?” she asked mildly and turned around as her hand slid into her pocket. “You’re doing what?”

The IDSS man looked like death. A red nose standing out against a pale sunken face. How bad was this virus? It would do no good for staff and students to start dying of some flu, perhaps she’d ask Baba Yaga for another spell soon.

He took a few steps towards her into the office. Despite his illness, he clearly didn’t feel at all threatened by her.

“I’m taking over, you’re finished- what?” His last step crunched on something neither could see on the ground. Probably a piece of debris from the explosion. For a moment, the glamour flickered and he looked around in surprise at the two competing visions of the office.

Gravenberg pulled a blade from her pocket and stabbed it into his chest. She pushed him up against the wall and twisted the blade viciously.

“I’ve waited my whole life for this, killed my own father for this, killed children for this. And what? You thought you could stroll in here and take this chance from me? The chance I’ve waited my whole life for?”

The man gurgled for a moment before his entire body fell limp.

“You won’t, Hollis won’t, no one will.”

She let the corpse fall to the ground. It vanished from her eyes just like the debris around the office and the bloodstains of the banshee’s victims outside. She took a deep breath and composed herself again, returning to the middle of the office and shutting her eyes. Alright, back to thinking about the real problem. Laura Hollis.

“Even though I’d do anything to take her place. Exchange her life for mine.” Hollis’ voice came from the laptop.
The solution hit her. As always, all it had taken was a little time to think. Hollis was smart, but just like the Kellan girl, she had a weakness for throwing all that intelligence away when people she cared for were in danger. To risk her own life for others.

The solution was simple then, as most of the best ones were. She left the office and ignored the confused and dirty looks the remaining IDSS goons gave her. She picked one at random and told them they were in charge now. She only needed to keep them in line for a little longer. Soon they wouldn't be necessary.

The rest of her journey went by on autopilot as she considered the two things her new plan needed. A target and something to throw at them. By the time she reached her destination, a small grey structure covered in moss, she'd figured out both.

She hadn't stopped at Hollis' Silas videos, Corvae had been more than willing to hand over everything they had on the two. The long and bloody records of Karnstein's undead existence, full of macabre descriptions and tales of woe. And the rather more mundane story of Laura Hollis before she'd gone to Silas. Perfect grades, perfect home, shame about the mother though. Childhood trauma sticks with you for life, no matter how far one might try to push it away, Gravenberg had learned that herself.

With that in mind, the choice of target seemed perfect.

Her plan solidified in her mind, she reached Baba Yaga's lair in long confident strides.

The two girls were in the walls, one unconscious, the other staring at her with wide eyes.

“Baba Yaga.” Her voice echoed through the narrow passages.

Her answer was the sound and vibrations of big lumbering footsteps. Baba Yaga rarely wasted words on such trivial things as greetings.

She came around the corner of a passageway and into view. The fleshy mass of her body, the crooked nose, the uneven gait. Gravenberg had grown used to it since their first terrifying meeting in her own home, but no soul could grow fond of it.

As expected, Baba Yaga didn't speak. She merely waited for Gravenberg to say what she wanted.

“I need your help with-”

The girl screamed out in anger. Teenage obscenities that Gravenberg didn't bother to listen to. Baba Yaga raised a fleshy arm and the girl went mute, her mouth suddenly unable to move as if sewn shut.

“As I was saying. I need your help with something,” Gravenberg said.

In response, Baba Yaga pointed to the girl.

“No,” Gravenberg said. “I don't need a spell. I need to borrow your pet.”

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“Baba Yaga, are you sure she said Baba Yaga?” Carmilla asked yet again.

“Yes, I'm sure, Baba Yaga,” Laura said. “Are you sure you're okay?” She followed up the question by reaching across the couch with a gentle hand to Carmilla’s side.
Variations of this exchange had been happening at least a dozen times in the last half hour since they'd left Stevenson’s house in a hurry and went back to Kellan’s. Certain that Gravenberg had fired off enough shots to get at least one person in the neighbourhood to call the police.

The journey had been a little rough. They obviously couldn't leave Kellan or her station wagon there for the police to find, yet Kellan was too groggy to drive and Carmilla turned out to be far more used to bikes than cars. Luckily, the lateness of the night meant the streets were mostly clear and Carmilla managed to barely keep them on the road long enough to get them to Kellan’s.

“So, if you could leave out the story of me struggling to drive some soccer mum’s old station wagon on an empty road without crashing in that notebook of yours, that would be appreciated,” Carmilla had said as they’d piled out of the car.

“Not a soccer mum, Lexi used to say I was cool all the time,” Kellan had mumbled before they put her to bed. She hadn't woken up since.

Since then she’d sent a two word all-caps email to Mel with a bunch of question marks and answered the same question from Carmilla repeatedly while she fussed over her with the same question of her own. Between watching her take a bite wound at the Okefenokee and getting blasted by magic, Laura was feeling a great deal of empathy for how Carmilla must have been feeling during her mini breakdown in that log cabin.

“I’m fine, cupcake,” Carmilla said. “Just got knocked off my feet. Got us here fine didn’t I?”

“Yeah. Yeah, got us here fine,” Laura said absently, her hands running through Carmilla’s hair and trailing up and down her chest. She wasn’t sure where exactly Gravenbergs blast had hit her, but Carmilla didn’t wince at any place she touched, so hopefully, that meant it hadn’t left any lasting injury.

They both stopped asking their questions for a moment and brought their foreheads together on the couch.

“Guess I turned out to be pretty useless back there, huh?” Carmilla said. “You must have handled it alright on your own though.”

“Damn right. Should have seen me pumping the bad guy for info under the threat of death. Super James Bond mode, all we needed was a laser beam or a shark pit. Wasn’t worried for even a second.”

Their heads as close as they were, Laura felt rather than saw Carmilla smile. “I bet.”

Their intertwining hands were much more truthful than their words. Carmilla’s felt soft and apologetic for leaving her to face Gravenberg alone. While the way Laura's tightened around whatever piece of Carmilla they could touch gave lie to the “never worried” thing.

She probably needed to check in with Carmilla that these little silent vibes she felt they sent each other every once and while were felt by her as well. Otherwise, things might get awkward. Another newbie to long-term relationships kind of question.

“I think the real issue here is that a woman came up to us, said her name was ‘Gravenberg’ and we didn’t immediately become one hundred percent sure she was evil,” Laura said, relaxing into the couch. “So, who’s this Baba Yaga? I’m gathering you know the name.”

Carmilla sighed and leant back on the couch. “I do. But how about first you tell me everything that happened after Count McGonagglemort hit me with their expellitramus spell.”
“Oh my God,” Laura said, her tone brightening. “You do kinda sorta remember. I mean, almost every single individual word of that sentence was wrong, but still.”

“I guess some things tend to stick in your brain after the tenth rewatch.”

“You say that like watching Harry Potter ten times is a bad thing.”

Even with her meandering storytelling tendencies, it didn’t take long for her to bring Carmilla up to speed on the both illuminating and alarming gunpoint conversation she’d had with Gravenberg. The revelations that she was both Roberts’ daughter and the one most involved at Salvation Hill High School, not Stevenson. Her plan to leverage her control over a new school to buy her way into Corvae and lastly, that the kids were being sacrificed to someone or something called Baba Yaga in return for them performing spells that helped Gravenberg’s goals.

Carmilla remained silent through most of it. But she took issue with that last point.

“Okay, I think you got that the wrong way round, no matter how Gravenberg put it,” Carmilla said after bringing up a hand to interrupt. “Whether she knows it or not, Gravenberg works for Baba Yaga, not the other way round. That would be like Mother working for Will, ludicrous.”

“Who is this Baba Yaga? You don’t just seem to know of them, you seem pretty spooked.”

“Well, to put it simply,” Carmilla started. “She’s…”

“A witch,” Mel said on the tablet screen.

“Okay, so when did you two start having conversations behind my back?” Laura said as Carmilla gave her an ‘I told you so’ look next to her at the dinner table. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, the idea of you both getting along well enough to do that is awesome, but you’re both making fun of me here. A witch? You mean a witch, witch? Like a pointy hat and broomstick, witch?”

“How is that so hard to believe after everything else you’ve seen?” Carmilla asked.

“I dunno, maybe because the first thing that pops into my head at the word ‘witch’ is Gruntilda from a Nintendo game. And she had green skin, spoke only in a rhyme and kidnapped little bears to steal their youth and vitality- Oh my God, we’re facing Gruntilda.”

The more rational part of her brain recognised the logic in Carmilla’s question as she rambled. Why not a witch? It seemed the world was throwing everything else their way. Gods, Vampires, Satyrs and more recently this Leshy creature. Why not add a straight up witch to the supernatural menagerie that was her life.

“I don’t know about green skin or how she talks,” Mel said. “But these descriptions are pretty on point to every fairy tale I’ve ever read. ‘Old lady,’ ‘hunchback’, ‘long crooked nose.’ I was so sure the authors were going to talk about her tricking people into eating cursed fruit or locking them up in towers.”

It turned out researching was a lot easier when you had a clear unique name to look up. Upon getting the Baba Yaga email, Mel had found a book on her almost immediately in the library. And this one looked to be vomit stain free as an added bonus.

“Take a look at this passage.” Mel held the book up to the screen, her finger on the paragraph she
meant.

Laura read it out. “Wherever she appears, she will be a scourge upon that land. Her pestilence and
dark magic will spread out from her filthy lair to corrupt all in her path. She will tempt the land’s
populace into greed and evil, she will feed off the young and vital, she will cause sickness and ill
health. In time, she will make the land her own and slaves of its people unless she is driven back
from whence she truly came.

Silence followed Laura finishing the passage. Laura felt like a priest who had just belted out an
intense malediction to a stunned congregation. You meet this witch and you die seemed to be the too
long, didn’t read version of what the authors had written.

“To think Elizabeth Montgomery and Sabrina made them seem so nice,” Laura muttered.

“There’s also some pictures here that look a lot like those photos you took in that swamp.” Mel
flicked through some pages as she talked. “Apparently, they’re supposed to be fetishes, symbols,
stuff that marks out her territory pretty much. Creatures under her thrall make them out of whatever's
around.”

“Carm said she saw those symbols at the school,” Laura said. “And weren't people getting sick
there? Turner said his people had a virus going around as well. That passage mentioned this thing
causing sickness.”

“If getting the flu is the worst that Baba Yaga does to you, you should count yourself lucky,”
Carmilla said.

“How do you know about Baba Yaga?” Laura asked her.

Carmilla shrugged. “Stories about her have been around for centuries. Mattie said she almost got
cursed by her in Poland once, but Mother intervened.”

“She was afraid of Inanna?”

Carmilla waved a hand airily. “Mother scared everyone.”

Well, on that they could all agree. The idea this Baba Yaga could be intimidated by something had
raised her spirits for a moment, but being afraid of Inanna hardly made something appear weak, just
intelligent.

“What does it mean by ‘whence she truly came?’” Carmilla said.

“Yeah, that's a good question,” Mel said. “There's a passage about her having two homes. One here
and one far away. I don't understand what that means. One here… where? Same question for far
away.”

“Well, whatever that means, I thought her home was supposed to be in Eastern Europe, where all the
world’s nicest creatures live,” Carmilla said.

“Nice creatures like the Yeshy?” Laura said. “I suppose that mystery’s been solved at least. I guess
when this Baba Yaga decided to emigrate from a Brothers Grimm Story to the US, she took the
Yeshy with her. Do you think she flew on a broomstick or sat in coach?”

Carmilla squeezed her hand under the table. She'd gotten used to Laura’s tendency to mask a stress-
induced spiral with a flurry of jokes. She squeezed back and took a breath.
“Okay, I don’t suppose there is anything in that book that goes into more detail on how to do that ‘whence it came schtick?’”

“No,” Mel said. “But there is a section on ‘How to set your affairs in order before you die’ and another on ‘Twelve things you need to know about how to make sure your inevitable violent and painful death doesn’t end up cursing the land, your immortal soul and your future descendants.’ So that’s helpful.”

“Perhaps not the most encouraging of chapter titles,” Laura said.

Mel shut the book and rubbed her eyes with a thumb and an index finger. “Hollis, can I talk to you for a moment?”

Caught off guard, Laura took a second to reply.

“Uhh, sure, I…” She looked to Carmilla. “Right?”

Carmilla shrugged and got up. “I’ll go check on soccer mum.”

Mel had a look on her face that was both strange yet also becoming familiar. Laura had seen it before at her father’s home and at the end of their last conversation. It looked mostly like a pained grimace. As if she was searching for a way to say something. But when had Mel ever taken the time to say something carefully?

“Look, Hollis, I get that you got that dumbass saviour complex thing going on, whether you want to admit it or not. But maybe you should think about getting on a flight back to Styria or Canada or anywhere that isn’t the domain of the Wicked Witch of the Dumpster Town.”

“You know, you’re the,” she paused for a moment. “Fourth? yeah, fourth person to bring up the idea of running away back home since Carm and I got here. Why exactly did you need to ask me this alone? It’s as much her decision as mine whether we stay here or not.”

Mel snorted and raised her eyebrows.

“Is it? C’mon, let’s be real Hollis. I wanted to ask you because you’re the one that needs convincing. If you decide to leave, she’d be right behind you and if you stay, she stays. It’s pretty obvious just from how she looks at you that she’d follow you into hell if that’s where your next righteous crusade took you.”

Laura felt an unpleasant twinge. She liked to think that their relationship had evolved further from Carmilla simply following her lead out of love and not much else. But what Mel had said probably still mostly hold true. If she told Carmilla she wanted to leave, after all, Carmilla would book the earliest flight back to Styria herself.

She shook her head. ‘I’ll tell you what I told everyone else. I can’t leave these kids to die. Learning about this Baba Yaga hasn’t made me want to run away, not when it’s more clear than ever that they need our help.”

Mel sighed and her face grew resigned. “Thought so. Wanted to try though.” She went silent, the pained expression came back. “Alright look, I’ve had something I’ve wanted to say to you for a while and as it looks like you two are in some real Silas level shit over there I should say it now just in case you dumbasses get yourselves killed.”

Laura opened her mouth and closed it. Deciding to wait and see what Mel wanted to say.
“I tried to say this at your dad’s house, but then all… this happened.” Mel gestured vaguely around her. “Though I should have said it earlier, before you and Karnstein went to go be Styrian Lumberjanes or whatever. I don’t know if it was pride or… I don’t know.”

She found Laura’s eyes across the screen.

“I wanted to thank you for what you did at Silas. I never properly did that, not as much as I should have after giving you so much shit while it was happening. Even though you only ever tried to help, I realise that now. At the end, in that pit, you saved us, everyone. No one else could have done what you did. Not me, not my Zetas, not even Karnstein.

“Back at your dad’s house, you were right. While you sacrificed yourself for us all I did was stand and watch. I’m sorry.”

“No, hey, I was out of line and most of the things you said at Silas were right, I did make a ton of mistakes, there’s no need-”

Mel’s eyes narrowed. “Hollis, do you have any idea how hard it is for me to both thank someone, admit they were right and say sorry to them at the same time?”

Laura nodded.

“Yeah, so please don’t interrupt. Laura, thank you for what you did for all us back at Silas and I’m sorry about not helping as much as we should have in that pit.”

Tears sprang to her eyes and contrite words came to her mind. *You don’t have to thank me or apologize, all I did was get lucky enough to fix my mistakes- She wiped the tears away and bit back the words. They weren’t what was needed.*

“Thank you,” she said through a smile. “And apology more than accepted.”

“Welcome,” Mel said, her tone suggesting every kind word was a chore to choke out, which made Laura appreciate them all the more. “Oh, and as for LaF and Perry, I wouldn’t take their radio silence personally. They went through some shit at Silas, and they know about Florence. I think it's not that they’re angry at you. It’s just that they … need a break from the kind of danger you two seem constantly in.”

That almost brought the tears right back. With everything going on, the apparent cold shoulder from LaF and Perry had faded from her mind but her sadness at it remained. She really hoped what Mel said was true. Of all the reasons she could come up with for why they weren’t talking to her, wanting to stay out of danger for the time being was the nicest one.

“Why not just say that?” she asked. “They can still talk to me without getting involved in stuff like this. I’d never ask them to do that.”

Mel’s ‘you’re being dumb’ look was eerily similar to Carmilla’s. “How would those conversations go, do you think? The ones where you tell each other about the days you’ve had and yours was fighting ghosts or goons or evil witches? Of course, they’d have to help. How could they not?”

Laura nodded. “Yeah, okay I get that. Thank you for telling me this, I appreciate it.”

A slightly awkward silence came between them after that. Neither sure where to go from here.

“Alright, I said what I needed to say, I’m going to go now,” Mel said.
They said their goodbyes and Laura made to turn off the call.

“I can come over there!” Mel burst out right before Laura's finger hit the end call button. “If you need help, I can scrounge up enough money for a plane trip and get over there. Back you two up. I’ll bring puppy for brains with me too.”

That meant a lot. Mel knew the kind of danger that would be awaiting her if she came here. Laura chose to ignore the probable immorality of volunteering Kirsch to come too so casually. The offer was tempting. Kellan was nice, and Beattie and Turner had been helpful in their own small ways but getting some of the old gang back together with her and Carmilla enticed her greatly.

Yet she couldn’t say yes, not to putting a friend at risk.

“You’ve done enough already,” she said, then tried to smile. “Seriously, braving the vomit-stained bestiary? You’re already a hero to me. I can’t ask you to do anymore than you have.”

“You're not asking, I'm offering.”

Laura shook her head. “No. Thank you so much, but no.”

Her heart felt heavy when she put the tablet down. A pang of loneliness creeping up on her. Carmilla was right, as she so often was. She liked having people around, friends to talk to and company to enjoy. People, friends, those words were plurals. She’d been dealing more in singulars for the better part of a year. Something to work on, if they made it out of Georgia alive.

She went off to find the others and got to the foot of the stairs to Kellan’s bedroom when she spotted Carmilla coming down the top of them.

“She wants to talk to you,” Carmilla said in a drawl. “Mel wants to talk to you, Kellan wants to talk to you. Guess I’ll just sit in the corner and-”

Laura skipped up the first few steps on the stairs and pulled her into a kiss. The lonely feeling and the heavy heart faded immediately, the intimacy of the moment and the familiarity of Carmilla’s soft lips on hers lifting her spirits greatly.

“I was joking,” Carmilla said. “I’d much rather you talk to them than I.”

When Laura responded by stroking Carmilla’s cheek and her eyes grew concerned.

“Hey, we’re going to work this out, just like we always do. Did Mel say something to you?”

“No it’s not about that and all Mel did was let slip that in a shocking turn of events, she cares a lot about us and rather we not die.”

“Really? The revelations keep coming tonight. What is it then?”

“It's nothing, I just.” She pressed her head sideways into Carmilla's chest. “I couldn’t do any of this without you. You know that, right?”

She felt Carmilla’s arms wrap around her. The middle of a stairway was probably not the best place for a lovers embrace, but when she shut her eyes in moments like this she felt like they could be anywhere for all it mattered.

“Are you okay?” Carmilla asked.

“Yeah.” Laura leant back. “I’m fine. Maybe sometimes I just like to hug my fiance and have her tell
me everything is going to be okay. I’ll go and talk to Kellan. Any idea what she wants?”

Carmilla shrugged. “No idea. Probably wants to start adoption proceedings for you or something.”

Laura laughed, but Carmilla merely winked and continued down the stairs.

“You think she has any of that pasta left?” Was the last thing Laura heard before she disappeared around the corner.

Kellan’s bedroom was down the hall from Lexi’s. She didn’t go in immediately when she reached the door, instead, she found herself looking back down the hallway at the daughter’s room. In her mind, she could see a little girl running from her room to her mothers. It took her a moment to realise the girl was her, not Lexi and the hall had turned into one from her old house. Her own room had been down the hall from her parents as well, how many times had she run to their room to wake them up on a lazy morning?

Laura blinked and the vision went away. She pushed the door open and went inside.

The colours of Kellan’s bedroom radiated warmth. Soft orange walls and flower patterns on the bed covers. A lamp on the bedside table bathed the room in a yellow light that could have been from a fireplace. The floor was soft even with her shoes on. Everything in the room felt like a gentle invitation to stay.

A woman smiled at her as she walked in. They sat up on the bed, a pillow placed between the back of her head and the top of the bed.

Little girl Hollis ran passed her and jumped on the bed. The woman laughed as her eyes sparkled and two wrapped each other up in tight hug-

“Hello,” Kellan said. “I hope I didn't intrude on your conversation with your friend when I asked Carmilla to find you.”

She wrenched herself back to reality. What was wrong with her? Kellan’s big eyes were just as kind and expressive as the woman she saw with her younger self, but they weren’t sparkling, instead, they looked as tired as they always looked.

“No, it was already over by the time Carmilla found me. You wanted to speak to me? How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay, Carmilla said I don’t have any scars or bruises. That’s a shame, who’s gonna believe me when I tell them I got hit by a magic spell unless I have a scar?”

A comfy chair sat against the wall facing the bed. Laura sat in it as Kellan laughed lightly.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” Laura said. “You know I do say to stay away for a reason. These people are dangerous.”

Kellan’s eyes flicked downwards.

“But on the other hand, you did kinda save me and Carm. So, thank you.”

Kellan shrugged sheepishly. “All I did was run in and get hit by a spell.”

“All I did at Silas was give the bad guy a hug remember? Little things can help a lot. You distracted her, if you hadn’t’ve done that, we’d be super dead.”
Kellan bit her lip as she smiled, her face flushing red.

“You’re kind to say that. You two keep putting yourselves in so much danger for us, about time I stepped up as well.”

She sat forwards, the pillow dropping behind her. “Did we learn anything? I mean apart from the obvious.”

“We've made a lot of progress, we know a lot more now than we did even a few hours ago.”

Kellan beamed and her smile grew wide and shiny. Though that expression faded as Laura brought her up to speed.

She shook her head when Laura finished. “I can't believe Ellen is doing all this. Working for that evil company. And some kind of… witch?”

“Were you two friends at the school?”

“No, not really. But we got along fine enough. I did get the impression she was dissatisfied with where she was but nothing like this.”

Laura started to get up from her chair. “I’m guessing that’s why you asked for me, so I could give you an update? I can let you rest now-”

“Oh no,” Kellan said, swinging her legs out of the bed to sit almost across from Laura. “There were other things actually, They're not that important, trivial really, but…”

“Sure,” Laura said and sat back down. “Whatever it is, just ask.”

“Well, I was thinking that. After all this is.” Kellan paused and her gaze went to Laura’s hands. “Why don’t you have an engagement ring?” she said suddenly.

“Ahh,”

“Oh my Gosh,” Kellan brought her hands to her face. “I’m so sorry! That is very personal and not at all what I was planning on asking. Please forget I asked that.”

“No, it’s fine, it’s okay,” Laura said with a smile and held up a hand. “I do have a ring. I keep it in a box that I take everywhere I go. Even here in Savannah. Carm and I decided that we wanted to keep the engagement between us until we were ready for the wedding. But, we told my dad in confidence, this was right before you arrived on his doorstep actually, and he let it slip to our friends.”

Kellan put on a shocked face. “He did what? I would have been so mad at my father if he did that.”

“Oh, he was just excited. I guess we forgot we were keeping it a secret after that, just started telling everyone. Carmilla even told Detective Beattie in the prison.”

“I told everyone that Ryan and I were getting married the day after he proposed. The bus driver, the store clerk, the McDonald’s server lady as I went through the drive-thru. It felt like this momentous event that everyone should be interested in. Or maybe I just liked saying it. We were getting married.” Her head tilted quizzically. “So why not put it on now then?”

“I don’t know. I suppose with everything going on I haven’t had time to think about it.” She sighed. “Okay, there’s also the fact that I really wanted to have one to give to Carm of my own when we finally made it official.”
Kellan shook her head vigorously. “Don’t worry about stupid stuff like that. You love her, you’re getting married, everyone knows. Put the ring on already, girl. Enjoy it. Enjoy being young and alive and in love. You never know how long any of those things will last.”

Considering how short a time they had known each other, she probably should have been annoyed by the slightly pushy, personal advice Kellan was giving her. But Kellan’s tone was pleasant and it made a fair amount of sense.

“All right, you’ve convinced me, Fairy Godmother Mary Kellan,” she said with a laugh. “I think you’re right. I’ll put it on next time I get the chance.”

“She’ll love it if you do.” Kellan winked at her. “I’ll tell you that for certain.”

Despite trying to keep her at arm’s length since the incident on the roadway, Laura had to admit she really enjoyed these conversations. Since that conversation in the back of a taxi, she’d found talking to her easy and comfortable. If she were still in High School, she would have enjoyed having her as a teacher for sure.

“Anyways onto what I actually wanted to ask before I veered into wildly inappropriately personal territory,” Kellan said and then looked suddenly nervous. “I was thinking, I know this is getting way too far ahead of myself and there are no guarantees. But if you can stop Ellen and all the other bad people and bring my daughter back to me…” She smiled nervously. “Lexi would love you, I’m certain of that. You’re everything she wants to be when she leaves high school and I’ve always wanted someone a little older for her to interact with and look up to…”

“I’m sorry, these are kind things to say but I don’t understand what you’re asking me exactly,” Laura said.

“Oh right! I’m asking if you wanted to keep in touch? You and Carmilla, you know, when this is all over.”

Yes, I’d love to. Were the first words that went through her mind. Cost them another one, still got two spare, were the next.

Two emotions surged through her, gratitude at Kellan’s offer and guilt at not telling her the truth. She felt much like she had when Carmilla asked about her mother on the canoe. Here was someone extending her such trust, yet she was unwilling to even tell her the truth.

Kellan must have seen at least some of the conflict on her face.

“I’m so sorry, I’m being way to forward, you’re just trying to do the right thing and here I am trying to push a relationship between us despite us knowing each other for about ten seconds-”

“Ms Kellan I need to tell you something.” She couldn’t stop herself, despite the warnings both in her voice and Carmilla’s ringing through her mind.

Kellan straightened her posture and leant forward. “Absolutely, I’m listening.”

The eagerness in her voice and body language was anguish. She probably thought Laura had forgotten to tell her some new development, some piece of info that meant they were closer to finding her daughter. The daughter Laura had promised she’d be reunited with so many times.

“I, um… it’s not.” Her gaze went to the ground as she mumbled before she took a breath and started again. “When we were being chased by IDSS or Corvae, whatever you want to call them on the road back from the Bishop’s house. We had a conversation with one of the goons. He died… but,
before he did he uh... he said-

“Wait, wasn’t that days ago? You never mentioned this before, why wouldn’t you-” Kellan’s face went white and Laura felt sure she could hear her heartbeat from the short distance between them. “He told you something bad and you didn’t want to tell me. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Ms Kellan, I…”

“What did he say? Tell me.” Kellan’s voice became strong and hard, but she couldn't mask the tremor underneath.

Laura looked her in the eyes. “He said that two of the missing children were already gone. He didn’t say which ones. But even if he was telling the truth, there's still two we can save and there is every chance that Lexi is one of them. Ms Kellan, I'm so sorry-

“I need to get some air,” Kellan said, standing up and striding past Laura out of the room. Her footsteps thundered down the stairs and she didn’t reply to her calls to stop.

Smacking her forehead with her palm and cursing to herself, she stood up herself to follow.

She found Carmilla at the foot of the stairs holding a plastic container full of pasta. She took a bite out of it with a fork and gave her a resigned look.

“You cracked and told her, didn’t you?”

“Where did she go?”

In response, Carmilla gestured to the front door with her fork.

“Damn it,” Laura cursed. “You know me better than pretty much anyone, can you tell me why I’m such an idiot?”

“You’re not an idiot,” Carmilla said with a wry smile. “You just can’t keep up a lie for very long. I’m proud you did for this long, actually.”

“You were right, I knew you were right. Why didn’t I just listen to you?”

“Yeah, I ask that question all the time.” Carmilla took another bite of pasta. “Relax cupcake, it’s fine. We’ll get soccer mum back and calm her down. She’s probably just…”

Carmilla paused and the fork fell into the container as something caught her attention at the front door

Laura hurried down to see that Kellan hadn’t bothered shutting it. But despite it being open, Laura couldn’t see anything outside. A thick layer of grey fog had descended on the suburb.

“That wasn’t there a second ago,” Carmilla said.

Laura ran into the living room and yanked the curtains back. The fog covered the whole suburb. She could barely make out the houses across the street. Laura looked back at Carmilla.

They both knew what it meant. They’d seen this kind of fog before.

The Leshy was here.

“Oh my God, Kellan is out there,” Laura said and dashed to the door.
“Wait!” she heard Carmilla shout behind her along with a clatter of plastic hitting the ground. “Laura, no!”

She didn’t listen and the next moment she was amidst the thick fog in the middle of the street, calling out Kellan’s name as loud as she could.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for hanging in there between the long break.
I hope everyone had a great Christmas and New Years, thank you for reading :)

The air felt cold and wet inside the murky fog. Like getting into a drizzling shower with your clothes on. Laura wiped condensation from her eyes with the back of her hand looked back at the house.

Or at least she tried to. She’d only taken a few steps but the house had disappeared from her sight. Most of the suburb had except for what lay directly under the few yellow lights along the street. She stood still, unwilling to get immediately lost like an idiot.

Her loud calls of Kellan’s name went unanswered, just as she ignored Carmilla’s calls of her name.

“Laura! You have to get back inside, that thing is out there!” Carmilla’s voice came from where Laura guessed was the front door of the house.

“Yeah and Kellan is out here with it,” Laura called back. “I’m not leaving her to get eaten, or anyone else who might be out here.”

A loud frustrated groan echoed across the street through the fog. “Stay there and keep talking to me, I’m coming to you.”

“No!” Laura said. “The only thing that it seemed afraid of was fire. Get back inside and try and find some matches or something. Anything we can make fire from.”

“I’m sure a centuries-old ex-vampire is smart enough to figure something out.”

“I’m not leaving you out there.” Laura heard Carmilla’s voice coming closer. “I’m not rummaging through drawers looking for matches while you get eaten by a folklore monster.”

Lights were appearing around her on the street. People waking up from all the shouting to find their suburb transformed into a setting from a horror movie.

As Carmilla came to her, she thought about how she might go about finding Kellan. With a start, she remembered her phone. She took it out of her pocket, turned on its flashlight and then called Kellan’s number.

A ringtone crawled out from the house, quiet and sounding like a *womp womp* to her own ears.

“Damn it,” she cursed and flicked the phone up to use its flashlight. “Where did you go?”

*There’s this little park passed the house across the street from ours. A minute or two away.*

Holding the phone out to light her way, she sprang into a run across the street.

“Hey, wait a second!” Carmilla called behind her.

“Just follow the light,” Laura called back. “I have an idea where she went.”

Next to the house across the street, she found a small concrete footpath nestled between a mass of bushes. She raced through it, seeds and fallen leaves crunching under her feet as the edges of the
damp bushes whipped across her face and arms.

She crashed through the last of the bushes and abruptly found herself off the concrete path and onto the grass of an open area. This had to be the park.

It sure looked like a place a monster might steal children right now, covered in the murky fog. Laura remembered Kellan talking about some kind of duck pond, but wherever it was she couldn’t see it. She couldn’t see anything, even the night sky above her hidden from sight.

Now that the shouting had stopped and she was out of the noisy bushes and refuse covered footpath, her surroundings fell quiet. The only noise her own heavy breaths.

The light from her phone revealed a little of the park as she flicked it around her. A tall tree to her left, a wooden bench next to her and then a shape straight ahead, off in the distance. Another tree? She couldn’t make it out.

“Kellan?” she shouted. “Are you here?”

A voice answered, but it was Carmilla’s rather than Kellan’s.

“Laura, where did you go? I can’t find you.”

“There’s a path,” Laura said, somewhat absently and probably barely loud enough for Carmilla to hear. “Next to the house.” She strode towards the shape. “Through some bushes.”

Carmilla’s response was crude and exasperated.

When the shape didn’t get any clearer, she sped up into a jog. The phone held out in front of her and her feet sinking deep into soft, wet grass with every step.

Her mouth opened for another shout, only for it to die in her throat when the shape materialised.

The Leshy stood in the middle of the park, it’s hands holding Kellan up to the sky above its head. Its tail hovered around its shoulder, the blade at the end of it aiming at her chest.

The Leshy noticed her arrival. With a low rumbling growl, it turned its head to look at her. Its eyes blinked in irritation at the phone’s light. Whether because it recognised her or it just didn’t like being interrupted before a meal, it reacted with a devastating roar. It pulled Kellan closer to its body, as if it were somehow worried Laura was another predator looking to steal her for herself.

For a long moment, nothing happened. She, stuck frozen in fear and shock. It, studying her silently.

A small voice spoke into the quiet.

“Run,” Kellan pleaded.

The Leshy growled again. The tail struck forwards and pierced through Kellan’s chest. The Leshy dropped its hands and Kellan hung in the air, the tail blade sticking out of her back.

“No!” Laura yelled.

Ignoring her, the Yeshy flicked Kellan of its tail and bounded off into the fog.

She started to dash after them, but a hand clasped her shoulder and held her back. Instinctively, she tried to wrench it off of her and twist free.

“Let me go!”
Instead, another arm wrapped around her stomach. “That thing is here and we have to go,” Carmilla said.

“That thing is here, so we have to stay here and get Kellan,” Laura said back, relaxing at hearing Carmilla’s words but not ceasing her struggles to wriggle free.

“Laura, we can’t help her.”

“Yes, we can!” Laura broke free. Or more likely Carmilla let her go. She turned to face her. “We just have to find her and then get her back to the house.”

“Laura.” Carmilla’s tone was soft. “She’s.”

“No,” Laura shook her head and took a step back. Physically retreating from the expected word. “And even if… that thing is out here and we have to stop it.”

“Stop it how? That thing almost killed us last time.”

“Yeah and you see any vines coming to drag us to the ground, or birds swooping at us or alligators trying to do… alligator stuff to us? It doesn’t have control of everything like it does on that island. The book Mel researched with said that takes time. It’s just it, nothing else.”

“Oh, just it? You mean the ten feet tall giant it with the long razor claws and xenomorph tail?”

“The next time we come across it, who knows what it will have on its side? This is our best chance to kill it. Here and now.”

Carmilla threw her hands out in exasperation. “With what? We don’t have any weapons, we literally do not stand a chance.”

Laura looked around. A feeble gesture, it wasn’t like she could see much of anything even if there was something around they could use. The Leshy didn’t have its minions, but neither did they have anything useful themselves.

“Wait,” she said, a thought occurring to her. “Kellan’s car, that would have petrol right? There’s our fire right there. And with all the trees around, we have a torch too.”

“Kellan’s car is all the way back there,” Carmilla said, gesturing vaguely behind her. “We’d never get there and back before it chases us down.”

“Not if you grabbed your motorbike out the trunk of the car and drove back.”

A growl echoed around the park. Carmilla shook her head.

“Still wouldn’t be fast enough.”

“It will be if I stay here and distract it.”

Carmilla seemed to almost physically recoil from the idea. ”Not going to happen.”

Laura stepped forward and cupped her hands around Carmilla’s cheeks. “I know that we’re supposed to be making decisions together, but I’m not leaving this park without stopping that thing and finding Kellan. I need you to trust me to stay alive somehow like I always do while you get that fire and come to my rescue like you always do, okay?”

A war raged visibly in Carmilla’s eyes. Another growl, closer than before came out of the fog. There
was no time for more words, Laura kissed her abruptly and said one more.

“Please.”

Carmilla nodded. Her hands reached out and clutched some strands of Laura’s hair before she spun around and raced away in that loping run of hers. The soft grass masked the sound of her footsteps and the fog denied Laura the sight of her almost immediately.

Laura turned back in the direction of where she last saw Kellan and the Leshy. She walked forwards, the phone held up. Its light revealed nothing and the growls seemed to echo around the park.

“Where are you?” she muttered to herself. “And why aren’t you coming out and charging me? Easier prey than Bambi’s mum over here.”

She flicked the phone to the grass under her feet and found dark splotches. Kellan’s blood. The image of the monster’s tail striking flashed through her mind.

“Where are you?” she asked again angrily, her voice rising. Her phone’s light no longer seemed to be penetrating the gloom at all, the beam swallowed up into the grey. A part of her worried that if she didn’t see it soon, the Yesy might be leaving the park and getting away. She had no idea what Baba Yaga had ordered it to do.

Gravenberg. Maybe Baba Yaga was the one with the Leshy’s leash, but this was her doing, Laura felt sure. It was too convenient that this had happened right after their encounter at Stevenson’s house. After failing to kill them there, she’d sent this monster after them and Kellan had been caught in the crossfire. Despite her efforts, someone had gotten hurt because of them, because of her.

Without thinking she threw the phone frustration.

The phone disappeared and a second later she heard a loud *clack!* of it hitting something solid, followed by a snarling howl of anger.

The fog cleared away slightly and the hulking figure of the Yesy appeared in front of her.

As it strode towards her, she abruptly realised she didn’t have a plan. It was coming towards her and she had no plan at all.

She froze as it approached, both in mind and body. The sound of its low growls mingled with her fast breaths and her heart felt like it had risen to ears. Dimly she could hear a voice, her own, yelling at her that she needed to do something, anything. But she stood rooted to the spot, as stuck to the ground as when the vines had trapped her on the island.

The Yesy’s steps were slow and languid, its eyes studying her closely. Perhaps surprised at her lack of action. Even through the fog, she could see droplets of drool falling from its mouth onto the ground. Its claws extended out of its knuckles, the sound of it like a dozen swords being unsheathed. Was this how it had gotten Kellan? Casually striding up to her as she stood too fearful to move? The tail struck yet again in her mind. Except this time it was spearing her. And then Carmilla.

That final image broke her out of her trance. A big breath exploded out of her and her brain rebooted. What could she do? How could she stay alive for a few minutes?

The memory of it charging at Carmilla on the island told her she couldn’t outrun it, not even for a few seconds. She couldn’t hide from it, the fog didn’t seem to impair its sight at all and otherwise, the park was an open space. And unlike Carmilla, she had no weapon to keep it at bay.
No running, no hiding, no weapon to defend herself. How else did something stop a predator from eating them?

Carmilla’s words back at the cabin floated across her mind. *Predators like to hunt, but they don’t like to fight.*

She didn’t have anything that she could hurt it with. But was the Yeshy smart enough to know that? In the end, despite all of its abilities, it was an animal, nothing more. An idea came to her, one that Carmilla would hate. In fact, she kind of hated it too and if it failed, her death would be so dumb she’d be glad to have no camera recording it like at Silas.

The Yeshy lost its patience. It bounded into a charge, its antlers and claws levelled in her direction.

Standing still meant death. Running away meant death.

She ran at it.

It was one of the hardest things she’d ever done. Forcing herself to run forwards, projecting as much confidence as she could muster as she charged a ferocious beast that could kill her without any effort. If this was going to work, she’d couldn’t show any fear. To that effect, she shouted as she ran, as loud as she could. A battle-cry she hoped, and not a frightened squeak.

The distance closed between them rapidly, soon its antlers and claws would gore her.

The Leshy was bigger than a grizzly bear, if she were any smaller she’d could’ve passed as a Hobbit. It had claws the size of longswords, pincer sharp teeth and a tail Ellen Ripley would baulk at, she kinda sorta knew krav maga. It was a monster out of a nightmarish Slavic fairy tale, she was a college drop out.

It blinked first.

Right before they crashed into each other, it reared up and stumbled back like a chastised dog. Its howling roars and growls turned into panicked grunts as its claws turned sideways protectively over its body. It rose up to its full height and took a few more steps back.

She doubted even a single creature of any size had ever charged it back in its entire lifetime. It didn’t seem to know how to respond. Its eyes studied her as it moved erratically. Taking one or two steps in a random direction and then immediately shuffling back.

It roared so loud that her eardrums almost burst. But she could hear the note of confusion and nervousness in it. She couldn't back down, if she did it would kill her instantly.

Stomach lurching, she took yet more steps towards it and jumped into the air.

It backed away again with a snort, claws held up. If it hadn't have moved, she'd probably have jumped right onto a claw or an antler. How long could she keep this up? How long would it take Carmilla to get back here?

She yelled and it roared right back. Somewhere around the park, David Attenborough was talking about rival animals posturing for dominance. Maybe she should pee on the ground to mark her territory or something?

The Leshy held its tail high in the air and aimed its claws towards her threateningly as it opened its jaws as wide as they would go, showcasing its yellow savage teeth. Faced with such a sight, her courage failed to let her charge again and its confidence came back. It pressed forwards, with all of
its weapons.

Without any other choice, she jumped at it again. But this time instead of falling back, the Yeshy whipped its tail to batter her away.

The force of the blow crunched into her side and sent her flying. After a long, almost surreal moment of being airborne, she landed hard on her back and rolled uncontrollably until she ended up on her stomach.

She couldn’t breathe, the air squeezed out of her from the blow. Her head spun and she struggled to remember where she was and what was happening. When she tried to push herself up, her ribs screamed in agony and she had to bite back a sob. Unable to get up, she tried to crawl. She heard the Yeshy coming up behind her, howling in triumph. It had won its first-ever fight, what a big moment for it.

Her crawls didn't last long. A giant paw landed on her legs and a thrill of terror pulsed through her. Drool dripped down onto her clothes and bare skin. It pressed down with the paw and dragged her towards it before using another to roll her onto her back. This close, she could see the black patches of scorched fur on its chest. It smelled awful, like a giant walking compost heap, little pieces of vegetation stuck in its damp fur.

Why it hadn’t already killed her seemed strange. Why drag her back and roll her over when it could have just stabbed her with its claws? Then she remembered that this was how it had planned to kill them on the island. Trapped flat on their backs with vines as it casually took its time.

She’d unnerved it with her charge and now it wanted to go back to what was familiar. To how it normally killed its prey. Its tail hovered menacingly. It could flash down at any moment.

An engine roared in the distance and her heart leapt in hope. The Leshy looked towards the sound. Its tail darted with it, aiming in the direction of the sound like a bloodhound pointing a paw. For an unlikely moment, they were both doing the same thing, staring into the gloom as the sound got closer.

A light appeared in the fog, tiny but bright.

“Carm! Over here!” she shouted.

The Leshy slammed a hoofed foot on her stomach and the air she needed for shouting abruptly left her body. Then it bellowed a blood-curdling roar at the oncoming sound.

Carmilla and the motorbike came into view. A flaming tree branch in one hand as the other steered. It took Laura a second to realise she’d put her helmet on.

*Guess she listens to me sometimes as well.*

The Leshy charged at this strange new foe. Carmilla didn’t stop or change direction, instead, she lifted the bikes front tyre into the air for a few seconds, like a jouster spurring on their horse. Laura couldn’t help a smile.

“Show off,” she muttered.

But fear soon came back. There was no way a collision between Carmilla’s bike and the Leshy would end up in Carmilla’s favour. Laura had seen what those claws could do on the island, she doubted the bike would survive even a single swipe. What was Carmilla’s plan?
Carmilla and Leshy charged towards each other, the gap closing rapidly. Right before they collided, Carmilla leapt sideways off the bike. She rolled along the grass and disappeared into the fog.

The Leshy swiped at the bike with a long arm and its claws penetrated straight through with a tortured squeal of metal. Seemingly without effort, it lifted the bike up into the air above its head. To Laura it seemed curious, moving the bike around to get a better look and pressing its nose to it to sniff.

Liquid fell out from the bike, something black. Petrol and a lot of it. Streaming over the Leshy’s fur and dripping onto the grass. An ugly fat black tongue slid from its mouth to lap at it.

Carmilla’s flaming torch flew from out of the fog and landed at the Leshy’s feet.

Fire engulfed the creature from head to toe. It howled piteously and for a moment, despite everything it had done and had tried to do, she couldn’t help but feel a stab of pity for it. Nothing should feel such pain to howl like it did and she was certain that she’d remember the sound of it forever.

The bike dropped from its grasp and it flailed wildly, trying to smother the flames on the grass. But the grass under its feet was covered in petrol and its actions merely fed the fire more. The smell of scorched fur and flesh was terrible. At last, just as Laura thought of covering her ears and looking away, it ceased its torturous howls and staggered to the ground.

It’s dead. The words floated hazily through her mind. And we're alive.

She pushed herself up with shaky arms and legs, the pain in her chest arguing passionately to stay down. As soon as she was standing, Carmilla engulfed her in a hug.

“Are you okay?” Carmilla asked, clutching Laura close. “Are you okay?”

Carmilla’s hug squeezed the air out of her almost as much as the Leshy’s stomp had and she barely breathed out a response.

“I’m fine, I’m okay.” Her voice sounded ragged and the breath she took equally so. “Some badass on motorbike saved my life. Any idea who she might be? She had a helmet on, so it can’t have been you.”

Carmilla made a sound that seemed like something halfway between a laugh and a sob. She kissed Laura’s forehead. “Safety is important.”

The fog around the park was lifting. The murky grey replaced with the half-light of early morning and the heavy black smoke coming from the Leshy’s burning corpse.

“I think we’re burning down the park,” Laura said. “First a house, now a park. I hope this isn’t habit forming.”

“I thought it got you,” Carmilla said. Ignoring the quip. “I could tell it was leaning over something and before I heard you screaming.”

“Roaring. Roaring, not screaming. Totally different and much more heroic thing.”

Carmilla laughed again and her hands started doing that thing where they roamed everywhere Laura they could touch. Then Laura’s stomach dropped as she remembered what she came out here in the first place for.

“Oh, my God,” she said. Looking around wildly. “Kellan, we have to find her.”
Their search didn’t take long with the fog lifted. A small motionless figure lying on the grass where the Yeshy had thrown her with its tail. Laura ran to her, the pain in her ribs forgotten, to be replaced by a pit of dread in her stomach.

The grass was dark around Kellan, it contrasted with how white her face looked. Her breaths were short and shallow. Two hands were pressed against her chest. They were dark too. Somehow, when she saw Laura standing over her, she managed a smile.

“Hey,” she said lightly, blood creeping out of the corner of her mouth. “It didn’t kill you. Wait.” Her eyes focused and she tried to rise from the grass. “Is it still here? You have to run, it’s not safe-”

“No no no, it’s gone, Carm took care of it.” Laura sat down on her knees next to her and pushed her down gently. Not that Kellan could have risen anyway, Laura was sure, but she didn’t want her doing any more damage to herself. “Nothing to worry about.”

That drew a short ragged laugh. Kellan looked down at her chest and then back to Laura. Her point made without needing to speak.

“Oh, okay, okay,” Laura said, her hands moving above Kellan’s chest but not actually touching any part of it. “Okay, so all we have to do is stop the bleeding, I think. Yeah, stop the bleeding and then we can move-”

“Laura.” Kellan’s voice was soft but it cut through the babble. Laura wasn’t sure she’d ever used her first name before. Ever since they’d met Kellan had often spoken her words with a nervous energy, but somehow despite everything going on, now she spoke calmly and with clarity. “I think, what I need, is for you to tell my daughter-”

No.

“Yeah, so you’re going to be fine. Okay? Okay. Just gonna stop this bleeding… and, uh, should probably. Carm? Carm’s been around for like three centuries so there’s no way she’s never had to deal with something like this. Carm!”

A familiar hand settled on her shoulder.

“Fantastic! So what do you think we should do? I’m thinking we take a look at the… at the wound and try to bandage it with something?”

But the hand didn’t move. Instead it squeezed. Tight, reassuring, Consoling.

She tried to shrug it off. When it stayed put, she ignored it. “Alright, so that’s what we’ll do. Don’t worry I’ve watched all the good seasons of Scrubs, I know what I’m doing. So if you-”

“Laura,” Kellan’s calm tone took on a measure of insistence. She was looking just above Laura, then she nodded slowly and looked at her. “Laura, I need you to listen to me for a moment.”

She took a hand off the wound in her chest and placed it in Laura’s. Laura felt her eyes start to wander down from Kellan’s face.

“No,” Kellan said and Laura’s eyes snapped back up. “You don’t have to look at that, sweetie. I don’t want you to look at that. Look at me.”

Another kind smile, how was she managing to do that?
“It’s funny,” Kellan said. “To think I told Lexi about a monster getting her in this park so many years ago. I guess there was one here after all, it’s just that it got me instead.”

Her laughter was short and shaky, but she held herself together.

“I promised you, you’d see her again. I promised you,” Laura said in a hollow voice.

Kellan shook her head. “Don’t worry about that. It’s not your fault, none of this is. You two have done so much, I’m so thankful.”

“I’ve done nothing but fail. You shouldn’t thank me, all I’ve done is screw up and-”

Kellan’s hand in her grasp squeezed firmly. Laura didn’t know where she got the strength for it.

“You’ve done nothing but try. When no one else would. Thank you.” Kellan coughed and shuddered and Laura’s heart stopped in the seconds before the cough subsided and Kellan kept going.

“I know your mother died a long time ago. So, I wanted you to know, that as one, I would have been proud to call you a daughter.”

The world went fuzzy and out of focus, she blinked but it didn’t fix anything.

“I know that you’ll find my Lexi, I know that you will.” More coughs and shudders, each one worse than the last. “I need you to tell her that I love her, more than anything in this world. And that I am so sorry.”

I am so sorry. The words sparked off the dreams in her mind. The memories.

“She won’t want to hear that. I don’t want to tell her that,” she said, her voice somehow worse than Kellan’s.

“I know. But you will.” Kellan slid her hand out of Laura’s grasp and reached it up to her cheek. “Brave, brave girl.”

Kellan’s hand dropped as she gave one final shudder and lay still.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for sticking with me through these longer waits. I really hope you enjoyed this chapter and thank you so much for reading :)
Ten Years Ago

The waiting room sported one of the softest, most comfortable couches she’d ever sat on and the window had a great view of the park outside. But as soon as the nurse left her alone and shut the door, she’d chosen the single chair in the corner. 

Laura sat forwards on it, hunched over with her arms crossed over her belly and her head bowed staring at her shoes. Idly, she decided that she should take off her backpack now that she’d sat down. The books and laptop inside it made it heavy and most times she’d be here for a while. But her body seemed to disagree and her arms remained where they were. 

The room always felt so big when she sat alone in it. The walls seemed to grow around her and the furniture became giant. Like she’d climbed through the window on a beanstalk to a land for the vertically enhanced. It was better to keep her eyes down, study her shoes. 

Today they had some dirt on them and an ant journeyed from lace to lace. Both picked up from the football oval her Phys Ed teacher was torturing her on when her name had been called out on the PA system.

By now, she’d grown used to it. Along with the whole school. The class fell silent and Mr Drubbings gave her a simple nod to excuse her. 

While the call wasn’t unexpected, her father not being at reception was. The previous times this had happened he had been. Instead Ms Jennings, her English teacher and more disconcertingly the Principal Mr Janes stood waiting for her. Ms Jennings smiled pleasantly while the Principal explained that Dad was already at the hospital and didn’t have time to come get her. So Ms Jennings had offered to take her.

This felt wrong, but her mind couldn’t quite stop whirring for her to get much out verbally other than simple ‘okay’s and ‘thank yous’. Why couldn’t dad have come? What was so important, there hadn’t been anything planned for today she didn’t think. Things had changed around without her being told before, but this still seemed weird.

Then she was in Ms Jennings car, she didn’t remember walking to it or what it looked like on the outside. A moment later they were in the car park and a nurse, a small kindly faced lady she never could remember the name of was ushering her out of the car. She remembered to thank Ms Jennings, but only when she and the nurse were already inside and halfway to the usual waiting room.

How long would she be waiting for? She thought the nurse had said her dad was on his way but she hadn't listened to her properly.
Without much else to do she started reciting her next speech. Laura had meant to give it to her tonight after school but maybe she’d get the chance now. This was a good one, she’d love this one. The product of a completely sleepless night of researching famous speakers and editing. She’d completed in art class, she could always finish tracing over her totally original and not at all a cover from a comic Buffy the Vampire Slayer sketch for that class tonight.

“It’s not about how far you have to go, it’s about how far you’ve come already,” she muttered under her breath. The words were in her bag but it was better to not have to read off of it. It felt better, more organic. Even though she was sure her mother knew she practised them over and over beforehand anyway.

She continued to mutter through the whole thing, happy that she’d got it memorized.

The door nudged open before stopping slightly ajar. Laura’s eyes shot up to it and she straightened on the seat. When nothing else happened, she wondered whether it had opened on its own, before it swung open and her father came through the doorway.

He looked ragged, his shirt rumpled and creased and his eyes red. The smile he managed for her benefit wouldn’t have fooled a toddler.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said in a shaky voice. He blinked. “What are you doing in the corner there, honey? Come on and sit on the couch with me. It’s much better on here.”

He sat on the couch and beckoned her to sit with him. She didn’t move, she was barely listening. What he was saying didn’t seem important compared to the shake in his voice and his demeanour. Something was very wrong. And in this place, something very wrong could only mean one or two things.

“Laura? Come on, come sit next to me,” her father said again.

Laura stood up slowly. Her steps were tiny and her eyes stuck downwards. Looking up meant looking into her father's face and bad things were written there.

*This was bad, this was bad, this was bad.*

She felt herself start to shake and her father wrapped an arm around her to pull her closer.

“Laura, honey. I have to tell you something. I am so sorry. So so sorry.”

“It’s bad,” she said quickly, interrupting him. “Really bad. She got worse. Like, all of sudden and you're worried that's gonna scare me. And it is, so now would be a great time for the whole reassurance act.”

“Laura.”

“But we should probably skip that part, if she’s really bad, I should go to her right now, I have this motivational speech all ready.”

“God, she really loved those little speeches, she told me that many times. She was always looking forward to them.”

In a flash, her backpack was off her back and in her lap. Her hands scrambled through her books, searching for the piece of paper. Where the hell was it? Why couldn’t she find it?

“My little speech all ready.”
Her father placed a hand over her’s, halting her frantic search. “Laura, stop. Honey, I need you to stop and listen to me.”

But then she finally looked at him and he didn’t need to say anything. The truth plain on his face.

Her heart stopped and her shaking doubled. “Please,” she said in desperation. “Please tell me it's just something bad. That we’ll have to stay here for a while or that she can't have visitors tonight or… or.”

“I am so sorry, honey. I am so sorry. We talked about this. We knew it was only a matter of time. She was already well past what the doctors said.”

“Which means they were wrong. That it isn’t as bad as they think. They’re wrong,” Laura said, obstinance creeping into her tone.

Her father didn't respond. He took a deep breath and rubbed her back with his hand. an argument clearly the last thing on his mind. He put the hand on her shoulder.

“She took a turn for the worse this morning and they couldn't bring her out of it. I'm so sorry-”

“No.”

“She's gone.” There was finality in his tone, a dreadful hollowness. “She's gone.”

The next minutes were a blur. Laura was vaguely aware of being hugged, of her father speaking. She didn't feel or hear any of it. A numbness spread through both her body and mind, any thoughts she managed to form scattered, random and mostly nonsensical.

How long they sat on the couch, Laura couldn't be sure. But eventually something her father said finally got through.

“She had something she wanted to tell you. She recorded it on one of those stick things you gave her. Is your little computer in your bag, honey?”

The words felt like cold water hitting her face. Abruptly, the numbness fell away. A flood of emotions and sensations replaced it. She couldn’t breathe, her heart felt like it wanted to burst of her chest, the ticks of the clock ahead sounded like heavy gongs and her father’s soft words were shouts.

She had to get out of this room, she had to get up and run and leave and go home. This wasn’t real yet, but it soon would be. Her father was talking about a final message. She didn’t want to hear that. Couldn’t hear that. It would make what her father was saying true.

As her father rummaged through her bag and pulled out the laptop she pressed her palms into the leather in preparation to jump up and run. But before she did, the sight of her father stopped her.

He was shaking as well, his hands almost dropped the laptop twice. He was barely keeping himself together and Laura realised the only reason he could was her. He could focus on her right now, on consoling her, supporting her. Making sure she heard her mother’s final words to her was a part of that. Something to focus on, something to do that wasn’t sit down and grieve.

If she ran, she’d be leaving him alone. Abandoning him. As much as she couldn’t face this right now, she couldn’t do that even more.

Forcing herself to breathe and her heart to calm down. She took the laptop from his trembling arms, he gave her the data stick and they sat together in the dark room to watch the video.
Her mother’s face came on the screen. Tired, pale and missing the long thick brown hair after her endless treatments, but radiating nothing but the love and kindness she always did when she looked at her daughter.

The urge to run rose again, or to at least turn the laptop off. Anything to not hear the words that were coming.

Her father’s hand found her own. She wondered whether the exact same thoughts were going through his head. She squeezed his hand and sat still. On the screen, her mother smiled and spoke.

“My Laura, my darling Laura, I have never loved anything in this world as much as I have you.”
Carmilla

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The sour-faced detective looked at her sceptically and pointed at the smoking embers of the Leshy’s corpse with his stubby, wrinkled fingers.

“So what you’re telling me is, that thing over there killed Ms Mary Kellan and started the fire in the park?”

“No, you idiot. We, I, started the fire to stop it after it killed Kellan and tried to kill us.”

“You know Ms Kellan?”

“Yes.”

“You were with her when this ‘thing’ apparently attacked?”

“Yes.”

“You decided to take a little stroll in the park in the worst fog conditions this place has ever had?”

“Is that a crime?”

“You know, you got an attitude,” the detective said. “Not a great thing for someone to have when I’m feeling pretty good about charging them with murder.”

They stood near a bench some metres away from where the Leshy had died. Carmilla slouching with her arms folded across her chest and the detective casual in his grey scabby suit. Laura sat silent on the bench, staring at her feet. She hadn’t said anything since the police and firefighters had arrived.

The first of them had come about a half hour ago. A pair of officers coming out ahead of a fire engine to investigate the loud noises and the smoke billowing out of the park. They were so shocked to see the Leshy’s corpse that it had taken them some time to even notice Kellan’s body and the blood on Laura’s hands.

They and the other police officers and then firefighters had been reasonably nice considering. It seemed the only one in the park who didn’t immediately see how obvious it was that Kellan had been killed by the giant burning monster was the one who happened to have the detective badge.

The fire didn’t take long to clear up. On the damp grass it hadn’t spread far from the Leshy, even with the help of the motorbike petrol. Carmilla tried to not spare any glances to the burned-out husk of her bike next to the monster. It would hardly improve her mood.

“Notice the giant stab wound in her chest?” Carmilla asked. “You see any claymores we might have used lying around? Oh, I know! We threw them on the conveniently nearby burning giant monster’s corpse to frame it. Congratulations, you cracked the case.”

Detective ‘she couldn’t give less of a shit what his name was’ gave a short laugh.

“Yeah, okay. It’s like three in the morning, I don’t have the will to deal with this right now. So what we’re going to do is take you down to the station and we can have another chat after I’ve had a nap, drank a coffee or three and had breakfast. See how you feel then.”
The glare she’d had since this moron had accosted them both with questions hardened, but she didn’t respond. God, she needed Laura for this stuff. She would’ve handled this conversation far better.

He looked past her at Laura. “Unless of course, your mute friend here has anything to say?” He reached a hand past her and shook Laura’s shoulder roughly. “You know these questions are for you too, little girl—”

A second later he was flat on his back and at least a dozen police officers had their guns pointed at her.

“You’re going to leave her alone.”

He flinched at her snarl and his hand went for his weapon.

“That’s enough!”

Carmilla turned around to see Detective Beattie strolling onto the park. One hand holding her big hat and the other held outwards to go with her shout.

“Really?” Beattie asked as she strode towards them, throwing her hand around to gesture at everyone around them. “There’s some freakish mutant bear or some shit over there and you guys are pointing guns at this lady? We skip our early morning coffees did we? Calm the hell down and get back to work.”

The guns dropped down and the officers went back to whatever it was they were all doing besides wandering about.

“They’re fine, Barnaby. I know them.” Beattie reached the bench and crouched down in front of Laura, concern on her face.

“Oh, I see. You know them,” the man said sarcastically as he got up from the ground with the grace and the groans you’d expect from an elderly person. “So, I guess they’re fine, don’t need to ask them any questions about the burning park or the beast or the dead person…”

“Okay, then let’s instead go with I’m the senior detective here and I’m telling you to fuck off and do something else.” Beattie dismissed him with a wave.

He shuffled away muttering. The fog was gone, but he still seemed to disappear after only a few steps. Or maybe that was just her mind helping her out by forgetting about annoying inconsequential people that would otherwise clog up her centuries-old memories with worthless junk.

“Is it true? Is Mary gone?” Beattie asked her.

“Yes.”

She nodded. “That sucks. That really really sucks.” She looked back to Laura. “I'm sorry, she was a good person. A good mother too.”

After a short silence, Beattie gestured with a crink of her head towards the Leshy’s corpse. “So I'm guessing the newest guest star in my nightmares over there did it?”

Carmilla nodded.

“And then you two killed it?”

Carmilla nodded again.
“Wanna tell me what it is, or was rather?”

“You wouldn't believe us.”

“I don't know, I'm believing a lot of things I wouldn't have before. I haven't been able to contact you because my boss has been on my ass. Somehow he knew I was still investigating this and he really didn't like it. I'm definitely believing that there's some bullshit happening with this case now. I don't think I can trust anyone at the…” She trailed off, still looking at Laura.

“Is she alright? This is the second time I've seen her like this. These things can be very traumatic. Maybe we should take her to the hospital, just overnight even.”

“I'm fine,” Laura spoke up, lifting her eyes from her shoes to Beattie’s face. “I'm fine. Did you find anything on that data stick?”

Laura’s voice was hoarse and shaky. Carmilla had to fight the urge to forget everything else going on around them and rush over to hug her.

“Yeah I did,” Beattie said, her voice becoming gentle. Even the people who knew Laura very little tended to dislike her being upset. Another part of the effect she often had on people. “But not here, too many people watching and listening. Especially brown nosing asses like the detective you had to talk to before. Half the people here would love to see me fired.”

She looked around subtly before sliding a hand into her pockets and bringing out a phone. Laura took it and quickly dropped it into a pocket of her own.

“I'll call you on that to tell you what I found out. Look, it's obvious to anyone who has eyes that that thing over there killed Mary and not you two so no one whose opinion matters is going to object to me letting you go for now. You’ll have to sign a statement at some point. But we’ll get to that later.” She placed a kind hand on Laura’s arm and rubbed for a moment. “You hang in there alright?”

Laura nodded and rose from the bench. Carmilla immediately stepped towards her and put an arm around her waist. Laura responded by melting against her and allowing Carmilla to carry her weight.

“Okay,” Beattie said, raising her voice so everyone in the park could hear. “You can go. But it’s important that you stay in the state and make yourselves available for us to contact you.” She nodded at them and turned around to talk to one of the officers.

The walk back to Kellan’s house felt surreal. A few short steps away from the scene of milling police officers around the Leshy's corpse and they were walking back through a pleasant park and a lazy suburb. How can the trip back from something so awful be so mundane?

Neither spoke, not even to the small gathering crowd of people at the park entrance debating whether they should take a look. No matter the century, Humans could be such gluttons for the misfortunes of others. She'd walked away from enough scenes of carnage to know that very well.

After she threw a snarled threat at one that approached, no one bothered them. Normally, Laura wouldn't have approved, but this time she squeezed Carmilla’s arm appreciatively.

The door was still open from when Carmilla had run out after Laura into the fog. Once through it, she led Laura to the bathroom. They passed the couch in the living to get there and Laura groaned at walking passed it.

“Yeah, me too,” Carmilla said. “Just have to get this blood off you first. Then we'll come back. Only take a minute.”
Laura stopped and held up her hands. They were covered in Kellan's blood. Carmilla could tell she hadn't noticed until now. She stayed still, her staring eyes going in and out of focus.

Her breaths became fast and heavy before Carmilla gripped her tightly.

“Hey, let's get you cleaned up, okay? I'll help.”

Carmilla cleaned each arm individually. Smooth, calming wipes, punctuated with soft kisses to Laura's cheek and the top of her head. Laura neither helped nor resisted, seemingly in her own world. When they were done, she blinked and looked down at her clean hands in surprise before uttering a quiet ‘thank you’ before her eyes glazed over again.

As promised, she took Laura to the couch after that and for hours there they stayed. The shut curtains blocked out any of the rising early morning sun, so Carmilla turned on a lamp on a small table next to her. It illuminated the living room in a tiny warm light.

They quickly found the positions that suited them. Carmilla relaxing seated with her feet on the coffee table as Laura curled up sideways with her head in Carmilla’s lap. The couch proved soft and comfortable but sleep eluded them both. Laura staring sightlessly at the room while Carmilla caressed an idle hand through her hair.

Carmilla waited for the inevitable explosion. She wasn’t sure how it would happen exactly. Crying, screaming, shaking. But whatever it would be, it would come soon. She recognised someone numb from shock and she knew full well what happens when it wore off. She couldn’t stop it, but she could make sure Laura wasn’t alone when it happened.

Laura’s breath started to quicken and her body trembled slightly. It was coming. Carmilla used her other hand to massage Laura’s stomach, trying to do everything she could to calm and reassure.

But instead of an explosion, Laura spoke.

“Cancer.”

“What?” Carmilla asked, startled.

Laura took a deep breath and rose up to a sitting position next to Carmilla. She lifted up her knees to her chin and wrapped her arms around her legs.

“My mum. That’s what happened to her.”

Carmilla straightened, her attention immediately gained. This wasn’t what she expected at all, she’d expected a breakdown, a spiral. Instead, she was getting something she’d wanted from Laura for days now. This felt like a golden opportunity, she couldn’t waste it.

She clamped down on that last thought, this was about Laura, not her. About what she needed. So instead of remaining silent and letting Laura continue like she wanted, she reached out and placed a hand on Laura’s knee.

“Are you sure you want to talk about this now? You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

Laura shook her head. “No, I think I do.”

They made eye contact. Laura’s eyes look so tired and red, but what else Carmilla saw there convinced her that Laura needed to do this.
“Okay,” Carmilla said and smiled lightly in encouragement. “Tell me about her.” She kept her hand on Laura’s knee, wanting to keep some kind of physical contact.

Laura let out another big breath and closed her eyes. “It’s actually a pretty mundane story now, considering all we’ve been through. It’s not exactly death by vampire or Immortal Sumerian God trying to end the world.”

She shifted uncomfortably on the couch. Every word seemed tough for her. This was not going to be an easy story to tell.

“You know, most people always talk about how their mum had to be the bad parent, the strict one. But that wasn’t my mum at all. She.” Laura let out a little laugh. “I think she really struggled to say no to me. Anything I wanted, anything I wanted to do. I used to follow her everywhere, didn’t matter where or what she was doing. She used to say she’d picked up a little shadow at the hospital when I was born.”

A happy glint came into Laura’s eyes.

“Following her around was like a new adventure every day. She’d always make it interesting somehow. I remember this one time going shopping. We saw this group of, I dunno gang members? Thugs? Something like that. They were bullying this lady, calling her names that I was way too young to hear. It was super public, people everywhere. But everyone was just walking by, too busy or too scared to do anything. Probably scared, I know I was. They looked so big and scary to me, I was really small then-”

“Oh, just then?” Carmilla interrupted despite herself. Luckily Laura responded with another little laugh before continuing.

“But not mum. No, she told me to stay where I was and she rounded on them. Told them off with some more words I was way too young to hear. No fear, at least none that she showed. And eventually, they backed off. Away from the crazy lady who decided she was brave enough to stand up and do the right thing. I think I was a little in awe of her after that.

Like mother, like daughter, Carmilla mused. She’d seen Laura do so many similar things, that the story didn’t surprise her at all. Picking battles with scary people to defend others ran in the family it seemed.

“And she never got tired. At least it seemed that way when I was little. I’d wake her up so early in the morning and she’d never complain. Then she’d come home from work and we’d pick right up from where we left off. This tireless hero woman that I could always count on.”

Laura’s face darkened and the happy glint fell away. “But then one day, she wasn’t so tireless. And then she went from tired to sick. Then suddenly, she was sleeping in a hospital room and her hair was gone. I think you can imagine the rest.”

She could. Back when she was a Countess, one could have changed the word ‘cancer’ to fever or cough and the story would have remained the same. A story that lost none of its tragedy no matter its countless retellings.

“Those months were surreal,” Laura continued. “It’s crazy how quickly something becomes routine. I still got up in the morning, went to school, came home. It’s just sometimes in between those things I’d take a little trip to the hospital to see mum. Ask each other how our days went.

“I remember when they told us that she only had a couple of months. But that never sunk in. She
always seemed fine when I was with her. Really tired, but nothing else. I think she put on a brave face for me, gave me the wrong impression. So it didn’t matter what the doctors were saying, what mum and dad were saying, they were all wrong. Mum would be fine, even if she didn’t know that herself yet, I knew.”

Laura gave a wry smile and shook her head. “That’s what got me upset the most. The way it seemed like everyone gave up on her just like that.” She snapped her fingers. “How could they do that? Tell her that there was no chance? No wonder she wasn’t getting any better, how could she when everyone she talked to told her she had no hope?”

“Even little Laura Hollis never gave up,” Carmilla said, her voice gentle.

“I was so sure that if she could fight hard enough, had enough motivation, enough hope, she’d get through it. And if no one else was going to give those things to her it had to be me. I used to make these big speeches. They were so dumb, I see that now, but all I could think of was how it worked in stories. The hero would be sad and beaten down and then someone would give them a speech that would pick them back up. Well, mum was my hero and I was going to pick her back up.”

Having been on the receiving end of a few of those speeches herself, Carmilla could imagine the scene clearly. Laura sitting in a chair next to her mother, pouring out words of hope and encouragement to her. A scene both heartwarming and dreadfully sad at the same time. She wondered whether Laura’s mother had felt the same way.

“I think she enjoyed them, but I could tell she didn’t really believe them. I mean, of course, she didn’t, they were just horribly plagiarized speeches made by a little girl in the biggest denial mode of her life. But her enjoying them wasn’t enough for me. I needed them to make her fight and when she accepted what everyone else was saying over me I…”

She stopped there. Carmilla didn’t think on purpose as Laura opened her mouth a few times but couldn’t seem to get any more words out. She started to tremble again and Carmilla squeezed her knee reassuringly.

“The last time we spoke she tried to get me to understand the reality again. That sometimes it didn’t matter how hard you fought or how unfair something is, that some things you just have to accept. And that her dying was going to be one of those things.”

Laura’s eyes had glazed over again, stuck in a memory that Carmilla knew from experience would stay fresh and clear forever.

“I remember seeing this numbness, this hollowness in her eyes. She had no hope, she’d completely resigned herself to it. To the fact that no one believed she had a chance. I got pretty upset, I was so selfish, I think what she needed was to hear me say I accepted it as well, or at least that I’d be okay. But I couldn’t, instead, I basically ran out of there and back home.”

Laura let out a long breath so shaky that Carmilla could track its progress from her chest all the way up and out.

“I remember going home and working on another speech. Worked on it all night and during class. Thinking I could talk to her again after school. I’d apologize and then give the best speech yet and then everything would be okay.”

“But you didn’t get to do that,” Carmilla said.

Laura shook her head and sniffed. “No, she died while I was in my morning classes. Didn’t find out
until midday at least. They took me to the hospital and dad told me there.”

There was a long silence. Then Laura’s eyes regained focus and became fierce.

“She died without hope, knowing that she’d been given up on. Thinking that nothing would ever get better. No one should have to die like that. No one should have to live like that.”

“Not even me,” Carmilla said with a smile, a nostalgic memory flashing through her mind. It felt like getting the final piece of a puzzle, that made everything else make sense. The puzzle of why Laura Hollis was the hero she was.

Laura looked back down, looking a little embarrassed. “I’ve always believed that since then. That everyone deserves to have someone to help them, to believe in them. And I know that sometimes that can make me look pretty dumb and naive-”

“No,” Carmilla said.”It's what makes you, you.”

Laura smiled for a moment appreciatively, before her face darkened again. “I know I only knew Kellan for a little while. I know that it's ridiculous that I got so attached. But for a hot second there it felt like…” She trailed off.

“Like having a mother again.”

“Is that crazy? That's insane, right? I knew her for about five seconds.”

“It's not crazy at all. She was a good person, even I had to admit that. Kind, brave, determined, yeah you two matched up well.”

“She asked me if we wanted to keep in touch after this was all over. After we found Lexi. God, I wanted to say yes. I should have just said yes. But instead, I had to tell the truth, like an idiot. They both needed something from me, and I didn't give it to them. I failed them both. Pretty much just failing everyone-”

“No. That's not what happened. Laura, listen to me.” Carmilla moved her hands up to Laura's cheeks.

“You haven't failed Kellan. Her daughter could still be out there, as well as those other kids. And if they are, we're going to find them. Okay? We're going to find them. And as for your mother, let me tell you something.”

She got off the couch and sat on her knees in front of Laura, making sure she found her eyes before continuing.

“I didn’t know her, but I know what it’s like having Laura Hollis tell you that there’s hope, that you deserve better, encouraging you to keep fighting and never give up. I can’t imagine a better person to be around in my final days. She wouldn’t have died upset that a young girl couldn’t accept that her mother was dying. She would have died knowing that she had a daughter who loved her.”

Carmilla took Laura's hands into her own.

“I'm so sorry that you lost your mother. I think I would have loved to have known her. But what you took from that. How that shaped who you are. The way you believe in people, the way you inspire them to be better, the way you try even when everyone else around you has given up. It’s why I’m here and not still stuck bringing innocent young girls to Mother to sacrifice to a monster. It's why all those people at Silas are still alive. Hell, forget all that, it’s why the world is still here.”
Tears streamed down Laura’s face now. Carmilla reached up to wipe them away.

“And it’s why I love you.”

Laura slid off the couch onto the ground and wrapped her up in an embrace. The hug warm and tight as Laura pressed her face against Carmilla’s chest. She could feel a wetness there from Laura’s eyes.

After a long moment, Laura brought her face up to Carmilla’s. Their foreheads and noses touching, their mouths inches away.

“Please don’t let go of me tonight,” Laura breathed.

Of all the things Laura had asked of her in the past, she doubted any of them had ever been as easy a request to fulfil. It felt such a privilege that Laura had opened up to her like this. To trust Carmilla enough with her hardest of memories and experiences.

She tightened the hug and kissed Laura’s forehead.

“I won’t,” she said. *And I never will.*

Chapter End Notes

I hope these two chapters have been enjoyable and thank you all for reading :)

True to her promise, she still had her arms around Laura when she woke.

The guest bed wasn’t made with two people in mind. But that didn’t matter when they pressed so tightly against each other. Laura still slept and her calm restful breaths were music to Carmilla’s ears. No nightmares, at least for now.

Keeping one arm under Laura’s side and around her waist, she used the other to brush her hair out of her eyes. When they’d found the room it had still been early morning. Now sunlight came through the open doorway and noises of cars and suburban life filtered through the windows.

Wondering about the time, Carmilla looked around the small room for a clock. The warm brown colours were similar to the other bedrooms but otherwise, it was unremarkable and clearly mostly left forgotten. Dusty, taped up boxes were lined up against one side of the room. Probably filled with old toys and family pictures if Carmilla had to guess.

Not finding a clock and deciding she didn’t care much anyway, she looked down again at Laura. A far lovelier sight than anything this dusty old room had to offer her. Normally Laura would wake up first when they were at the cottage. Or anywhere else. The only exception being a brief period when Laura had been recovering from using her Mother’s mask, the Sarratum. So many a time she’d wake to find Laura already up and about. She couldn’t help but feel a little pang of disappointment every time she’d turn over to find her not by her side.

Without consciously deciding to, her free hand began to idly brush Laura’s hair behind her ear. She listened to the comforting rhythm of Laura’s breaths.

To think she’d thought she couldn’t admire Laura more. For such a long time, she’d thought Laura’s kindness and positivity had solely come from growing up in a safe, peaceful little suburb in Canada. A borderline pollyanna born from naivete more than anything else. And while she was sure that had played a part, now she could see that the core of it was a response to pain.

Ever since becoming a vampire she’d responded to pain and suffering by retreating inwards. With nihilism and apathy. It had always seemed like the best way to protect herself. It was a marvel to see Laura’s response to it being the exact opposite. To embrace the world despite the pain, to protect others instead of herself. The loss of Ell had crushed her, broken her for a very long time. But Laura had somehow used her own loss to become better.

Her way had cost her centuries of misery and been used as an excuse to carry out the wishes of a monster. Laura’s way had shaped her into becoming a hero that had saved the world with a hug and a fortune cookie. The age difference between them was centuries wide, yet she was learning from Laura just as much, if not more than Laura was learning from her.

She stopped playing with Laura’s hair and placed her free arm back over Laura’s side to connect with the one underneath. Her head hit the pillow and she closed her eyes. She had no desire to move right from where she was and after everything Laura had been through, Carmilla wanted to be the first thing she saw when she woke up.

A phone rang. The noise of it echoed through the house. She let out a groan, a return to sleep had been so close. A big part of her wanted to ignore it. Not too long ago she would have. But if it was the phone she thought it was, the caller probably had some important things to say.
With care not to wake Laura up, she slid out from the bed and followed the sound. After staggering around tiredly and with numerous aches, cuts and bruises from last night, she found the phone discarded on the couch. The phone Beattie had given Laura at the park. Laura had probably dropped it when they got up to find a place to sleep. She picked it up and answered.

“This isn’t a good time, Beattie.”

“Karnstein? For a second there I thought you two weren’t picking up,” Beattie answered back. “What do you mean not a good time, you two have something better to do? C’mon, I’m risking my neck doing this, who knows when my boss will walk back in here? He keeps coming into my office randomly to check up on me.”

Carmilla sighed. She really didn't want to wake up Laura, but she'd want to hear anything Beattie had to say and it looked like this might be their only chance to talk to her.

“Fine. Hold on for a second.” Without waiting for a reply she dropped the phone from her ear and strode back to the guest room. Next to the guest room door was a small table with family photos and metal adornments. She placed the phone on it and shut the door behind her.

Laura hadn't moved since she'd left. At Carmilla’s gentle proddings to wake, she groaned softly.

“Laura,” she whispered. “Beattie’s on the phone she gave us. It's important.”

Laura groaned and flicked a red-rimmed eye up to Carmilla. She nodded and slowly rose from the bed straight into a warm hug Carmilla had waiting for her.

“You okay?” Carmilla said into Laura’s ear.

“I think so,” Laura. “Kinda no time for a big round of processing. So ask me that when this is over.” She kissed Carmilla on the cheek. “Thank you for everything last night.”

Laura seemed to be suffering the same aches and pains as she was. They supported each other as they staggered back to the living room before putting the phone on speaker.

“There was a lot on it,” Beattie said. “Most of it not important. School projects, homework, personal photos. I think this kid only had one data stick so she had to throw everything on it. But one folder was a lot more interesting. It had files with detailed notes on an investigation into their missing friends. Real detailed, what they knew, what they suspected, who they suspected, what they planned to do. I’ve seen less work done on cases my colleagues are assigned to. A real pair of Nancy Drews. I say they, because it looks like both Abigail and Lexi were working together on this. Did you two know that?”

“Uhh, yeah,” Laura said. “Yeah, we worked that out…”

It could be hard to remember that Beattie didn’t know nearly as much as they did.

“Really feel like I’m out of the loop here. But it does make sense, they were clearly close friends. There’s some stuff here suggesting they snuck out to the Okefenokee and saw something that sounds a lot like that thing that was burning in the park this morning. Can you believe that? How the hell did these kids manage to do that without anyone noticing?”

“Never underestimate high school girls,” Laura said, her tone wry. “You’d be surprised what they can do when they’re angry and determined.

After hearing so many stories from Mr Hollis, Carmilla was sure Laura spoke from personal
There’s also a bunch of saved files from online websites in the folder,” Beattie went on. “Which is where things get a lot weirder. Stuff on all kinds of supernatural things. Vampires, witches, werewolves, evil spirits and deities. The investigation they did was pretty well done for amateurs. But this is fantasy stuff, I don’t know what to make of it. A part of me thinks that maybe its a school or personal thing that was saved to the wrong folder.”

They looked at each other, unsure on how to respond. It was the same problem as with the parents before. It was hard to cooperate well without telling the truth, but telling the truth would turn them into crazy people in Beattie’s eyes and hence end any cooperation at all.

“Yeah, that does sound strange,” Laura said eventually. “Was there anything else?”

“Yes.” Some mouse and keyboard clicks could be heard as Beattie answered. “One file, probably the most interesting. It’s a set of blueprints for a really small building. Looks a bit like a shed or a vault even. Small but it goes a level underground. It doesn’t say where the building is, but I’d sure like to find out.”

Laura shot forwards and muted their side of the conversation. An excited look on her face.

“What?” Carmilla asked.

“We’ve seen a shed before,” Laura said and looked at her importantly.

She gave Laura a blank look.

“The high school oval!” Laura's arms gesticulated with energy. “We drove past it to get to the side with all the trees.” She groaned expressively and threw her hands up to her face. “Ugh! we drove right past it.”

She remembered it now. Kellan had mentioned the little decrepit building as they drove past. What it looked like exactly slipped her mind, but that it existed she could remember.

“Okay, let’s say you’re right. Why would they have the plans for it?”

Laura was in full flow, energy radiating off of her. “You said you saw those Baba Yaga symbols in the trees, right? Mel said creatures do that to mark her territory.”

“But I thought she was living in that swamp with her pet-” Carmilla paused and realised what Laura was saying. “Two homes that book said. You think her second one is that shed?”

“Maybe. Or maybe she’s moving. Decided to get closer to the buffet of juicy high schoolers she likes to eat. She could have left the Leshy back in her old home as a guard dog or something. It might have been too conspicuous to come with her.”

“Or too hard to control,” Carmilla said. Their thoughts were syncing up the more they talked. “But why would Baba Yaga want to live in a shitty little shed on an oval?”

“Well if you mostly live in swamps would you be all that discerning? Plus Beattie said it has a lower level. It might be bigger than it looks. Or maybe she doesn’t need much room. God, I can’t believe we were so close without realising!” Laura groaned again.

“You two still there?” Beattie’s voice came from the phone.
Laura jumped a little. They’d both forgotten her for a moment. Laura reached down again and unmuted themselves.

“Beattie we think we know where it is. We’re going to check it out. Thank you so much for your help, you have no idea how much we appreciate it.”

“Well, you’re welc- Hey wait, first you have to tell me where and what it is so I-”

Laura ended the call. “Yeah, no.”

Carmilla wasn’t surprised. There was no way Laura was going to let anyone else even get close to danger after last night.

“So, what’s the plan?” she asked.

Laura started to bounce up from the couch, before hissing in pain and flopping back down. Carmilla saw the energy deflate out of her in an instant. As if the physical pain of her aches and bruises, reminded her suddenly of what had happened last night. Laura took a deep breath and looked at her.

_We don’t have to do this. At least not right this second._ The words almost came out of her but she bit them back. That wasn’t what Laura needed to hear. What Laura needed most after last night wasn’t an excuse to stop and rest, it was encouragement to do what she did best. Saving people and stopping the bad guy.

Ignoring her own aches and tortured muscles, she got up from the couch and reached a hand down to Laura.

“C’mon, Creampuff. Let’s go save some kids.”

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_Salvation Hill High School_

Davies couldn't stop coughing.

Her normally clean and comfortable IDSS uniform was covered in what was left of her lungs and stomach and it clung to her, damp from her sweating in it for hours. Feeling like her legs wouldn’t hold her up much longer, she leant hard against one of the nearby cheap modular buildings the school had so many of.

She coughed as she rested, just as she coughed while she walked, when she talked and whenever she did anything else. She’d never been sick like this before. It was starting to scare her. Her colleagues were anxious too. They were all sick now and a few had already left. Rubens hadn’t even told anyone before he’d left and he was supposed to have been in charge after Karnstein had killed Jackson and the others Gravenberg had sent.

Feeling a little better, she tried to start patrolling down the path to the library again, before another intense fit overtook her. It forced her to her knees and her vision swam. On top of everything else, her eyes wouldn’t stop watering. When the fit was over, she rubbed her eyes and looked down at her palms. There was blood there.

_Screw this shit._ Davies took out her radio and fumbled at the switch to turn it on. “Jacques, I’m leaving. I’m straight up leaving. I need to go to a hospital. I think I’m coughing up my Goddamn lungs. Screw protecting this dumpster fire of a place and screw Gravenberg. If she wants this school
protected than she can do it herself, I don’t care how much Corvae are paying me.”

No one had seen Gravenberg since she’d strode out of her office and told Jacques he was now in charge. A little after she’d left, they’d all gotten decidedly worse with how sick they were. Enough was enough. She wasn’t prepared to die here coughing up her insides.

The radio only gave her static in return.

“Jacques? You there?” Maybe he was already well ahead of her and had already left himself. She fumbled with the radio some more. “Anyone listening? Anyone there?”

More static, surely she couldn’t have been the last dumb schmuck still sticking around while everyone else had bailed? She staggered towards the library. If anyone was still here, that’s where they should be.

Her vision flickered and for an instant, her surroundings somehow looked far worse. Vegetation suddenly covering every inch of every building, flies and mosquitoes buzzing in all directions through air thick with muggy fog, the ground wet with dirty water.

She shook her head and things went back to normal. Hallucinations now? She had to get to a doctor, she likely needed some of the strongest antibiotics known to man. She had a lot of money and a gun, it probably wouldn’t be too hard to convince people to give them to her.

Then again, her feet did feel strangely wet. She’d assumed it was sweat, but... And she had been hearing unexplained buzzing on and off for hours now.

No, she was being ridiculous.

As she reached the library she could hear someone talking quietly inside. With an angry shove, she opened the big doors and stumbled inside.

“Jacques, is that you? Who is it? Be real nice if you could pick up the radio and respond like a Goddamn professional is supposed to-”

Jacques was on all fours in the middle of the room, his back to her and his face pressed to the ground. His words were garbled and muffled, she could barely make them out.

“She wants more, she wants more, she wants more. Get out! Get out!” He coughed violently. “She wants more, she wants more, she wants more.”

“Jacques? Ah, shit,” Davies said, walking towards him. “Alright fine, I guess you can come to the hospital with me. As long as you don’t vomit on me while I’m driving.”

She reached out to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

They didn’t linger in Kellan’s house for long. Whether it be investigating police or even Beattie herself now that Laura had brushed her off, Corvae goons or monsters sent by Baba Yaga or Gravenberg, something they didn’t want to deal with would be arriving there sooner or later.

A taxi, called with the phone Beattie had given to them as Laura’s was probably either lying broken in the park or sitting in an evidence locker somewhere, took them back to their hotel room. Where they prepared to go back once more to Salvation Hill High School.
It was mostly mundane stuff, considering the danger they were about to head into. Starving, they ordered up a meal from the hotel's kitchens and while they waited for it they showered and had a change of clothes. The hot shower soothed their bodies aches and pains as well as refreshing them mentally for what lay ahead of them.

As they ate sitting on the kitchen bench like with the pizza before, they tried to come up with anything resembling a plan.

“Even without the Leshy, we still have to get past the goons again before we can even get to Baba Yaga and the kids,” Carmilla said.

“Not through many, maybe none at all,” Laura said. “It's on the edge of the oval. Last time there wasn't any guards on the oval when we first got there and that was before, well… you know.” She shifted uncomfortably.

“Before we thinned their numbers out some, yeah. So we go in the same side as last time. Except this time we head to the weird shed instead of through the trees.”

Laura nodded. “Yeah. And it’s a weekend today, so it should be pretty quiet other than however many goons are left.”

“Okay, so that’s the easy part. Let’s say from there we find Baba Yaga and the kids. Then what?”

Laura scrunched up her face and bit her lip. “I... kinda hoped that the ancient ex-vampire might have a trick up her sleeve when it came to witches?”

Carmilla looked at her blankly. “Like what? I was a vampire, not a magician.”

“Yeah, but you know stuff!” Laura said, sputtering a little. “Like that bracelet thing you gave me to protect me from your Mother. Something like that.”

“I didn’t make that myself, I had exactly one of those. Now I have none.”

“Okay, but you have to know something.” Laura blinked. “Wait, you only had one and you gave it to me? Wow, we hardly knew each other at that point, that was super kind of you.”

Carmilla shrugged. “Yeah, well. Maybe I’d been warming up to you a lot sooner than I let on.”

Laura gave her a smile that Carmilla returned.

“To be honest, my go-to against anyone who could cast a spell was to run up to them and bite them before they could say anything,” Carmilla said.

“Like Aragorn when they thought Saruman was in the woods,” Laura said, nodding sagely. “Well obviously he wasn’t going to bite him, that would have been weird. Is that... still our plan here?”

“I think I’ll go with punching instead.”

Laura sighed. “One of these days we’re going to have to come up with better plans to defeat ancient beings of unimaginable power.”

“We could wait a few days, see if we can’t work out something better.”

“No, we can’t do that,” Laura said forcefully. “Who knows how much more time those kids have. We have to go now. Even if our plan is ‘run up to the scariest witch of all time and punch her in the face’.”
They both laughed lightly before Laura found her eyes and spoke again.

“Not to sound overly dramatic or anything.” She took a breath. “But when we go, whatever is waiting for us. We find those kids and get back before we leave. No matter what. Right?”

Carmilla put away her plate and pressed her forehead against Laura’s. “Right.”

Their incredibly paper thin plan ready to go, they relaxed in their apartment for a little while. Preparing themselves for the challenge ahead. Mostly they lied together in the bed, taking comfort and drawing strength from each other. As the time grew close to them needing to leave, Laura spoke into what had been a long silence.

“Love you,” she said simply. It was all that was needed at this point.

“Love you,” Carmilla said back. And with that, they got out of the bed and left the hotel for possibly the last time.

With no other way to get to Salvation Hill, they had to call another taxi. The back of a cab was probably the strangest way she’d ever travelled into a fight. The tension in the air felt a lot like when they were descending into the tunnels to take on Mother for the last time or when they’d finally made it to the Uffizi at the end of their adventure in Florence. But that clashed against the mundanity of sitting in the backseat of a taxi as a stranger drove them casually through Savannah.

They couldn’t even talk much. To plan more or even just to give each other encouragement and reassurance. It being far too awkward to do so with the taxi driver right there.

Then their plan ran into a snag at its first step.

“We want to go around the school,” Laura said to the driver. “Not the main car park. The oval.”

“No. No, can't do that,” the driver said. “Road got shut down recently. Some kind of repair work.”

Some kind of, ‘don’t let people sneak into the school as easily anymore’ work, more like. She and Laura looked at each other. The same expression on their faces. Laura licked her lips and turned back to the driver.

“Main car park it is then.”

Aside from another of the black SUVs that had attacked them days ago, the park was deserted. This one was dirtier than those other two. It appeared like it hadn’t been used for a few days. Carmilla looked out through the window at the school. Searching for the goons she was certain would be waiting for them. She saw nothing. There weren’t any signs of life at all.

Laura paid the driver as they got out the taxi. The car drove away back down the hill, leaving them alone and in silence.

“Well, at least we haven’t been shot at yet,” Laura said.

“Something’s off,” Carmilla said. “This doesn’t feel right. Why would they let us drive right up to the main entrance no problem?”

“Maybe they’re all inside? Might not be enough of them to watch the whole place anymore.”

It didn’t sound right, she’d never had to guard a place before, but surely the main entrance would be considered something to keep an eye on no matter how few of those eyes you had. She couldn’t
think of a better explanation though. Other than it being a trap, of course.

They moved up the path to the reception building. It was eerily quiet, no sounds of birds chirping, people talking or even the buzzing of insects she remembered from both their times here. After a short walk, the reception building lay ahead of them. On their first visit, this had been where they had seen the first of the goons, but this time no one stood in front of the doors.

“I can’t believe we’re just gonna walk right in,” Carmilla said. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

The automatic door squealed as it opened. As if being forced to move against its will. The sudden sharp sound caused them both to wince.

“Well, what do you know, the school is still a shithole where nothing works right,” Carmilla said once it finally opened all the way.

They strode into the room.

The receptionist wasn’t there and the lights and air conditioning were off. Their footsteps squeaked on the tiles and Carmilla felt a wetness at the bottom of her shoes.

“What, did they take the time to clean the floors recently?” Carmilla said, looking at the ground. It didn’t look wet, but it was pretty dark without the lights on.

“Water leak, maybe?” Laura offered, looking as confused as she was.

“Doesn’t matter, let’s keep-” Realising something else was missing, she turned around to see that the automatic door hadn’t closed again. “Moving…”

They walked down the short corridor leading to the interior of the school. The door at the end of it was also wide open. Even though Carmilla could have sworn it had naturally swung closed when Gravenberg had opened it before. Through it, she could see the cracked, dirty concrete pavements and the austere modular buildings some asshole had decided were okay to teach children in. They walked past the open door and into the school proper.

Her entire vision flickered and changed. In an instant, vegetation covered the ground, so overgrown that the pavements couldn’t be seen at all. Reeds and bushes that hadn’t been there a second ago now were everywhere before them. The buildings were similarly covered. Green vines and white and brown fungus clinging to the walls. Brown dirty water pooled in shallow puddles on the ground.

Right before their eyes, the school had transformed into something resembling a swamp.

“What the hell?” Carmilla said.

So stunned by the sight before them, it took her a few moments to notice that in addition to everything else, flying insects were buzzing around in droves. She felt one on her arm and with start, she slapped it away. How long had it been there?

“What the hell?” she said again.

“Carm.” Laura tugged on her shoulder, looking back down the corridor.

The corridor and the reception area passed it had transformed as well. While not as overgrown as the outside, vegetation had encroached in there as well. Water could clearly be seen on the ground now.
and vines grew on the walls and ceiling.

“We were just there,” Laura said. “How did we not see that?”

“I don’t know. But I’m starting to think we might have been wrong about what we should have been worried about getting to that shed.”

The air felt clammy and humid as they moved through the transformed school. In some places, the vegetation was so thick that Carmilla could barely remember there was anything man-made underneath it. After the eerie quiet before they’d entered the school, now a cacophony of animal sounds assaulted her ears. Buzzing insects, chirping frogs, singing birds. They could have been back in the Okefenokee, it felt so like being in the wild.

“Gravenberg did say this place had big changes coming to it,” Laura said, slapping away yet another mosquito. “I don’t think this is what she had in mind.”

“This is all Baba Yaga. Like I told you, she’s the one in charge, whatever Gravenberg thinks.” Carmilla pointed up at a huge spider web stretching from one mass of green that must have been a building underneath to another. More of the witch’s symbols were hanging from the silk. “She doesn’t care about this school becoming more successful, why would she? I think you were right about her making a new home. But it’s more than just that shed. I think she wants this whole place and she used Gravenberg to help her take it.”

“I wonder how Gravenberg reacted to finding this out? Or will react, does she even know this is happening yet? We don’t know if she’s here.”

“Either way. It’s not her we need to worry about anymore.”

Laura seemed to disagree with that, but she didn’t say anything.

The library, when they reached it, still remained recognisable despite the overgrowth. Though it’s circular windows were covered up in green along with its brown wood walls.

“Ugh, that’s a shame. This was the only nice place here,” Laura said.

“C’mon, shouldn’t be too far from the football oval.”

“If it even is that still.” Laura picked something up from a nearby puddle. After a moment of looking at it, she held it up for her to see. It was one of the posters Kellan had put up. Another reminder that despite all appearances, this place had been a school only a few days ago.

A few days, a few hours? How fast had this all happened? And what had masked it? She searched her mind for anything she’d encountered like this. Nothing came to mind in regards to the school turning into a nightmare swamp faster than you could blink but that flicker when they’d finally seen what this place was now did remind her of something.

“A glamour,” she said abruptly.

“A what?”

“A glamour,” she repeated. “It’s like an illusory spell. You cast it on an object to make it look like something it’s not. I don’t know, like a valuable jewel look like a bauble or to make a person look like someone else. It’s a visual trick. I’ve seen it a few times in the past.”

“You think that’s what tricked us before?”
“Yeah. When it starts to fail you get that flicker in your vision when you look at one. But I’ve never seen it used on a whole place before. It’s always been little things. You’d have to be seriously powerful to cast something like that on a place as big as this.”

Laura sighed heavily and brushed a hand through her hair. “And maybe something big to sacrifice. Like maybe a child?”

Carmilla stopped walking and looked at her. “What that goon said…”

“‘Costed them one’, he said. He didn’t know what they meant, but I think we do now. Sacrificing one of the kids to… ‘fuel’ the spell or however it works. Would that make sense?”

Carmilla looked down for a moment, before forcing herself to bring her eyes back up. “Yeah.” She nodded. “Yeah, that would make sense.”

There was nothing really to say to that, so they fell into silence as they moved around the library. To her surprise, its large double archway door was wide open. Lichen grew on the doors.

Whimpers came from inside, fearful and pained. A recognizably human sound cutting through the cacophony of animal and insect noise. They looked at each other. Carmilla didn’t like what she saw on Laura’s face.

“Laura, no. Whoever is in there is not the kids we came to save. It’s probably one of those Corvae goons. They decided to get paid to work for people like Baba Yaga and Gravenberg, whatever is happening to them is their fault.”

Laura shook her head. The gesture reluctant, almost contrite. “We don’t know who it is and even if it one of those goons. I’m sorry, I’m not-”

“-Going to leave someone in pain like that,” Carmilla finished for her. She shook her head and made for the open doors. “Stay behind me.”

With the windows covered and the lights obviously not working, Carmilla couldn’t make out much beyond the light that came in through the open doors. Laura stepped up close behind her and pulled out Beattie’s phone. It’s flashlight revealed that the libraries inside had been taken over much like the rest of the school. The computers across the front of the ground floor had been completely grown over and when Carmilla pulled out a moss-covered book from the nearest shelf, it’s wet pages crumpled at her touch.

Laura moved the light around. Searching for the noise. The light hit a figure lying prone on the ground in the middle of the room. A woman, IDSS from her clothes. The whimpers were clearly coming from her. But at the light hitting her, she sprang up to her feet and stared at them with bloodshot eyes. Her pale sunken face twisted into a horrible grimace.

“More, she wants more,” the woman said, the words rolling out of her mouth in a low growl.

“More.” Another voice said to their left. Laura swung the light to find a second figure in IDSS clothing looking the exact same as the woman advancing slowly towards them.

“More… hugs and chocolate chip cookies and other generally fun and wholesome things?” Laura said hopefully.

Both responded by repeating their previous words like a chant. Laura swung the light back to the woman, she’d started advancing on them too, chanting and growling as she inched closer.
“Run!” Carmilla yelled.

They spun around and ran out of the library. The two Corvae goons cried out and Carmilla could hear them rushing after them. They headed in the direction of the oval as fast as they could.

“I can’t believe this place somehow got even worse from the last time we were here,” Laura panted out. “How about we never come back ever again?”

“Agreed,” Carmilla said and looked over her shoulder back at the goons, or whatever they were now.

She could see them, but they were well behind. Their runs were ambling jogs at best. As if they were struggling to control their own limbs.

Or something else was.

Before she could think on that some more, another former goon burst out of a door to a building so covered up in vegetation neither had registered it as such until they were right upon it. They lurched at Laura, their hands reaching for her. She grabbed her around the waist and pulled her away from them, before urging her onwards.

“Don’t let them touch you,” she warned.

They had to dodge a few more on the way to the oval. Bursting out from around corners and through hard to see doors and windows. Once past them, they fell behind quickly, but from their repetitive chants and angry shouts, they weren’t giving up the chase.

After a harrowing journey, they came upon the huge gym and music buildings and the path between them they knew led to the oval. The two structures vast size meant that they still remained recognizable. Though so ugly were the buildings, Carmilla thought they might have been improved by being surrounded by green.

After running past the buildings and down the path, they saw the oval.

It had been utterly transformed. The majority of it filled with dirty water at least ankle deep, the centre of it much more so. Dark coloured reeds covered the entire area, reaching up from out of the bog as flies buzzed around them. Any sign of goal posts or floodlights were gone, for all appearances, it had never been a sports oval at all.

Except for the familiar looking, and completely damage free she might add, road behind it and more importantly, the delapidated shed huddled on the far side edge of the area.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” Laura asked through heavy breaths as they stopped to take in the surreal sight.

“No,” Carmilla said. “This is a pretty new one for me too.”

The shouts from the former goons came closer, jolting them back into action.

“We should go round the sides,” Laura said, pointing. “It looks pretty deep in the centre.”

Carmilla agreed and they rushed into the oval turned bog. The water slowed them down and when she looked back, the former goons were gaining on them, the foremost of them at the edge of the bog.
“C’mon!” she urged. “We-”

Something slimy and strong wrapped around her ankle and she fell face first into the bog. Water rushed into her nose and mouth and her world became dark and murky. She thrashed wildly, failing to regain her balance as whatever held her foot pulled hard downwards.

“Carm!” she heard Laura shout in alarm and a moment later their hands were helping her out of the water and their foot was stamping on whatever had grabbed her.

After a few stamps, the grip around her foot fell away. Whatever it was, it was gone for now.

“Thank you,” she managed to say after spitting out some of the water she’d unwillingly taken in, Laura patted her back to help. “Watch your step, there’s something in the water.”

“More, more, more!” A former goon shouted, he was barely a few metres away.

“Actually, to hell with that. Run as fast you can.”

The mad dash through the ankle deep water and the squishy, uneven ground beneath to the shed was exhausting. Her wet clothes felt like they added another person’s body weight on her back and the air was even more humid and sticky here than in the rest of the school. They couldn’t take any breaks or slow down even a little, the former goons were right behind and something told Carmilla that them getting close would be a terrible thing to let happen.

Finally, they made it to the shed. They searched for the door behind the overgrown moss and then threw themselves against it to force it open. They bundled in and slammed the door back shut.

It was pitch black inside. Laura pulled out the phone for light. Revealing, rather unsurprisingly at this point, a room completely overgrown with vegetation.

“Remember when I said it might be nice to have a garden at the cottage?” Laura said. “Forget it, I don’t want to see another plant in my life.”

“Quick, get some light on the door. See if we can lock it,” Carmilla said.

Laura compiled and Carmilla found a latch she immediately locked. Then she found a heavy box of sports equipment and pushed it up against the door as well.

“That should hold them a little while.”

When she turned back around, Laura had lied back against a wall, panting heavily.

“What has happened to them? I mean, I’m glad they’re not shooting at us and all. But they’re acting like zombies. Is this that sickness the book was talking about?”

“I don’t think it’s a disease,” Carmilla replied, following Laura’s lead and leaning against the nearest wall to rest. “At least not a regular one. I think if you stick around in a place Baba Yaga’s got a hold over for too long, that is what happens to you. People were getting sick who worked in the swamp too.”

“Oh,” Laura said, in that higher pitched voice she tended to use when the conversation became about extreme violence or how very dire their situation currently was. “So we should probably get moving.”

“Yep.”
After a short search, they found some stairs on the other side of the room.

“They go down,” Laura said. “I think this is definitely the place Lexi and Abigail had blueprints for.”

“Better be, otherwise we just trapped ourselves here for no reason like a couple of morons.”

The stairs led them down into what she imagined used to be a basement but now resembled something more like a naturally made cave. A pool of water covered in lily pads lay in its centre, taking up most of the space. Water dripped down from the level above, the soft impacts echoing around the quiet space.

Otherwise, it was empty. Not a kidnapped child nor a terrifying witch in sight.

“Is this it?” Carmilla said after a long moment, exasperation in her voice. “There's nothing here.”

“No,” Laura said. Staring at the room in disbelief. “No, This doesn’t make sense. This must be where she lives. Why would the kids not be here?” Laura looked distraught. She started waving the phone’s light all around the room looking for any sign of the missing kids. “C’mon, C’mon. There has to be something!”

But the light revealed nothing more, the room was empty.

“Okay, Laura we tried, but we should get out of here before-”

Loud bangs and angry growls came from the above level.

“Before that happens,” Carmilla finished. “Look no one’s here, maybe Baba Yaga took them somewhere else.”

“Where else? Nowhere else makes sense.” Laura started walking around the edge of the water pool. A frantic energy to her efforts. “There’s gotta be like a secret room or passage or something. We just have to be smart enough to find it.”

“Laura, what we have to do is get out of here before those things get in-”

“No! We can’t leave until we work this out. I’m not failing anyone else, I’m finding-”

A bird burst out of the water.

It flapped around the room wildly, droplets spraying from its small black wings. Clearly as surprised to be where it was as they were to see it. After careening around the room for a few seconds, it found its bearings enough to fly past them and up the stairs out of sight.

Neither said anything for a short moment.

“Uhhh, okay?” Laura said.

“It came out of the water. How did it do that?” Carmilla said, staring at the water pool.

“Secret passage,” Laura said. “Not quite what I had in mind, but if that bird could get through one way maybe we can go through it as well.”

“Go through to where? We have no idea where that bird came from. What are we going to do, jump into the water and see what happens?”

Laura bit her lip and shrugged slightly, a small grin appearing on her face. “Would that really be the
dumbest thing we’ve done?”

*Oh God, that’s exactly what she wants us to do.*

“Laura, come on. This is crazy.”

But then came the hopeful, endearing face and the shining eyes. Laura walked over and took a hand into her own.

“I remember a time not too long ago when we were standing in front of some kind of hellmouth looking portal thing and you asked me to trust you to follow your lead and go through it together.”

“This is totally different! I knew exactly what it was. Even if… I didn’t have any idea where it would take us”

Laura smiled lightly. “I have no idea what this is and no idea where it might take us. Still trust me?”

Carmilla looked at the water pool doubtfully, then up to the ceiling as the banging sounds upstairs got louder. She sighed and shook her head. “Still killing me, Hollis.”

Laura laughed and kissed her cheek. The hug that followed was warm, despite their soaked clothes.

Hands held, together they waded into the water.
“What the hell have you done to my school?” Gravenberg yelled into the dark, her voice echoing off the narrow tunnels.

As she waited impatiently for a response, she leaned against one of the tunnel walls and sucked in deep, ragged breaths. She’d never run as far or as fast as she’d just done for at least a decade and her body revolted at the sudden burst of physical activity. She felt light-headed and her heart pounded painfully in her chest. She fought the urge to clutch at it.

But this had to be dealt with immediately, there was no time to waste. Her school had been transformed into a swamp. Why had Baba Yaga done this? How could she not understand that she was ruining everything?

The response to her yells was the slow rumble of Baba Yaga’s footsteps. Even distorted by the constant echoing, they sounded grudging and lethargic. It took longer than usual for the witch to come to her. A hulking figure ambling barely out of the darkness in front of her.

“What have you done?” Gravenberg demanded again. “My school is a disaster. Overrun by your plants, it’s flooded, insects everywhere, it’s like its been abandoned for years. I can see glimpses of it every time your glamour flickers. Which is all the time now by the way. You said it would work.”

“I told you that it would work for the time you said you needed,” Baba Yaga spoke and Gravenberg flinched at the harsh, raspy tone. It had been a while since Baba had actually deigned to speak back to her. “A time that passed days ago. That it still works at all is only due to my prodigious power and skill. Gratitude is what you should be delivering to me, not feeble complaints.”

“Gratitude? My school is ruined! Kids and staff will be arriving tomorrow morning and when they do, this is all over. I can’t cover this up. The School. Is. A. Swamp. Do you understand that?” She pointed a finger at the witch. “And if it’s over for me, it’s over for you. I can’t deliver any more kids to you when they shut the school down probably forever. And you better hope nobody comes into that shed and finds out about you. Because without me and Corvae, nobody will be protecting it.”

Baba Yaga laughed. A long bellow so loud Gravenberg winced as it bounced off the tunnel walls. Fat fingers slapped a round corpulent belly and even in the dark Gravenberg was sure she saw the flesh jiggle disgustingly.

“Do you think me so vulnerable, Gravenberg? That those who enter my domain do so without my knowledge or control? You stand where you are now because I deem it to be so. Because you have my permission. I even nicely keep you dry as you go through the water. Wouldn’t want that frail and wrinkled up human body of yours catching a chill, would we?” Baba Yaga clucked her tongue mockingly. “As for those that enter without my permission...” She paused for a moment. “They arrive to much less pleasant circumstances, I assure you.”

Gravenberg felt a slight pang of fear but forced it down. She couldn’t let this creature intimidate her, not now, when she needed them to understand how precarious their situation was.

“What you’ve done to the school is unacceptable. You have to-”

“I have to?” Baba Yaga cupped a hand around her ear. “Help an elderly woman out and speak louder please, dearie. I must have misheard, for a second I thought you were telling me I had to do
“If you want more kids—"

“I do want more. And as you said, tomorrow I will have many.” Baba Yaga’s voice took on a singsong quality and she made a walking motion with her fingers. “One by one they’ll come through those doors and into my waiting arms. Oh, such a feast I will have. A banquet fit for royalty and an army of slaves to help me prepare it.”

“N- no, you can’t do it like that. That’s way too public. The deal was—"

“The deal was that you would use my gifts to improve your tiny pathetic school and provide me with a constant supply of food. The deal was that you would handle everything. But you have wasted my gifts with your incompetence. My glamour should have given you enough time to clean up the mess from Karnstein’s night time visit. But you did not.”

“That’s not my fault, there were bodies, blood, ghost remains, a destroyed office. How could I clean all that up while also—”

“You were supposed to track down and kill Karnstein and her companion. But you did not.”

“How could I know that the Corvae IDSS team would be so worthless? If you’d just listen to me—”

“And now, thanks to your lies. My beloved pet has been killed.”

Gravenberg opened her mouth and closed it again. Shocked into silence. The Leshy was dead? On the rare occasions that she’d seen the beast, it had appeared invincible. How could Hollis and Karnstein have killed it?

The first part of Baba Yaga’s sentence registered in her mind.

“Wait, lies? What lies? I’ve never lied—”

Baba Yaga stamped her foot and the ground shook. Her anger echoed around the tunnels.

“You told me that Karnstein was no longer a vampire!” The harshness of her voice was like nothing Gravenberg had ever heard before. A thousand nails scratching on a chalkboard. “‘Karnstein is mortal now’, your words. I trusted them to be true. But how else could she have defeated my Leshy than with the power Inanna entrusts to her bloodsucking stooges?”

“No,” Gravenberg said, flinching and stepping back. “She’s human, I swear. I can show you the video files. I…” She paused, remembering that she doubted the creature had any idea what a video or a file even was. “She is a human, I promise you. If they killed the Leshy, it would have been Hollis that thought of a way. You shouldn’t underestimate—”

“I don’t care about whoever this Hollis is. Karnstein is Inanna’s creature and it is they who concern me.” Baba cut the air with a dismissive hand. “I am done with you. Either you are a liar or you are a fool. I care to be allies with neither.”

A rush of anger spread through her, overcoming her rising fear. She clenched her fists and stood tall. “I will not be talked down to by some disgusting fat lady that cowers in tiny tunnels underground that smell like shit. I won’t be dismissed by a moron who still thinks she’s living in the middle ages. You need me and you’re going to listen to me!”

Baba Yaga didn’t respond at first. Her silence allowing Gravenberg’s outburst echo around them.
Gravenberg felt her fingers inch towards the rocks in her pockets. Had she gone too far?

Baba Yaga laughed. Another hearty bellow that threatened to blow out Gravenberg’s ears.

“I don’t live in these tunnels, Gravenberg.” She spread out her arms in a gesture. “This is my pantry. *I keep my food here.*”

Baba Yaga advanced out of the darkness and Gravenberg noticed their predator smile baring dirty yellow teeth. Her finger dived down for her rocks before a force lifted her into the air and threw her against a wall. Without warning, vines wrapped around her, pinning her to the wall and her arms to her sides. She tried to cry out, only for more vines to cover her mouth.

“You were useful for a time and you did show promise, but now I grow bored of you,” Baba Yaga said, turning around and ambling back down the tunnel she’d came through. “You’re much too old and stringy to be a meal for me. But I have many other pets I need to feed from time to time.”

She was falling.

That much she was aware of and not much else. A moment before, she and Laura had waded into the water and now she was falling.

She could see nothing but dark and murky grey around her. Clouds? Was she falling through clouds? Her ears were overwhelmed with the sound of air rushing past her.

Her hand brushed across something soft and familiar she couldn't see. *Laura!* Her arm more specifically. She clutched her fingers around it. Wherever they were heading, she didn't want to get separated. She tried to speak but the air was so fast and thick it was like trying to speak underwater.

The grey clouds cleared and she found herself staring at a narrow river she was rapidly falling towards.

Instinctively, she thought to pull Laura towards and above her to take the brunt of the impact. But before she could put that thought into action, they hit the water.

It hurt. It hurt a lot.

It felt like a giant had punched her entire body and the next moment she found herself up against a large tree growing out of the water. She must have blacked out from the shock and pain of the impact. For how long she couldn’t be sure.

Blinking rapidly to clear the water from her blurry eyes, she looked around in time to see Laura slowly floating past her face up and unconscious. She shot out a hand and pulled her up against the tree alongside her.

“Laura,” she said, tapping her face and shaking her. “Laura, come on.”

Laura groaned and her eyes blinked open.

With a sigh of relief, Carmilla pressed her forehead against Laura’s chest.

“Oh me worried for a second there, Creampuff.”

“Now I know how Luke felt when he crashed into Dagobah,” Laura said, wincing and looking
around her. Carmilla did the same.

Now, this was more like what she'd thought the Okefenokee would be like and closer to the nightmarish bog she and Mattie had suffered through that she’d mentioned to Laura. It was dark. Wherever the sun was in relation to them, it wasn’t piercing through the thick grey clouds above. Gnarled and wrinkly trees surrounded them. Their misshapen roots twisting together in knots before diving into the black water. Above her, their branches were much the same.

Nothing stood by itself in this swamp they’d found themselves in. Every branch and root wrapped around another and every plant grew on, under or alongside another plant. To say where one tree or shrub or anything ended and another started seemed impossible. Much of the vegetation was the same strange green colour from the island they’d found the Leshy on. The colour added to the sickly vibe the place had. As if everything was slowly being suffocated in the twisted mass of green.

Turning from the slow-moving river to her right she noticed a small bank to her left. A tiny crevice of dry land that looked real good right now. She gestured at it to Laura and they waded onto it.

It turned to be more damp than dry, covered in wet dirt and plants. But it was still a lot better than being in the river. They stayed huddled together, shivering from the cold. At least there wasn’t a breeze, though the lack of a wind or, as she suddenly noticed, any real sound at all gave the place an eerie stillness.

“Kinda wondering whether we would have been better off where we were,” Carmilla said.

“There were zombies where we were,” Laura replied through chattering teeth.

“Oh yeah. Good point.”

They both sat up on the bank, their hands instinctively finding each other as the did so. In such a threatening place, keeping in physical contact felt good.

“Now to figure out where here is,” Carmilla said. “We're not at the school anymore, that's for sure. Are we even in the same country?”

“It didn't feel like that portal in Italy,” Laura said.

“Yeah, this was different. Those portals take a few seconds to get you where you're going.”

“I remember. And for those few seconds, you're in Willy Wonka’s ludicrously out of place for a children’s movie creepy tunnel. Not a fan.”

“But with this, We waded in and then we were falling into this place. One step and we were right here.”

“Like the Library!” Laura burst out. The glow she only got from working something out on her face. In the dim light, it lit up her face like a light bulb. “That’s just how the doors in the Silas Library worked.”

“Well sure, but those were completely different. They didn’t take you to other places on earth, they took you to…” She trailed off, her thoughts catching up with Laura’s.

“Other dimensions,” Laura finished for her. “‘Two Homes’. One here and one far away. That’s what confused us, where was ‘here’ and where was ‘far away?’ What if ‘here’ literally meant earth? Our dimension? Here.”
“And far away…”

“And another dimension. Baba Yaga’s dimension I guess.” She gestured around them. “This horrible, horrible… horrible place.”

She felt a rush of pride. Laura would often play it down, pointing out that she wasn’t some scientist or math genius, but her intelligence constantly impressed Carmilla. Not only had she fallen in love with a hero, she’d fallen in love with a smart one too.

“I think you might be right,” she said. “But you do realise this means not only are we facing a powerful witch with pretty much no plan. We’re facing a powerful witch with no plan in a dimension she literally owns.”

Laura paled. “Yeah, well when you put it that way, it kinda sounds really bad.”

“Cupcake. It is really bad.” Carmilla sighed, standing up and looking for a way to proceed. Which was tough, considering they didn’t know anything about where they were, what else was around or what might try to kill them on the way.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Laura said, her voice growing serious. “It’s not just us we have to be worried about.”

“I know, I know, we have to find those k-”

“No, I don’t mean that. Though, yeah we do. That ‘glamour’ thing you were talking about? That was still working on the outside. It only broke down when we went inside. What if it’s still like that tomorrow? It’s a school day tomorrow.”

Carmilla cursed under her breath and turned to Laura, understanding what she was getting at immediately.

“They’ll be kids streaming in. They won’t have any clue that something is off until they walk through those doors.”

“And straight into those zombified Corvae goons. And whatever else is now at that school.” Laura shook her head and found Carmilla’s eyes. “If you’d have asked me before, I’d have been pretty fine with just rescuing these kids and getting out of here. But it’s more than that now. We have to find a way to stop this Baba Yaga right now. Before it’s too late.”

She nodded. There would be hundreds of kids, children, entering the high school tomorrow. All of them walking right into the jaws of Baba Yaga. Even her old vampire self well before meeting Laura would have baulked at such a thing.

As for the person she was now.

“You’re right,” she said. “We can’t let that happen.”

Trying to get a move on, she decided to pretend not to notice the warm gaze and smile she could feel Laura direct her way. If she turned to see them, it would be difficult to focus on the task at hand of getting out of here.

A task that seemed pretty challenging from where she was standing. The vegetation on both sides of the river was much too thick to walk through. An impenetrable barrier as impassable as any man-made wall. That left the narrow river, which while slow enough to be easily waded through in either direction, was much too cold for them to travel in for very long. Stopping Baba Yaga would be even
harder if they both had hypothermia.

“I don’t know where to go from here,” she admitted to Laura. “I really don’t want to get back into that-”

The ground fell away underneath them. Melting away like it was a drawing someone had taken an eraser to. Caught utterly off guard, they plummeted into the water underneath. Coughing and splashing wildly, Carmilla found herself being pushed by the water back into the river.

A moment ago it had been slow moving, but at a snap of a finger it had speeded up considerably. As soon as the water pushed her into the river, it’s strong current dragged her helplessly along. Unable to fight the current at all, she instead found Laura beside her and clutched their arm as hard as she could, desperate not to let them get separated.

Other than that, it was all she could do to try to keep her mouth and nose out of the water enough to breathe. The current buffeted her ruthlessly, one moment she’d be on her back, the next on her side or stomach.

 Abruptly, the current stopped. Leaving them floating in a daze and coughing out water.

“You okay?” she managed to gasp out. Shaking her head to try to clear the water from her eyes.

“Yeah,” Laura said. “What was that?”

Before she could reply, a voice boomed from afar. It sounded like an old woman’s, but impossibly harsh.

“Mircalla Karnstein. Welcome to my home. I am so grateful for your visit. I get so few willing visitors here. And look, you even brought me a meal as a goodwill present. How kind of you.”

A shiver that had nothing to do with the cold went down her spine. Her and Laura’s eyes met for a silent moment.

“Laura,” she said, reaching for her.

Before her outstretched hands could reach her, Laura cried out as something sucked her under the water. In a blink she was gone, a few silent ripples in her place.

“No!” Carmilla shouted, splashing her hands where Laura had been in a frantic attempt to find her. The black water revealed nothing under its surface and when she dived under, it may as well have been a void for all she could see.

“Laura!” she shouted again when she resurfaced. Her heart raced, a feeling of cold dread creeping through veins. She was gone and she couldn’t find her.

She was gone.

“Oh please. Let's not put on a false show about actually caring about some human pet you brought along. I know from experience that all Inanna’s creatures care for nothing but themselves.”

“Where have you taken her?” she shouted, her eyes still searching fruitlessly for any sign of Laura.

“My Pantry,” the voice said simply. “But I think you have your own problems right now.”

Carmilla looked up from the spot where Laura had vanished and saw where the river had taken them.
Before her lay a river bank clear of the gnarled trees that smothered all else the eye could see. Starting from the edge of the river, two parallel rows of burning torches made a path. Her eyes followed it up until it led to a huge hut. The hut sat in the middle of the clearing, its wooden walls sloping inwards and its triangular straw roof reaching up as high the trees. Grey smoke the same colour as the clouds in the sky seeped through the straw, swirling in an ominous cone above the hut before disappearing into the overcast sky.

The torches stopped at the doorway. A large wide open arch with bright orange beyond it. Its shape crooked strangely in such a way that Carmilla couldn’t help but see a grimacing open mouth with fire instead of teeth.

The entrance to the lair of Baba Yaga.

“Nice place,” she spat out. “Not over the top and self-important at all.”

“I'm glad you like it,” Baba Yaga’s voice boomed out from the hut's entrance. “Why don’t you come in and take a closer look?”

Her eyes went back to where Laura had disappeared under the water. “I’m kinda hungry, I’d rather see this pantry of yours.”

A cackling laugh floated out from the hut. “The idea that I’d want to eat someone as old and spoiled as you. I’d get more pleasure drinking the pus from a boil.”

The water around her displaced violently and two enormous alligators emerged out of the black water. They flanked her, their massive jaws open and barely an arm stretch away.

“It wasn’t a request.”

The alligators advanced on her, giving her the choice of their teeth or moving towards the hut. Taking one last look at the spot she’d last seen Laura, she chose the latter.

*I’ll find you. I’ll find you. Just hang on until I do.*

The alligators followed her up the path. She could hear their footsteps and guttural growls. She kept her eyes on the hut, her mind racing to come up with a plan. Nothing came to mind. The one where she ran up to Baba Yaga and punched her in the face was looking dumber by the moment.

At the hut entrance, the alligators stopped. She glanced back at them to see they’d gone completely still. As if someone had flicked an off switch on them.

When she stepped through the entrance, the first thing she noticed was the skulls.

They lined the walls, stretching up into the ceiling as far as she could make out. Blackened and most far too small for Carmilla to want to think about. She could see them thanks to a number of hanging braziers that lit the room with an orange glow. All the skulls were facing her as she walked in, watching her through empty sockets, cruel grins fixed on their faces.

Next, she noticed the intense heat. It felt like walking into a sauna, the cold she felt outside immediately forgotten. A haze blurred her vision and caused her eyes to water. A large cauldron in the middle of the room appeared to be the main source, steam rose from the bubbling liquid inside it in a constant stream up into the ceiling and through the straw.

Passed the cauldron, Carmilla could see steps leading up to a big chair on a raised platform. A large figure sat on it, obscured by the cauldron’s steam. She moved to the side of the cauldron to see them
Baba Yaga sat in the chair like it was a throne. Her legs spread out and her flabby arms relaxing on the armrests. The prominent hunch in her back forced her head to lean outwards, her long crooked nose hanging over a round belly so fat that it billowed out from the collection of brown rags she’d clothed herself in. Black beady eyes, small for her round pudgy face, watched her as she moved. A malicious glint clear in them.

Carmilla had never seen the witch in person before, but she had no doubts that it was her.

The witch was massive, larger than any person she’d ever met before. Amazon woman had been freakishly tall and Gustav might as well have been half giant but Baba Yaga dwarfed them both. A body as wide as it was tall. A sheen of sweat could be seen anywhere that wasn’t covered in rags. Combined with the colour of her skin, pallid and grey, it made her look like some kind amphibian. A colossal toad that had decided to walk upright on land.

“I thought she’d forgotten me. Your Master,” Baba Yaga said from the chair and Carmilla winced at her voice’s harshness. “Or is it ‘Mother’? I vaguely remember her having her pet monsters call her that. So like a God, to use words for family to describe her possessions.”

“Oh please!” Baba Yaga lifted up a hand and rested her chin on the back of it. Her mouth curled into a smile that showed rotten, yellowed teeth. “I can smell her within you. You might have somehow convinced imbeciles like Gravenberg that you’ve left Inanna’s service. That you’re just a regular human being. Pah!” She spat a dark glob that flew across the room and landed in the cauldron. “If you were either of those things you’d be dead. Inanna suffers no traitors.”

“Inanna isn’t here anymore.”

“Oh, that I know!” Baba shifted in her seat energetically and pointed at Carmilla with the hand she’d been resting on. “I felt her go.” Her crooked smile widened and her eyes glinted. “The Queen Bitch is gone. But she didn’t leave completely did she? I think not. I think she’s left you here. Maybe that Afrikanna too. She’s drifted up to the heavens beyond but her foul stooges still remain to carry out her bidding, don’t they? Don’t they!”

More globs spewed from her mouth and her eyes widened manically. The fat finger she had pointed at Carmilla shook.

More globs spewed from her mouth and her eyes widened manically. The fat finger she had pointed at Carmilla shook.

She thinks I’m still a vampire. Carmilla realised. And more than that, still her mother’s pawn. She bit down on the urge to argue the point. Could she use this to her advantage? Was the only reason Baba Yaga hadn’t tried to kill her yet that she thought Carmilla more dangerous than she really was?

Affecting an air of confidence, she loosened up her muscles and started pacing around the hut languidly. Until she had something better, pretending to still be the three centuries old vampire felt like her best option.

“And now, the moment I pop my head out from under the ground, you show up. An assassin Inanna has sent to end me,” Baba Yaga said.

“You were hiding from Mother,” Carmilla said. Her words following along as her mind worked. “You left Europe, your home and came here. Mattie said she crossed paths with you and you almost cursed her before Mother stopped it. Was that why you ran and hid?”

Baba Yaga snorted. “That squabble with your vampire brethren meant little. Inanna already disliked better.
me. Said I drew too much attention. That people like us were better off in a world where humans didn't think we existed. And I was jeopardising that.” She shrugged and the chair groaned plaintively. “Never made any sense to me. Humans can't be in fear and awe of us if they don't know who we are. Since they first started coming down from the trees humans have served and revered me. I see no reason why that should change.”

Carmilla gave her a dubious look as she stopped pacing and folded her arms. “‘People like us.’ What, are you a God too?”

That drew a cackle. And as Baba Yaga laughed, the black skulls laughed with her in a chorus of rattling teeth that reverberated around the hut.

“I am Baba Yaga,” she said simply after the rattling stopped.

When the witch said nothing more, Carmilla continued her train of thought. “So you and Mother had a fight and you ran. Hid in your swamp for years. But now with Mother gone, you’re going right back to enslaving people and eating their children? You know some people use their downtime to contemplate their life choices, maybe realise how much of a dick move that is.”

She recognised the words coming out of her mouth as Laura’s. Without Laura beside her, she’d started cracking the dumb jokes that they’d usually be making.

Baba Yaga tilted her head sideways. “You’re different than I expected. Not like Inanna or her other daughter at all. Such righteousness from a pet monster Inanna has sent to murder me.”

“Maybe she had a point. Did you ever stop to think about what happens when people realise you exist and what you’re doing?”

Baba Yaga rose from the chair. The wood underneath her creaked and how the steps suffered her weight as she ambled down them without shattering Carmilla had no idea.

“I am not concerned in the slightest about humans and their pathetic steel and arrows.”

Something clicked in Carmilla’s mind. *Steel and arrows?*

“Wait. Just how long have you been hiding here exactly?”

“Too long!” Baba Yaga spat as she reached the bottom of the steps and then let out a frustrated roar. The skulls rattled with her again, as if she were the composer of the creepiest concert of all time.

She ambled quickly, far more quickly than Carmilla would have believed her capable, to her cauldron and took a large ladle from the ground to stir it. After a moment she lifted some of the liquid out, a hideous black goop that smelled like death.

As Baba Yaga stirred, Carmilla thought to use the opportunity to look around, to find a weapon even. But while the witch focused on the cauldron, the skulls watched her closely. A thousand pairs of eyes alert for any wrong moves on her part.

Baba Yaga let the black goop drop back into the cauldron before throwing the ladle violently to the ground. It hit the side of metal pot on the way down with a heavy clang.

“Empty. For so long it’s been empty. I have had to sit here with no food, no sustenance. Even the few scraps Gravenberg has thrown my way I've had to use to feed my spells rather than myself.”

“Yeah, I can tell. You're really wasting away,” Carmilla said in a drawl.
“But no longer. Tomorrow, I will finally break my fast with the biggest feast I’ve ever had. Finally, I will have what I once had before your Master ruined me. My pantry will be full, I will have an army of servants to do my bidding, I will transform that grey cement monstrosity into a home worthy of one such as me. And once more the world will remember who I am. Baba Yaga! And with that remembrance will come the fear and awe that I am owed!”

She breathed heavily after her wild rant. She put a hand on her knee to steady herself, before speaking again.

“Well, maybe tomorrow. According to Gravenberg, that’s when they’ll all come again. Apparently, it’s a ‘Weekend’? What even is that? I have no idea. What’s important is that they’ll come soon enough.”

“Yeah, what would happen ‘soon enough’ is your new home getting bombed out of existence once everyone works out that a real-life evil witch lives there, you idiot.” Carmilla shook her head. “But by then you’d have killed and eaten God knows how many kids and I’m not going to let that happen. Bring Laura back, let go of the kids you’re keeping here and crawl back into your little hole. Or else.”

Baba Yaga’s brow furrowed, her eyes narrowing.

“You weren’t lying earlier after all, are you? You care about those kids and the girl you brought with you. Inanna would care nothing for either, so why should you? Unless…” She trailed off, tapping her chin with a fat finger. “Was Gravenberg telling me the truth? That you turned your back on Inanna for some girl? That you two are the reason she’s gone?” Baba Yaga’s mouth curved into a smile that showed teeth.

“She also said you aren’t a vampire anymore. And if that is true, I have no need to continue this conversation. There’s no reason I shouldn’t just kill you, here and now.”

Carmilla felt a thrill of fear as her one defence melted away.

“Are you really about to get into a fight with a vampire on the word of someone like Gravenberg?” she asked, desperately trying to sound confident.

“She was right about everything else it seems. I did find it strange, the way you choked for breath while in my river and that you sweat like a pig in my hut. Since when do dead things need to breathe or sweat?”

Without thinking her hand went up to her cheek and immediately felt a wetness there. Her eyes met with the witch’s and she knew her deception was over.

Another cackle, another chorus of rattling and Baba Yaga advanced upon her.

“Gravenberg said you and the blonde girl are lovers, yes? Rejoice then, for you’ll be together forever. I promise that when I’m done with the pair of you, I’ll find your skulls a spot on my walls side by side.”
As soon as she went under the surface of the river her world disappeared to be replaced by complete darkness. Water rushed into her mouth and nose as a powerful force dragged her down. It didn’t feel like something grabbing her and pulling, it felt more like falling from a great height. The force so strong, so inexorable, it might as well have been gravity.

She began to panic, her arms and legs flailing wildly in a futile attempt to fight back to the surface she couldn’t even see. She’d had no time to take a breath and already her mouth begged her to open up and take a breath.

As she fought the urge, without warning, Laura suddenly found herself landing on solid ground amidst a deluge of water. With great relief, she realised she could breathe again and she alternated between greedy, gasping breaths and long coughs. As she lay on the ground, water poured onto her back and the ground around her. It began to slow and after a few moments, it had become a trickle.

She rolled painfully onto her back to see a hole in the ceiling close itself up. Wherever she was, clearly Baba Yaga wanted her here.

Taking a moment, she lay on her back coughing out water and calming herself down. The journey down here had been one of the scariest moments of her life. The combination of being unable to breathe and being dragged down into total darkness utterly terrifying.

“Carm?” she yelled and her voice echoed all around. “Carm?”

Other than her own repeating voice, she got no answer. Carmilla must not have been sucked down with her. Which meant she was still up above, alone with who she had to assume was Baba Yaga.

Groaning as her muscles complained and her head spun, she forced herself to her feet. She couldn’t let Carmilla face the witch alone. She had to find a way back to her.

When her head stopped spinning she saw that she’d been deposited into a dark tunnel covered in moss. Water dripped from the ceiling and trickled down the walls. She was soaked as well, her clothes sodden and heavy and her eyes blinking to clear the droplets falling onto them. Shivering, she clutched goosebump-covered arms around her chest.

“Okay, it’s on now, evil witch lady. We already did the spooky dark tunnels thing. You’re being super inconsiderate of some deeply repressed memories.”

She blinked and her mind filled with images of a writhing mass of huge serpents chasing her. She shook them away.

“Yeah, because you really needed to make this place scarier, didn’t you?”

Her steps squelched on the damp ground. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she saw that rather than one single tunnel, she was in a maze of them. Logical Laura Hollis argued for mentally mapping each new twisting and branching round tunnel entrance she came across as best she could in a bid to not get lost. Cold, wet and tired Laura Hollis desperate to get out of here and find Carmilla rushed through them at random. Carmilla needed her now and if she stayed down here too long she’d likely freeze to death. Just as when she’d argued against waiting before coming to the school, this was no
time to indulge the side of her that liked to carefully plan each step.

No matter which new tunnel she chose, everything looked the same. Her steps became quicker, mostly out of rapidly increasing anxiety, but breaking into a jog also warmed her up. A dark thought grew in her that maybe everything looked the same because everything was the same. That no matter which direction she chose, she’d magically end up back where she’d already been. It sounded like something an evil witch would do with a creepy labyrinth of tunnels in her own personal dimension.

Right as she considered stopping and trying something else, she finally found something different. A tunnel entrance that appeared to lead outside. She could see more misshapen trees and the grey clouds beyond it.

But when she approached, a mass of green vines sprang from the walls to block it off. One whipped in her direction, slapping her arm painfully before retracting back.

“Argh. Alright, alright. I get the message. No leaving.” She backed away and the vines melted back into the tunnel walls.

She sighed in frustration. What now? What was the point of even exploring further if any exit would be blocked anyway? Unsure of what to do, she leaned her head against a dry looking part of the walls to rest.

A voice, the first thing she’d heard in the tunnels that weren’t an echo of her, rang out ahead. Shocking her back to alertness.

“Help me, help me, please.”

It sounded muffled, distorted. Though that may have been only the effect of the echo.

“Hello,” she called out to it, her heart beating rapidly with excitement. “Lexi? Abigail? Are you one of the kids? I’m here to help.”

“Help,” the voice repeated.

“Keep talking. I’ll come to you. Keep talking.”

The voice’s owner complied and more muffled and weak sounding pleas for help came down the tunnels towards her. Despite the echo effect, she managed to follow it.

“Help me, please.” Close now, she’d almost reached them. It had to be one of the kids. Was it Lexi? They sounded female. She followed the voice through another tunnel entrance.

A force struck her hard in the back of the head and she fell face first onto the ground.

“I gave you a chance, Hollis. You could have just left. Gone back to your happily ever after. I gave you that chance.”

Laura recognized the voice. She turned over to see Gravenberg standing over her, a gun in her hand.

“You chose this,” Gravenberg said through a snarl. “You chose to stay and meddle with something that had nothing to do with you. That you had no part in!”

The gun in her hand shook and her voice grew louder after every word.

Laura slowly sat herself up and tried to ignore the stabbing pain where Gravenberg had hit her.
“I’m guessing you noticed that your school has had some pretty radical renovations. Probably not the big changes you had in mind, huh?”

Gravenberg’s clothes were wet and tattered. A whole section of her trousers around her thigh was missing. Underneath it, Laura could see a ghastly looking burn on her thigh. Her whole body was trembling and were they not so close, Laura would have felt pretty confident that Gravenberg wouldn’t be able to hit her with that gun. Perhaps that had been why she’d lured Laura in with the muffled pleas for help.

“Let me guess. The evil witch that you decided to do a supervillain team up with, you know, the one that literally eats children? She betrayed you. I’m so shocked, how could you ever have seen that coming?”

“She strung me up in the walls like I was just another piece of meat in her larder. Took the last of my rocks to get out.” Gravenberg tilted her head towards the wall to Laura’s right.

Vines like the ones protecting the exit she’d come upon covered it, most blackened and smoking. Whatever energy or magic infused within them burned out. Laura saw a number of rocks like the ones she’d seen Gravenberg use before on the ground. A couple were within arms reach.

“I had her under control. I had it all under control. But then you showed up and you ruined everything!” Her scream of the last word echoed around them. “My school destroyed, my chances of joining Corvae ruined, my life.” She gave a wild, ragged laugh. “Probably about to end real soon if I can’t get out of here. It’s all because of you, this is all because of you!”

Gravenberg pressed forward with the shaking gun. “But it’s not just me that’s going to suffer. Baba Yaga is planning on taking every last child that walks into the school tomorrow. With me in charge, it would have been the odd kid here and there. Nobody would have noticed. But thanks to you, they’re all going to die.”

Laura didn’t reply. Memories of the desperate parents at Kellan’s house flashed through her mind. Tomorrow there would be so many more people just like them and she’d be part of the reason why.

“Now I myself couldn’t give less of a shit about that,” Gravenberg said. “But I want the last thought you have before you die to be that not only did you fail to save anyone. You got a whole lot more people killed.”

Gravenberg took a deep breath and the gun steadied in her hand.

“This is all your fault,” she repeated. “I’ll be sure to tell Mary that when I track her down once I’m out of here.”

Laura scraped a hand along the ground towards the nearest couple of smoking rocks and flung them at Gravenberg. They burned at her touch and Gravenberg flinched back to avoid them, bringing up her hands to her face protectively.

Seizing her chance, Laura sprang to her feet and launched herself at Gravenberg. The old woman toppled over as the gun went off. The shot nearly deafened her in the confined space and her ears started ringing painfully.

They fell to the ground as they tussled. For years she’d prided herself on knowing Krav Maga, but in this moment not a single lesson she’d been taught came to her. This was nothing like the nice velvet carpeted and air-conditioned room she’d spent a few weekend hours in for a time. This was scrappy and ugly. A desperate life and death fight in a deep dark place both bone-chillingly cold and wet.
No thoughts of strategy occurred. No clever ideas or crazy plans. Only a desperate need to not let Gravenberg get the chance to use the gun. They rolled over each other as they wrestled for it.

“Kellan is dead,” she said as their wrestling stopped with her on top. “Because you sent a monster after her.”

“What a shame,” Gravenberg replied through heavy breaths. “But I suppose you do have some experience in watching mothers die after all.”

With a cry of anger, she struck Gravenberg in the face. A clumsy punch, but it shut her up. She’d never felt anger like this. She struck again, this time with an elbow and she heard a crunching sound with the impact. The gun fell from Gravenbergs hands and dropped to the ground forgotten.

With Gravenberg stunned, she looked up to see that as they’d wrestled over the gun, they’d tumbled all the way back to the tunnel that led outside.

She got to her feet, grabbed Gravenberg by the shoulders and dragged her towards the exit. Her body moved of its own accord, her conscious mind not in on whatever plan a deeper part of herself had come up with.

Gravenberg wasn't heavy, she slid along the slick wet moss with ease. As they approached the exit she regained her senses and began to struggle.

“No no no. Wait, no!”

Laura didn't listen and Gravenberg’s struggles were feeble. With a big effort, she half wrenched half threw Gravenberg at the exit.

The vines sprang out once more. Catching Gravenberg before she made it past the threshold and wrapping themselves around her. They began to pull her towards the wall to their right.

Laura blinked and let out a startled gasp in disbelief at what she'd just done. She stood still and stared at Gravenberg struggling against the vines.

With a deep rumble, an opening began to form in the wall. Moss and soil gave way to create a hole big enough to fit a human being. Apparently, a simple warning slap wasn’t what the vines had in mind this time.

“Clever, Hollis.” Gravenberg spat out, switching between glaring at her and looking back at the suddenly appearing maw she was being dragged into. “But you're not going to let this happen. I've watched your videos, I know what you've done, I know who you are. You can't do this. You haven't got the stomach for it.”

Gravenberg was right. Wasn’t she? She couldn’t let someone get dragged away into whatever nightmare awaited through the hole the vines were dragging Gravenberg into. That wasn't who she was.

But when she tried to step forward to help, she was back in the park crouching over Kellan. The blood was back on her hands. The tears again falling from her face.

*I would have been proud to call you a daughter.*

*I suppose you do have some experience in watching mothers die after all.*

As Gravenberg inched closer and closer to the hole. Laura found herself doing nothing but standing...
“Hollis?” Gravenberg said, her voice rising in panic as her feet disappeared into the hole. “Hollis? Hollis!”

She kept screaming her name until the wall swallowed her up and she vanished from sight. Then it became simply screams that slowly faded away. The hole closed itself and the vines retracted.

Laura stood in place for a long while, staring at where Gravenberg had vanished.

**What had she just done?**

Her heart started beating rapidly and her breaths became wild and shallow. She felt sick, her stomach heaving so bad that she thought she was about to throw up. She tried to steady herself by leaning against the nearest wall but it didn’t help other than to make sure her shaking legs didn’t give out under her.

Why hadn’t she helped Gravenberg? Not doing so went against everything she knew about herself. It didn’t matter what they had done, what they might have deserved. They weren’t trying to kill her anymore, they had been helpless in those vines. And without her gun or her rocks, she should have been able to handle her. Why hadn’t she helped? Like she was supposed to, like she always had in the past.

*Because you didn’t want to.*

The thought echoed in her head as easily and as loudly as any sound in the tunnels. It chilled her to hear. Because as horrible as the thought was, it also felt true.

She’d had a decision to make and yes, she could come up with a litany of excuses. Number one probably being that Gravenberg was a murderer who had been trying to kill her and Carm. But she couldn’t help but think she’d made the wrong choice for who she thought she was. For who she wanted to be.

Laura shook herself. This was no time for an impromptu introspection and probable negative spiral of self-criticism. Carmilla still needed her and it struck her that if Baba Yaga had thrown both Gravenberg and her down here, then maybe she’d thrown the kids down here as well.

Taking some deep breaths and making an effort to not look back, she left the exit tunnel and continued on. She hurried through tunnel after tunnel calling the names of the missing kids. A mosquito buzzed past her at some point, but otherwise, she found nothing. She began to slow down, tired and discouraged from seeing nothing but the same dark tunnels over and over no matter which direction she picked.

She turned another corner and this time she saw a figure up ahead.

Vines held them up on the wall, the set up exactly like the one Gravenberg had used her rocks to escape from. The figure was small, even in the dark Laura could tell they were probably young. They weren’t moving and when Laura called out to them, they didn’t respond.

As she got closer she realised why. The person looked shrunken. As if all the water had been taken from them. Their cheeks were impossibly sallow and their skin yellow and desiccated. She couldn’t even tell if it was a boy or a girl. This wasn’t a human being anymore, this was a hollowed out husk drained of any life or vitality they once had.

They were too late. She should have expected to be so for at least some of them. Too much of what
they’d learned said that it was already too late to save them all. But actually knowing, to have finally found one of them, only for them to be like this.

She sank to the ground. Her legs refusing to hold her up. Her knees came up to her chin and she buried her face in her hands. She sobbed quietly as she sat in the dark.

“I’m really sorry,” she said to the husk. “I’m so sorry.”

It didn't answer and Laura fell silent.

Had this all been for nothing? She wondered how long they’d been like this. Before they'd even arrived, or if they'd been faster could they have stopped this from happening?

Was this Kellan's daughter? Was this Lexi?

If it was, or if they were somewhere else in this labyrinth of tunnels looking exactly the same, then she had failed Kellan utterly. Kellan, the Meyers, the Bishops, the Turners. They had all put their faith in her, trusted her to save their children.

And not only had she failed every single one of them. She'd gotten more people killed as well. Kellan, Stevenson, even those Corvae goons they'd fought on the road. One of them by her own hand. Or thrown motorcycle helmet.

There had been so much violence and death since her and Carm had come here. After she had so confidently told Kellan she'd find her daughter and convinced Carm that everything would work out. They'd stopped the apocalypse, what couldn't they do?

“Save you,” she said to the husk. Or was it to all the kids? Or Kellan, or the people walking into a trap tomorrow?

Or her mother?

A small noise floated out from around a nearby corner. Snapping her back to reality. Laura focused on it, straining to hear. The noise sounded human but she couldn’t make out any words, as if they were muffled somehow. Like someone gagged by tape or a sock.

Or by vines!

Renewed hope surging within her, she sprang to her feet and ran headlong to follow the noise through yet more similar looking dark tunnels. As quiet as the noise was she struggled to track it properly. More than once she’d realised it was growing quieter instead of louder and she'd hit a moss covered wall in frustration before turning back to find another route.

She called out for them to keep making noise, desperately afraid that they might stop before she could find them. Frustration grew the longer it took to find them. This could be her last chance to find even one of the missing kids alive.

After correcting yet another wrong turn, the noise sounded nearby for the first time. Her heart pounding in expectation and hope she rounded another corner to see that she’d finally found the source of the noise.

It was another figure pinned by vines to a wall. As she’d suspected, vines covered their mouth like a gag, but their skin was pale and healthy instead of desiccated yellow. As she approached, their eyes spotted her and widened. When they did, Laura saw the same hope she was feeling herself in them. They were incredibly familiar. Big and bright and shining with emotion. Then she noticed the dark
hair, the light frame.

“and she has a freckle on her right cheek.”

She knew this girl. She’d seen them before in countless photos around Kellan’s house. Lexi Kellan. Alive and in front of her.

When she got close enough to reach out and touch her, she gave the girl as reassuring a smile as she could.

“Lexi, right? My name’s Laura, Laura Hollis. It’s going to be okay. You’re going to be okay. We found you.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading guys. Getting close to the end now :)
Before she could react to Baba Yaga’s advance, a force like an invisible hand lifted her up from the ground by her throat. Her hands instinctively came up to try and wrench it off and escape, only to find nothing there but her own skin.

She gasped for breath as she hovered above the ground. High enough that she had to look down to see the oncoming witch. Her cheeks burned, the flaming braziers that hung on chains from the ceiling where much closer now. The nearest one right in front of her eyes.

Sweat streamed down her face from the heat and the hand squeezed ever tighter. Her vision swam and her head started to pound. Her legs flailed wildly and despite knowing that they’d never find anything, her hands refused to stop clawing at the force around her throat.

Baba Yaga laughed. A harsh cackle that grated on the ears. “To think I was actually concerned when you showed up in my swamp. I thought mahaps to bargain with you. Inanna’s creatures are dangerous and even if I killed you what would stop her sending more? But Gravenberg was right, vampire you are no longer.”

Carmilla couldn’t even try to give some snappy reply. It felt a herculean effort to even keep her eyes open. Her legs stopped flailing and her hands slowly dropped from her throat. Another few moments and she’d be unconscious.

Another few moments after that and she’d be dead.

“What madness possessed you?” Baba Yaga asked. “To give up such power? What gift could have been so great, that you’d trade immortality for it?” She shrugged. “I’ll have to remember to ask you again when I have your skull in the palm of my hand.”

Baba Yaga drew herself up as high as her hunched back would allow to bring her face close to Carmilla’s, her mouth open and wide in a malicious smile.

Which also put the witch’s head at the same level of the braziers.

With a great effort, she brought up a hand and slapped the nearest one as hard as she could towards the witch. The brazier swung on its chains and hit Baba Yaga’s face.

Baba Yaga turned away, shrieking in pain. The hand around her throat disappeared and Carmilla fell to the ground. The brazier slipped off the chain and hit the ground near her.

All the while, the skulls chattered loudly. It felt like having an excited audience watching the fight, cheering them on.

Sucking in some big needy breaths, she got to her feet at the same time as Baba Yaga turned back around. The bubbling and smoking cauldron was now between them. The witch’s face had fury on
it, a snarl as savage as any wild animal. She took a step forward and Carmilla felt a force tugging her upwards once more.

But this time as Carmilla was picked up, she swung out her legs to kick the cauldron. Knocking it over and spilling its contents over the witch. There was a horrific sizzling sound as the boiling broth spilt over the witch’s rags and skin. Baba Yaga screeched in agony and lost her balance, tumbling onto her side with a great crash that shook the wooden floor.

Seizing her chance, Carmilla rushed forwards with her fists raised. But the witch recovered quickly and before she could land a blow a colossal fat arm crunched into her side. The backhanded blow sent her flying into a wall. The wood cracked on the impact and her insides felt like they were vibrating. When she tried to get up, her head spun dizzily.

She wouldn’t get up from another hit like that. She was struggling to even get up from the first one.

As she regained her senses from the blow, she felt things wriggling on her back and legs. She shook herself and rolled onto her side to get whatever they were off. Her already spinning head protested vociferously and for a moment she felt a wave of nausea accompany the dizziness.

She blinked to clear her vision and saw a chattering skull inches from her face. Staring at her with its empty black eye sockets. The force of her hitting the wall combined with all the other shaking must have unstuck them from where they’d been placed. At least a dozen lay around her and every other second more would drop down. A few of them were flaming. Surprised by this, she looked up to see that a great deal of the hut was on fire. Her eyes found the brazier that had fallen to the ground. The flames kept inside it for so long clearly enjoying their newfound freedom of wooden floors and walls. She needed to leave and fast.

“You!” Baba Yaga screeched. “What have you done?”

The witch looked a horror. The entire left side of her body riddled with bubbling cysts and dead patches of skin. Most of her rags on that side were gone, except for a few tattered remains that seemed to have been almost seared into her flesh. As she advanced towards Carmilla, every step caused her left foot to lose more of itself. Pieces of it sloughing off and sticking to the ground.

“You’re going to pay,” Baba Yaga said out of the side of her mouth that still worked. “The suffering that I will put you through. Pain beyond anything you’ve experienced before. You’ll beg for death before I’m done with you.”

Using the wall to her back to help her, Carmilla got to her feet as Baba Yaga ranted.

“But you won’t die. Nothing lives or dies here unless I want it to. Every single creature here exists at my whim and my whim alone. I can make sure you suffer for an eternity. And all the while, you’ll get to watch me do the same to your lover. Argh!”

Baba Yaga stepped next to one of the fallen skulls and it latched onto her foot, biting hard into it and not letting go. Cursing, Baba Yaga bent down to slap it away.

Why had it done that? Weren’t they her skulls? The chattering had reminded her of a cheering audience at a fight. But who had they been cheering for?

An idea seized her. She picked up another skull and threw it at the witch.

It hit her in the neck and as with the previous one, it bit her as soon as it got close. Carmilla quickly picked up and threw more, each one biting whatever part of the witch they could. Baba Yaga screamed in pain and frustration. But no matter how many skulls she managed to shrug off, Carmilla
had more to throw. She began to drive the witch back step by step.

As the witch flailed around, Carmilla picked up yet another skull but this time held onto it. She charged forwards and crunched it into Baba Yaga's face. The skull shattered and Baba Yaga stumbled back. Not letting her regain her balance, Carmilla shoved her as hard as she could towards a flaming wall.

Baba Yaga hit the wall and a dozen skulls, all ablaze, fell onto her. Many more followed. Even ones from so high up she doubted they were all being shaken off purely by the fight and commotion below.

When she'd first entered she'd thought them merely the witch’s puppets. But now that they'd gotten a chance, after everything she’d been through in life and undeath, she knew revenge when she saw it. The chattering had become a cacophony now, louder than even the burning flames.

A deluge of flaming skulls dropped onto Baba Yaga. So many that she lost sight of the witch even as she wailed in pain.

Carmilla turned and ran for the exit. She made it a few strides before the toes of her foot burned in agony. She lifted the foot up and looked down to see she’d stepped into the spilt broth from the cauldron. The tip of her shoe was mostly gone and what was left had steam coming off of it.

Ignoring the pain, she went around the spill. The smoke was thick and black now, wreathing the hut in darkness and causing her to cough badly as she stumbled over fallen skulls and patches of burning wood. She heard a loud crash behind her. The hut must have started falling apart.

With great relief, she reached the exit and took a step outside.

A scream of desperate rage came from behind her and a hand closed around her leg. It yanked hard and tripped her, causing her to fall halfway across the threshold of the hut.

Carmilla got a brief glimpse of the motionless alligators still waiting at the hut entrance before she twisted onto her back to find Baba Yaga looming over her screaming and trying to drag her back into the hut.

Skulls still covered the witch, holding onto whatever piece of her they could with their teeth. Behind her, Carmilla could see skulls awkwardly rolling themselves along the floor towards Baba Yaga. A sight that might have been comical if it wasn't for the mortal danger.

Baba Yaga seemed beyond words now, her face a mask of rage with bloodshot eyes as she screeched from a mouth set in an animal's snarl.

If the witch dragged her back into the hut, she’d never come back out. She kicked her free foot into Baba Yaga's face repeatedly. Desperate to free herself.

But the witch didn't let go. Ignoring Carmilla's kicks, she got a second hand around her leg and pulled. Inch by inch, Carmilla was dragged back into the hut. Her hands grasped the frame of the entrance and only then did she manage to resist.

Baba Yaga’s screeching turned into a scream of pain. The flames had reached her. Carmilla kicked as hard as she could, seizing what could be her last chance to escape. The grip on her leg loosened, she was almost free.

“Help me!” Baba Yaga cried out, looking at the alligators behind Carmilla. “Kill her!”
The alligators growled and moved towards her. For a terrifying moment, their giant jaws hovered right above her face. She felt a cold despairing realisation that the situation had turned fatally against her. She couldn’t even begin to think of a way to fight them and Baba Yaga. They would sink their teeth into her and the witch would drag her back into the flames. She couldn’t do anything about it. The alligators moved past her and towards the witch.

“What? No!” Baba Yaga screamed.

As quickly as it left, hope came back. With the witch clearly losing control of her domain, maybe the skulls weren’t the only things in Baba Yaga’s swamp seeking revenge.

“You said you wanted a feast. Looks like you got one,” Carmilla said and with one final kick, her leg came free of the shocked witch’s grasp.

As she threw herself away, the alligators surged forwards. Together they drove Baba Yaga into the hut and all three of them disappeared into the flames.

Carmilla stumbled her way back across the torchlit path to the edge of the river before, judging herself far enough away, half sitting and half collapsing down on the ground. While placing her steaming foot gratefully into the cool water, she looked back at the burning hut. The cone of grey smoke above it was gone, replaced by the black smoke from the raging fire.

Baba Yaga screamed one final time. Inhumanely high pitched and so loud that Carmilla cupped her hands around her eyes in pain. The entire hut collapsed down with a monumental crash.

The scream stopped abruptly and a piercing pop! emanated from the hut. A sudden breeze blew past her, lasting only for an instant. The torches went out and the trees all around the hut swayed backwards. She heard the trees on the other side of the river behind her doing the same. A shockwave of some sort? She wasn’t sure.

Then the swamp began to die.

The colour drained from everything. The black of the tree bark, the strange greens of the leaves and shrubs, even the brown dirt. All turning into a dull ashen grey. The twisting tree branches withered and shrivelled up. Within moments, what was a swamp of suffocatingly thick masses of vegetation had become a desolate wasteland of dead trees and plants.

“Great, the whole place has gone Dorian Grey,” Carmilla muttered.

The chattering had ceased as well. She doubted anything was still alive in this place anymore. Except for her and Laura, and if they were here, hopefully the kids as well. Carmilla looked back at the river where Laura had been sucked down. How could she find a way to wherever Baba Yaga had taken her? The witch had mentioned a pantry, but who knew what that really meant.

As Carmilla pondered her next move, there came a rumbling in the distance. When she tried to pinpoint where, she found that it was coming from all directions. She heard the sound of trees snapping and crashing to the ground. A sound that was definitely slowly but surely getting closer.

Baba Yaga’s domain wasn’t just dead, it was collapsing.
Laura

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“My name’s Laura, Laura Hollis. It’s going to be okay. You’re going to be okay. We found you.”

Laura thought that came out pretty well under the circumstances. Friendly and confident at the same time. Perfect for telling the girl that she had a friend now who was going to help her out of this nightmare. Surely their face would light up at seeing what to them must have seemed like a hero stepping out of the dark to rescue them. Once she got the vines off of them it would be effusive ‘thank yous’ and hugs-

Lexi screamed into her gag and shook in her bonds violently. Laura couldn’t make out the words she was trying to say, but the general intent was pretty clear.

“Yeah, okay. Okay,” Laura said, holding her hands out in an attempt to calm the girl. “I’m gonna get you out, calm down. I’m here to rescue you.” She reached up and started pulling away the vines around Lexi’s mouth. “To which you’re supposed to say, ‘aren’t you a little short for a stormtrooper?’ But I'll let you off the hook because, you know, gagged by vines.”

After a great deal of effort, Laura ripped the vines from Lexi’s mouth.

“Witch!” The word exploded out of Lexi’s mouth. “I know it sounds insane. But there's a witch. Like a magic witch. And she kills people. There’s a magic witch here and she kills people. We have to find my friends and get out of here! Please, you have to believe me.”

Laura put a hand on Lexi’s shoulder. “Trust me, I believe you. And that's what we're doing. Getting you and anyone else out of here.” She looked down at the vines holding Lexi in place. They were much thicker and tougher looking than the ones over Lexi’s mouth. “Have to get these off you first though.”

“Have you, have you seen her?” Lexi asked, her eyes wide.

“No, but I think I heard her voice and I’ve met a couple of her friends getting here.”

“Where is here? I was thinking this place is under a river or the Okefenokee or something like that.”

Laura paused before answering. “Yeah… Yeah, let’s go with something like that for now. One step at a time. We’ll get to the whole… another dimension thing later.”

“I’m sorry what? You said that too fast.”

“Never mind,” Laura said quickly. “Have you seen or heard any of your friends? Abigail or-”

“Phillip.” Tears sprang to Lexi’s eyes and she nodded at a spot nearby. “He was there, but the witch. She… she killed him. He was fine but then she did something and he turned, I don’t know how to describe it. He was like a mummy.”

“I saw. You don’t have to keep going. I saw. Back there.” Laura gestured behind her.

Lexi’s face turned white. “No, he was here, he was right there.” She nodded again at the same spot. “He’s still there.”
Laura looked closer at where Lexi was gesturing. A pile of powder lay on the ground. The same colour as the husk she’d seen before.

The same realisation hit them both. Misery was all over Lexi’s face when she spoke.

“They’re all dead, aren’t they? I’m alone.”

“No,” Laura said. “We don’t know that. There's still—”

A piercing scream, inhumanely loud and high pitched interrupted her. It sounded like it came from above but in moments it was echoing through the tunnels. She cupped her hands around her ears and Lexi, unable to do the same, cried out in pain.

“Argh,” Laura groaned when it stopped. “What, on top of everything else is there a Nazgul flying around now?”

As she looked back up at Lexi, the girl fell onto her. Surprised, Laura lost her balance and they tumbled to the ground in an awkward tangle.

“Ow,” they said together.

The vines holding Lexi in place that had looked so strong and immovable had turned grey and shrivelled up dramatically. Now they drooped on the floor like large wet noodles.

The vines weren’t the only things that had changed. The green moss on the tunnel walls had disappeared. Thin flecks of dust dropping down on them were all that remained of it. She had no clue what, but something very big had happened.

Who had screamed? Baba Yaga? What was happening up there between the witch and Carmilla?

A dull thud echoed from another tunnel nearby, followed by an exclamation of pain.

Lexi shot up from the ground. Excitement radiating off of her.

“Abi!” she cried and broke into an ungainly run towards the sound. It must have been the first time in weeks since the girl had used her legs.

Laura followed. Around another few tunnel bends and twists, she found Lexi hugging a figure on the ground. A girl around the same age with dark skin. Behind them, there were more dead vines drooping from the wall.

“I thought I was alone,” Lexi was saying to her. “I thought she’d killed you too.”

The girl on the ground, Abigail, didn’t reply. But Laura could see how tightly she clutched at the arms Lexi had around her.

“I’m so sorry,” Lexi said. “I should have been there. I should have been with you. I’m sorry.” Her voice lowered to a whisper. “I’m going to get you out of here. It’s going to be okay.”

Kidnapped by an evil witch, forced to watch her friend die, trapped in a cold dark place alone for weeks and yet her first instinct once she got free was to find and help her friend. It wasn’t hard for Laura to see the mother in the daughter.

Lexi helped Abigail up to her feet. As Abigail stood on shaky legs, Laura saw how slight she was. Delicate features and slender limbs that shook in the cold of the tunnels.
Lexi noticed the shaking as well and then the two girls were hugging again. Tight and long enough for Laura to suddenly feel strangely uncomfortable.

Abigail’s eyes flicked towards Laura. “Who are you? Did you get taken too?” she asked in a soft tone.

“Hi, I'm Laura. Laura Hollis. And no, I came here the long way.”

“She's a friend,” Lexi said. “She came to rescue us.”

Abigail managed a little laugh. “After everything that’s happened, that still sounds the most crazy. Who cares enough about any of us to do that?”

“Trust me, there’s people who care. I’ve met them and they were desperate to get you back,” Laura said.

They both seemed to brighten at that. Carmilla had been right, these kids really did need to know someone in the world thought them worth saving.

“Are you like, a cop or something?” Lexi asked.

“No.” Laura dragged out the word, trying to think of how to answer the question. “More like a… concerned third party?”

Lexi’s head tilted quizzically. But Abigail just shook her head.

“Whoever you are, thank you so much. Can you help us find our friends?” She turned to Lexi. “We have to find Phillip and Wallis.”

A silence followed her question. One that Abigail picked up on. Her face fell.

“I'm sorry, Abi,” Lexi started but seemed unable to say anything else.

To her credit, Abigail didn't break down. She sniffed and took a deep breath before nodding to them both.

“We have to get out of here,” Abigail said simply.

“Where is here?” Lexi asked, looking at Laura. “Maybe now is a good time to explain that?”

“Yeah, so uh, where we are is, um.” Laura paused. Here she was yet again needing to explain completely insane things to people.

How would Carmilla explain it?

“You got kidnapped by an evil witch, her pet monster and an asshole called Gravenberg. We're in the witch’s own dimension, which is a big swamp. As in we're not on earth. And if we can't stop the witch, she'll eat us. Because eating people is what she likes to do.”

For a long moment, the two girls stared at her. Then they both nodded.

“Okay.”

“Sounds about right.”

Maybe she should try Carmilla’s more blunt and direct way of talking to people more often.
“Okay then. I remember a way out of these tunnels. It was blocked before, but I'm thinking that might not be the case anymore.” Laura gestured to the dead vines on the wall.

They followed her back to the exit tunnel and as she’d hoped, no vines stretched out to stop them this time.

“So how do we get out of this swamp place and back home?” Lexi asked.

Laura stopped at the threshold and turned around to look at them both. “Listen. I’m sorry, I know you’re both scared and exhausted but we can’t go home yet.”

“Wait, what? Why not?”

“I came here with someone. But we got separated and I think she’s with the witch right now. I have to find her.”

“She was trying to save us, like you?” Abigail asked.

Laura nodded. “Yeah. We’re partners, we do things together and I’d never have found you without her.”

“What's her name?” Lexi asked in a kind tone.

“Carmilla. Her name’s Carmilla.”

The girls turned to each other and talked to quietly amongst themselves. She couldn’t hear the words, but from their faces, it was clearly an intense conversation. It ended with their foreheads pressing together and a quick tight hug.

“We’ll help you find her,” Lexi said. “You have to save your friend. We get that.”

“I thought you might,” Laura said, she felt a smile sneaking onto her face. “And she's much more than a friend. Oh, plus Baba Yaga, that's the witch by the way, is kinda taking over your school and planning on taking all the students tomorrow. So there's that too. Probably should have led with that as to why we can't leave yet.”

The tunnel exit had brought them up to a bank to the same river she and Carmilla had fallen into. It was a relief to finally leave the dark tunnels, even if the sight that greeted them outside was dire.

“This place looks like a setting to a horror movie,” Lexi said.

“This is not how it looked at all when we got here. Something’s happened,” Laura said.

The swamp was dead. The trees and their branches shrivelled and grey, the plants on the ground reduced to ash. If it wasn't for the familiar black river, she'd have considered the possibility they’d travelled through another portal to an entirely different place.

There was something else. Something in the background of her senses.

“Maybe-” Abigail started.

“Quiet,” Laura shushed her. “Just for a second.”

She closed her eyes. Whatever it was, she wasn’t seeing it. Instead, she tried listening, feeling.

The ground was shaking. A constant vibration under the surface. And in the distance, the sound of
snapping and crashing. Suddenly staying here felt even more dangerous than before. A tingle inside her screamed danger. That this was the wrong place to be.

“I think we need to hurry,” she said. Then to Abigail. “What were you saying before?”

In response, Abigail pointed skywards down the river at a giant black plume of smoke. “I was saying that if something’s changed, maybe that has something to do with it.”

Too many trees were in the way to see clearly what the smoke was rising from. She could tell it was on their side of the river and that it wasn’t far from where they were.

“Carm,” Laura said and broke into a run towards the smoke.

“How do you know?” Lexi asked as the two girls followed her.

“It's Carmilla. Going towards whatever's burning down or getting violently murdered is a great way to find her.”

They rushed through the gaps between the ash grey trees. Laura in front, the two girls dragging behind. A part of her wanted to slow down, both the girls were using their legs for the first time in weeks and their struggles to keep up were obvious. But the need to find Carmilla was far greater. She’d been down in those tunnels for far too long. Leaving Carmilla alone to face Baba Yaga in her dimension. All she could do was desperately hope that she wasn’t too late.

“Almost there,” she said encouragingly. “If we bump into anything dangerous when we get there I want you both to stay behind me, okay?”

Past the trees, they came upon a large clearing. The source of the smoke lay in a collapsed heap in the middle of it. Some kind of structure, but what exactly it was too destroyed for Laura to work out. Down from the smoking structure, a line of torches led to another river bank. She could see a figure at the edge of it, milling about as if in confusion.

“Who’s th-” Lexi started.

“Carm!” Laura shouted. “Carm, over here!”

Carmilla turned towards her and they ran to each other in a headlong rush. They met halfway with a crunching hug that almost drove the air from her lungs.

“Hey there,” Carmilla said through a smile. “Was just thinking about you.”

“I was so worried, I thought Baba Yaga had you and that you’d need my help, I mean, not that you’re not awesome and can’t handle yourself, it’s just you know, most evil witch of all time and everything, but the tunnels were like a maze and there were vines and Gravenberg and I found the kids, Oh, I found the kids! What happened to your shoe-”

Carmilla pulled her in and kissed her. A sense of calm settled in on her and for at least this moment, she felt at ease despite everything else going on. She took a much-needed breath when they drew back and reminded herself that sentences were a thing when talking.

“Oh, wow, when you said together. You meant like together together,” Lexi said. “That’s pretty hot.”

“Lexi!” Abigail said and when Laura back to them, her face had gone red.
“What?” Lexi replied in a lower voice. “They look really good together is all what I’m saying…”

“I see you found them,” Carmilla said, back to her drawl.

“We found them.” Laura hugged her close and tight again. “Okay, let's focus. What happened with you? How did you escape Baba Yaga? Where is she?”

Carmilla tilted her head at the smoking rubble. Laura followed her gaze.

“Wait, she's… No way.”

Carmilla gave a self-satisfied smirk and a little shrug.

“How did you?” Laura shook her head. “Because you're amazing. That's why. I don't even need to ask.”

“Well, I can't take all the credit. I may have gotten some help from a couple of alligators and the background cast for a Tim Burton film. I'll explain later,” Carmilla added at Laura's confusion.

It sounded very much like Laura had another story to write in her notebooks back home. Of all the stories Carmilla told her, the ones were she knew Laura would be impressed by something she’d done were definitely Carmilla’s favourite to tell. However Carmilla had beaten the witch, there would be a great deal of artistic exaggeration she was sure.

“She’s really dead?” Lexi asked. “The scary giant lady thing. She’s gone?”

“Definitely dead,” Carmilla assured her. “Might not be completely gone, there could be a bit left of her under all that rubble.”

“So that’s probably why this place looks like this now. This is her own personal dimension after all. I guess it makes sense that it would die without her,” Laura said, gesturing around at the dead swamp.

“You said something about Gravenberg?” Carmilla asked.

The unease came flooding back. A pit formed in her stomach as Gravenberg’s cries of her name echoed around her head. She swallowed hard before answering.

“Later. Let’s get out of here first.”

“Yeah, I was hoping you might have some ideas on how we could do that.”

“Wait, are we stuck here?” Lexi said, concern in her voice and on her face.

“It’s fine,” Laura said. “We’ve done the hard parts right? Kids found, Baba Yaga defeated, school saved. Should be easy from here.”

Carmilla started to say something, but the subtle shaking going on around them suddenly became a great deal more noticeable and the sound of snapping and falling trees became much louder. Laura noticed another sound as well, a heavy rumbling from which direction she couldn’t tell. Carmilla bristled and threw her a dirty look.

“Nope, this is your fault,” Laura said. “I told you before to not let me say things like that. This is totally, one hundred percent on you.”

“Err, guys,” Abigail said, looking upwards. “Is it just me or are things getting a lot darker really quickly? And I can’t be the only one who thinks the sky looks kinda weird.”
She was right. As they talked, the light had fallen dramatically. Her first thought was that the sun had set, but then it occurred to her that she'd never actually seen the sun here. Did this place have a sun? Did it have a day and night cycle? If it did have a sun, what sun? If it didn’t have a sun how weren’t they freezing to death or-

Laura cut off that line of questioning. She very much doubted she’d get anything other existential dread out of the answers.

It looked even darker in the distance. Through the gaps between the trees, she saw what looked like a solid black wall on the horizon as far as the eye could see. She looked around and saw that it was like that in every direction.

Abigail was right about the sky as well. When Laura looked up, the sight above was deeply unsettling in a manner she couldn't quite work out at first. Until Carmilla stated it out loud.

“It's closer. The sky is closer to the ground,” Carmilla said.

It sounded insane but Laura could see what she meant. In some intrinsic way, it felt like the very sky itself had lowered. Her hand stretched out to Carmilla's. What on earth was going on in this place?

The rumbling became ever louder, coming it seemed from all directions.

Just like she could see nothing but black in all directions.

And the sky above was lower and the ground below them was shaking.

“The sky is lower because this place is shrinking,” Carmilla said. “All over.”

“Yeah, and not to add even more to the already terror-inducing ‘we’re in a place that’s fading out of existence’ thing. But I don’t think that’s our only problem,” Laura said, gesturing to the river in front of them and the trees all around.

Carmilla looked off into the distance. “This place is shrinking.”

“Yeah.”

“But it’s the place that’s shrinking, not the stuff in it. The trees and water and everything.”

“Yeah.”

“So all that would have less space to be in, so it would all get pushed up and-”

“Towards us. Yeah,” Laura finished in a voice getting progressively higher. “Remember when I made you watch Star Wars? That scene when they were trapped in the trash compactor? I think that’s us right now.”

Black water began to seep across the ground. It’s level not much higher than the soles of her shoe. It felt like some kind of portent of impending doom. A lot more would be coming soon and at a much higher level than their feet.
“Okay. We need to leave. Right now,” Carmilla said.

“How?” Lexi asked, both the girls looked utterly terrified. “I don’t see an exit sign anywhere.”

That was a good question. When she'd convinced Carmilla to enter the portal with her, she'd been so focused on finding the kids and stopping Baba Yaga that the plan to get back out was practically non-existent. Before stepping into the portal, she'd thought they'd probably get back out the way the got in.

That sparked a thought. Maybe even a plan. A crazy, ill-considered, come up with on the fly plan. But this hardly was the first of one of those for her.

“We get out the same way we came in,” she said, pointing up.

Carmilla gave her a blank look. “And how exactly are we growing wings again?”

“We don’t need to fly, we can climb.”

Carmilla scoffed. “Okay, these trees are pretty tall, sure. But there's no way they'd reach the...oh.”

Laura turned to the girls. “We got here through a portal thing at the bottom of a shed at your school.”

“That’s the last place I remember before waking up where you found me,” Lexi said.

Laura nodded. “I don’t know how it worked for Baba Yaga, but when we went through it we fell from the sky. So I’m thinking we might be able to get out the same way.”

“And if this whole place is getting smaller you think we can reach the...sky or top or whatever from the trees?” Abigail said.

“What if you're wrong and we can’t leave that way?” Lexi asked.

Laura wished she could offer the girl anything other than a shrug. “It’s our best bet. Unless anyone else has any better ideas.”

No one did. Though Abigail did point out that she wasn’t sure her and Lexi would be able to climb in their condition.

“Trust us, we’ll get you there,” Laura said. She went for an encouraging smile, but she doubted it was very effective.

It was hard enough to calm herself, nevermind two teenage girls. The darkness had become pervasive now. If they lost much more light, they wouldn’t even be able to see the trees they were planning to climb. That, along with the ever-encroaching black walls and falling sky, gave a real sense of being swallowed. Of being devoured by some unknowable darkness to be never seen again.

She’d faced death before many times, but this felt different. If they couldn’t escape this place, they’d be stuck in a dimension fading from existence. Surely that was worse than death, even if she couldn’t quite wrap her head around exactly why. A primal panic bubbled under the surface of her mind and no matter how much she tried to get it under control it refused to let her press it down.
“Hey,” Carmilla said, before giving her hand a comforting squeeze.

Laura focused on the feeling of Carmilla’s fingers on her own and the features of Carmilla’s face. For a short moment, they were back in their bubble. Safe and warm and not at all facing erasure from their very existence. Kindness and reassurance radiated from Carmilla, her touch, her small smile, her eyes. It felt like an infusion of strength.

They’d get through this, one way or another. They always did. She smiled back at her and nodded. Time to get moving.

“C’mon, the tallest trees I can see are behind the hut,” Carmilla said, urging them all to follow her.

“That was a hut?” Lexi asked sceptically, glancing at the rubble in the middle of the clearing.

They ran for the trees, their feet splashing into dark water that had risen above their ankles. On the way, Abigail cried out behind them as her foot sank deep into the ground. It took all three of them to pull her out. This place was falling apart already.

They reached the trees Carmilla had pointed out. Their colour gone and their branches withered, but their sheer size meant they still seemed sturdy enough for them to climb.

“Abigail and Lexi first,” Laura said. “We'll help them up and catch them if they fall.”

Lexi eyed her and Carmilla dubiously. “Catch us?”

“We’re stronger than we look,” Laura said, somewhat to reassure and somewhat defensively.

The tree they chose was still wide enough for two people to climb next to each other. As Laura directed, the two girls went first with her and Carmilla close behind.

The going was treacherous. The ashen crumbling bark fell apart under their touch and many a branch simply snapped off when they tried to use them as leverage. The only advantage was that they found it possible to dig their fingers into the soft bark, giving them handholds when no branches were in reaching distance.

But despite the danger, they couldn't slow down. The rumbling was so loud now that Laura had to shout to urge the two girls on and even without looking down, she knew the water would be rising all the time.

The climb was exhausting. Every inch upwards costing her more energy than she really had left. Her fingers felt raw and her muscles ached. How Lexi and Abigail were managing she had no idea. Though more than once she saw Abigail falter, only for Lexi to steady her with a strong hand.

Carmilla tapped her shoulder and said something she couldn’t hear. When Laura didn’t respond, Carmilla pointed down. A direction she very much wanted not to look.

Carmilla shouted this time.

“...Berg!”

“What?”

“Gravenberg!” Carmilla pointed down again.

Laura looked down and received a huge dose of vertigo. They were already much higher than she thought. She blinked to clear her vision and saw what Carmilla had seen. A figure below them
climbing the tree.

Elenore Gravenberg.

With everything else going on, she hadn't the time to consider that the swamp dying also included the vines that had carried Gravenberg away too. Conflicting emotions surged through her at seeing Gravenberg alive down below. But with the whole impending existential doom coming their way, she'd have to process them later.

She shook her head and urged Carmilla on. They had to get to the top and escape. If Gravenberg escaped too, they'd have to deal with that then.

A cry of alarm came from above, followed by a branch falling past her. The latest branch Abigail had tried to use had snapped off and this time she struggled to stay balanced, her hands and feet scrabbling desperately to regain a handhold. Lexi reached out a hand but it wasn't enough and with a scream, Abigail lost her grip and fell.

She fell in the gap between them both and together they caught her. Her hand snatching at the girls torn shirt while Carmilla somehow got an arm under their shoulder.

“You're okay,” Laura shouted. “We got you.”

Once Abigail regained her grip they let her go and continued on. Luckily, no one lost their grip again and after a torturous climb, they made it to the top.

“We’re here,” Lexi said in a raised voice between panting. “We made it. Not wishing I was dead after that at all. Now what?”

“Do you see anything?” Laura asked. Carmilla and her still had a few stretches to go to reach the top.

“It's so weird. It's like the sky but I can reach out and… Whoa!”

Laura looked up to see Lexi raise her hand to the sky. The tips of her fingers brushed against something invisible and where her fingers went, strange ripples appeared after.

The ripples opened and water gushed down onto them. The surprise of it almost cost her her grip on the tree, but she hung on grimly. The water stopped and above them, she saw a glassy image of the shed they'd entered to get here.

“That’s it!” she shouted. “That’s our way home.”

“We can’t reach it yet,” Abigail said.

“We will. Just have to wait a little longer.”

She hoped they had a little longer to wait. The walls were almost upon them. They were near enough now for Laura to see the layers of swamp debris they were carrying forward. Her trash compactor analogy seemed pretty spot on. Every single thing large and small in the swamp was getting squashed into a smaller and smaller space. No wonder the rumbling noise was so immense, the entirety of the dimension was coming together.

Even closer than the walls, the black water below had now entirely submerged the remains of what Carmilla had called a hut and every second it rose more rapidly.

*Only a little longer. That’s all we need.*
Someone screamed.

On instinct, she looked to Carmilla and then up at the girls first. But it had come from below. From Gravenberg.

She looked to have caught her foot somehow and in her attempts to free it, had lost her grip entirely. Now the only thing stopping her from plummeting into the water below was the same stuck foot. Her head dangled above the water as her hands scrabbled uselessly towards the stuck foot, unable to reach it.

“Help!” she cried. “Help me, please!”

They wouldn't make it out by themselves. Laura could tell that immediately. Her gut churned. Suddenly dealing with Gravenberg couldn't be a ‘later’ thing anymore. She had to make a choice now.

The water wasn't much below where Gravenberg and was rising fast, the walls were about to close in on them and her muscles screamed at even the prospect of climbing down and up again. She wasn't sure she’d be able to get to her and back in time. Or if she could actually do anything to free Gravenberg’s foot anyway.

But none of those reasons were why she didn’t want to go back down. Not if she was being honest with herself. Had it been Carmilla she’d have been halfway there already. Or the girls or any of her friends. Even if it had been a stranger she’d have gone back down.

No, the reason was that when she looked at Gravenberg, she once again saw the mummified husks of the kids she was responsible for sacrificing, felt Kellan’s blood on her hands as she died and heard Gravenbergs taunting words about her mother. Just as in the tunnels, she found herself unable to move, unable to make a decision on what to do. Except this time she’d have to. Up or down. Save her or let her die.

Gravenberg was responsible for the deaths of children and had planned on killing many more. She’d sent the Leshy after Kellan, a mother who only wanted her child back, nevermind sending Corvae goons to kill her and Carmilla. And she’d done all of those things without an ounce of remorse, for nothing more than her own petty gain. What kind of a person could do such things? To care so little about the lives of other people, of children? What could that person be other than a monster?

“Please help me!” The monster screamed. “Please!”

“Laura, no. We don’t have time and she’s literally a murderous psychopath,” Carmilla said. Unknowingly agreeing to everything going on her head.

It would be crazy to risk her life going down to save Gravenberg. Utterly crazy.

Crazy like going on a one journalism freshman crusade to rescue her roommate from a vampire cult. Like taking on a literal God trying to end the world. Like falling in love with a vampire.

Or like a mother being the only one brave enough to stand up to thugs many times her size.

She looked at Carmilla and the words from their conversation last night went through her mind.

“But what you took from that. How it shaped who you are.”

Being the person who tried to save everybody no matter what had been how she’d helped rescue her roommate, stop an apocalypse and
“It’s why I love you.”

And why the woman she wanted to spend the rest of her life with loved her.

Maybe why she felt so terrible in the tunnels after doing nothing as Gravenberg got dragged away, was that it wasn’t about who Gravenberg was. Monster or not. It was about who she was and who she wanted to be. She wasn’t the person who did the smart thing and leave her enemy to die alone.

She was the person who went back to save them.

Laura found Carmilla’s eyes. “It’s what makes me, me, right?”

“No. No. No! You are not using my own words to justify doing something so insane. Laura, listen to me-”

“I’m not leaving them down there to die,” Laura said simply.

“Okay. Okay, you win. The things you make me do Hollis. I’ll go back down and get her. You stay here.”

“No. This has to be me. We’ll be able to climb through this… portal thingy real soon. Make sure the kids get out and I’ll be right behind you.”

“Please don’t do this,” Carmilla’s words were a plea.

Laura squeezed her arm with a free hand, keeping her eyes locked on Carmilla’s.

“I’ll be right behind you.”

With that, she went down. A real urgency to her climb now. The muscles in her limbs seemed to agree with Carmilla, going back down was a dumb idea.

With time running out, she took a risk and let herself slide the rest of the way. For a scary moment, she thought she might not regain her grip but the risk paid off and she found herself right above Gravenberg’s stuck foot.

The water had risen to the top of Gravenberg’s head. Laura reached down and grabbed one of Gravenberg’s hands. With a grunt of great effort, She lifted her upright to a standing position around the tree. The action brought them face to face. Gravenberg looked shocked, her normally small and narrowed eyes wide.

“After all the horrible things you've done. I'm not going to let you dragging me down to your level be one more,” she told her and climbed a little further down to get at the stuck foot.

It had sunk deeply into the crumbling tree. With a hard yank, she pulled it out.

“Go, you’re free!” she urged.

The climb back up was more a mad scramble than anything else. The water kissed her shoes and the walls were only metres away. The only direction she could look without feeling intense terror was up. Where with great joy she saw Carmilla helping Lexi and Abigail up through the portal to safety.

Whatever happened next, they’d stopped Baba Yaga and saved who they could. She felt an elation at that, despite her own situation.

By the time Gravenberg reached the top, both the girls and Carmilla had climbed out. They looked
slightly distorted on the other side of the portal. Like viewing someone from underwater. Carmilla wrenched Gravenberg up and threw her aside out of the way savagely. Her eyes fixed on Laura the whole time.

“C’mon!” Carmilla stretched out a hand towards her.

She forced herself up the last few inches and reached her hand out to Carmilla’s.

The entire tree shook and began to fall, the ground underneath it falling away. She used the last of her strength to jump up and her hand found Carmilla’s tight grip.

“Got you,” Carmilla cried out. “Hang on!”

Carmilla grasped her hand with both of her own and started to pull. Lexi and Abigail went behind her and grabbed her around the chest, making sure she didn’t fall. The water had reached her waist and it seemed to not want to let her go. As if it was imbued with the last of Baba Yaga’s will, desperate to have one final victim. Bit by bit, they dragged her up as the entire dimension closed in on her.

She’d made it. They’d all made it. Another moment and she’d be out and back home safely.

A figure moved behind Carmilla and the two girls. Gravenberg had gotten back to her feet. On her face, a cruel malice mixed with triumph. Laura realised her intent immediately. In a story, at least one that she’d enjoy, the villain would respect the fact the hero had saved them and might even help them in turn. But when their eyes met, Laura knew there was zero chance of that. With them all on the edge of the portal, a single push would be all Gravenberg needed to send them all to their deaths.

Laura shouted in alarm as Gravenberg pressed forward. But before she could reach the girls and Carmilla there was a loud crack! and she fell back clutching her shoulder.

A second later Beattie appeared with a gun in her hand. “Is everyone o-” She looked down at the portal on the floor. “What the fuck?”

“Shut up and help us!” Carmilla shouted.

Beattie wrapped her arms around Carmilla and the two girls and helped them pull.

Finally, it was enough. Together, they lifted Laura up and out of Baba Yaga’s dimension and to safety.

They all fell into an exhausted heap on the now drained floor. Carmilla grabbed her and pulled her close, but otherwise, none of them other than Beattie moved. Laura wasn’t sure if her body would ever let her move again so tired every part of it felt.

She flicked her eyes up at Detective Beattie.

“Thank you,” she gasped out before head fell back to the floor.

There they stayed for quite some time. Just breathing and nothing else. By the time the police Beattie called arrived, the portal had long since closed and the last trace of Baba Yaga and her swamp disappeared forever.
The busy narrow corridors of the police station looked little different at night time. The lighting may have changed but the constant buzz of dozens of people talking at once and the steady stream of people heading in every direction remained.

At least this time she didn’t have to see the prison cells again. Though that might be the only positive thing about her visit here. Her heart beat heavily and every step felt a burden as she anticipated the conversations she was soon to have.

“You don’t have to do this,” Carmilla said next to her. She hadn’t left Laura’s side since they’d left the school hours ago and her grip on Laura’s hand was so tight, Laura doubted she wanted that to change any time soon. She walked with a limp, whatever had happened to her foot definitely was causing her pain. “You’ve done enough already for these people, you don’t have to explain or defend yourself to them.”

“They deserve answers. It’s right that they get to talk to us about what happened at least once before we leave.”

“None of this is our fault.”

“Maybe. Probably not, yeah. But we should still do this. We can’t just skulk away. Even if I’m really not looking forward to it.”

Carmilla kissed her cheek. *I’m here with you.*

Laura took a quick moment to lean her head on Carmilla’s shoulder as they walked into a large hall filled with desks and yet more people. The police officer leading them glanced back.

“Almost there, Detective Beattie’s office is at the end of the hall,” they said.

“Yeah, we remember,” Laura said, raising her voice over the din.

The officer knocked on Beattie’s door and the detective came out. Her face tired and drawn, her hat nowhere to be seen. She nodded thanks to the officer, who turned around and walked away without a word. Beattie sighed when she looked at them.

“They’re inside, I told them what I could. Even if a lot of it I don’t even understand. But I think they understand the basic picture. It’s good that you came, can’t have been easy.” She nodded to them both respectfully. “This is gonna suck. But they’ll be grateful for anything you can tell them, even if they might not be able to show that right now.”

Beattie ushered them into her office. A few more chairs were in it than usual. Four people were sitting in them. People she recognised. The Meyers and the Turners. The parents of the two boys they weren’t able to save.

The anxiety she felt coming here was much like when she’d met them all for the first time in Kellan’s house. But the mood inside the office had none of the stressful mix of desperation, frustration and intense fear she’d picked up on there. Walking into the office felt more like entering a tomb. The parents were silent. Some staring blankly into nothing, others had their eyes closed as they leant
against their spouse for support.

Their clothes were even more ragged and crumpled than before. The room smelt of dried sweat and body odour. Things like showering, eating or sleeping were of little priority to any of these people right now. Laura couldn't blame them for that.

Together, they looked up at her and Carmilla as they came in. The sight of their faces would haunt her for quite some time, gaunt and hollow. None of them said anything.

“So,” Beattie started. “Now that they're both here-”

“I'm sorry,” Laura interrupted, looking at them all. “I am so, so sorry.”

She expected them to start shouting. To be angry and vengeful. Instead, after a long silent moment, Mr Turner shook his head.

“Way I see it. You two did more than anyone else ever did. You’re the only ones who really tried.”

Laura winced at the not too subtle barb at Beattie, but this wasn’t the time to start an argument.

Mrs Meyer leaned forward on her chair, furtively looking around to make sure no one else was talking. “The… the detective, has been telling us a lot of stuff I don’t really understand. But all I really need to know is, the people who took our children, are they still out there?”

“No. They're either dead or locked up.”

“That monster?” Mr Turner asked. “The one at the swamp?”

“Dead,” Laura confirmed for him. “And the person holding its leash.”

He let out a big long breath. “Thanks to you, we know. It’s good that we know.”

The other parents nodded and the room fell silent again. She’d expected a long, terrible conversation, but already there wasn’t much more to say.

Somehow, this felt worse than if they’d raged at her. Without that or any questions to answer there was nothing else but the realisation that she could do nothing to fix the damage of what had happened to these people. She’d tried her best and so had Carmilla, but for the people in this room, it hadn’t been enough.

Not too long ago she’d have related that back to herself with guilt-ridden questions of what could she have done better and tried to find some way of taking the blame. But with the grim acceptance and even gratitude the parents had given her, came an awareness that it wasn’t about her in this moment. It was about the profound loss that these people had suffered. A loss she couldn't repair.

As she quietly left the room after answering a few more questions and an awkward goodbye, she hoped that her earlier prediction that the loss of their children would break these people forever had been wrong. That maybe one day they could find a way to heal. But whether they could or not would have nothing to do with her. She'd done everything she could and now all that was left was for her to accept she couldn't solve everything and save everyone.

A sobering lesson, but also a valuable one. She promised herself never to forget it.
“That was good, went better than I expected. They’ll appreciate you coming here and talking to them down the line,” Beattie said as she closed her office door after following them out. The three of them found a little corner in the busy hall to speak.

“I hope so,” Laura said. “Didn’t feel that way in there.”

“Trust me, them knowing the important details will help them move on in time. The word is, uhh.” “Closure,” Carmilla said.

Beattie nodded. “Yeah. Closure.”

The detective gave out her biggest sigh yet and leant hard against the wall behind her. Seemingly without care for the framed picture she rubbed up against.

“Hey, what was said in there-” Laura started.

Beattie held up a hand. “Was true. I didn’t find those kids, you two did. I was there when the first one went missing and three kids later I still couldn’t figure out a damn thing. Kellan told me the same stuff she told you. The difference was you listened. Maybe if I had, four kids would have been saved instead of two.”

“You’re not being fair to yourself. There’s no way you could have known. And you’re forgetting that if you hadn’t’ve trusted us, we’d never have found that shed and without you coming to rescue us there, Gravenberg would have killed us all.”

Beattie gave a little nod of acknowledgement. Laura hoped that the detective took the words to heart. She genuinely meant them.

“Yeah, that was nice of you,” Carmilla said, folding her arms. “Though, you never did say how you worked out where we went.”

Beattie bit her lip. “I may have… put a tracker on that phone I gave you.” She shrugged. “A little underhanded I know, but I’d hope given how things turned out you wouldn’t hold that against me.”

“We won’t,” Laura said through a grin even as Carmilla scowled. “Thank you for saving us. And for all the help.”

“And for not arresting us,” Carmilla added.

“Well, at least I’ll know who to call if a demon or something shows up in town,” Beattie said. She reached out and shook both their hands. “I'm glad you two came, I'll always remember what you've done here. You've saved a lot of lives, thank you.”

She straightened up and looked sideways down the hall. “But I understand there's one last person you wanted to see here.”

Laura nodded.

“Down that hallway, take a right.” Beattie gestured the directions with a hand. “The guard knows to let you in.”

“Thank you,” Laura said gratefully. She hadn’t been sure if Beattie would let her do this.

They said their goodbyes and Carmilla and her went down the hallway Beattie had told them to. The right turn led them to into a corridor of interrogation rooms. A bored looking guard stood in front of
Before heading towards him, she turned to Carmilla and put a hand on her side.

“Thank you, but this I need to do alone.”

The interrogation room was dark and cramped. She'd expected a big room with a one-way mirror like in most cop shows. But instead, she'd entered a small box without a window to be seen. The room’s one light barely worked, dull and flickering intermittently.

Gravenberg sat in the middle of the room cuffed to a square metal table. Despite her tattered clothing and ragged appearance, she sat up straight in her chair. A haughty defiance radiated from her.

“Finally,” she said as Laura entered. “I have a burn on my leg. I have the right to medical atten- Oh it's you.” Her eyes narrowed at her. “Are you a cop now as well Hollis? College freshman, private detective, Savannah police department. Whatever is next in the saga of our great hero?”

“Just a favour,” Laura said and sat down on the across from her.

Neither spoke for a while. Instead, they simply stared at each other coolly.

“Did you have something to say? Did you come here to gloat? Or what?” Gravenberg asked.

“Is there any part of you that’s remorseful? Even a little? People have died, two of them boys, school children. Does any part of you feel something about that?”

“Why do you care?”

“I saved your life. Would be nice to know that some part of that life is human.”

“You also left me to die, perhaps you’d feel better then if I said no.” Gravenberg’s narrow eyes flashed. She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter either way. No, I don’t care. Nothing’s changed. They were meaningless. If they were still alive, they’d have grown up to do nothing of any value.”

She searched Gravenberg’s face for any sign of a lie. She found nothing.

“You're wrong. Before I came in here, I had one of the hardest conversations of my life. It showed just how wrong you are. Phillip Turner, Wallis Meyer. Those were their names, in case you couldn't be bothered to remember them. They had people who cared about them. Family, parents who might be destroyed forever thanks to you. They had friends who I saw cry tears at losing them. Lexi Kellan, Abigail Bishop.”

“These names don’t mean anything to me.” Gravenberg waved a hand irritably, the chains attaching her cuffs to the table jangled.

“But they do to others. Abigail’s parents were desperate to get their daughter back. Mary Kellan.”

She paused and swallowed hard before continuing.

“Mary Kellan died trying to find her daughter. That’s how much she cared. That’s how much these people mattered. How dare you sit there and say they were meaningless.”

Gravenberg lost her dignified posture and slouched back. “Why are you telling me all this? You
already won. What purpose does ranting at me while I’m cuffed to this table have? If you think one of your vomit inducing naive speeches is going to result in anything other than me hating you more, then you are even more of a moron than I thought.”

“Maybe. But that night in Stevenson’s house you asked me a question I didn’t get the chance to answer. That if all my, what did you call them? ‘Good deeds’ got me was getting killed by you, were they worth it?” She leant forwards on the table. “Believing in people and trying to help them is how I found the best friends I’ve ever had, it’s led to me finding someone who I want to spend the rest of my life with and it’s how I’ve helped save more people than I can count. So yes, it would have been worth it.”

She got up from her chair.

“But as we’re alone across a table again, I’d like to ask you the same. What about your deeds? The lives gone because of you, the families you’ve taken from, all this suffering you’ve caused to so many people. This outlook you have that the only thing that matters is you and nothing else. Now that it’s led to where you are right now. All alone and heading for a dark miserable prison cell for the rest of your life. Was it worth it? Or only now are you realising how pointless it all was?”

Gravenberg responded only with a withering glare. Laura started for the door.

“You chose to save me,” Gravenberg said abruptly, and Laura stopped. “That was a choice. You apparently decided that my life mattered enough to do that. If you think about it, if I was ever to get out of here. Whatever I do after that, a part of that will be because of you.”

That rattled her for a moment. The implied threat in Gravenberg’s words was not subtle. 

*She’s not ever getting out, this is just her last chance of throwing some barbs while she still can.*

She turned her head back to Gravenberg as she opened the door.

“If you ever did get out of here. Then I’d just beat you again and drag you right back. But you’re never getting out. I think that when I shut this door, that’s it. Years from now I’ll barely remember you as I live my life, just like everyone else in the world. That’s justice for those boys and Mary Kellan. I’m leaving now and I’m never going to see you again. No one will.”

As Gravenberg sat stunned into silence, she walked out of the room and let the guard close the door.

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All the lights were on and the window wide open in the hospital room. It’s occupant not interested in sleep despite the late hour and everything she’d been through.

Lexi sat hunched and leaning forward on the bed in front of the open window, enjoying the cool breeze that Laura could feel from the door. Lexi turned at her entering and Laura got a quick glance at a white and tearful face before she turned back to the window.

Laura heard sniffling and saw Lexi’s hands come to her face. “Didn’t know you were here as well. Did you get hurt?” Lexi asked in a thick tone.

“No, I’m fine. Only just arrived. Carmilla has a burn on her foot, so I forced her to get it checked.”

“I hope she’s okay.”
“Thank you and I’m sure she’ll be fine. Between you and me, she’s kind of a huge badass.”

“Yeah, I noticed. She’s like Jessica Jones or something.”

Laura walked towards the bed and sat next to Lexi. The girl’s tears were gone, but a raw redness around her eyes remained. “But I also wanted to come here to talk to you. I’m guessing they told you… about…”

Lexi nodded and sniffed again. There was a long silence before she spoke.

“I’m alone. They’re both gone and I’m alone.” She held her head in her hands for a moment before another sniff and a shaky breath. “It feels like, only yesterday they were both alive. And now.” She raised her hands up slightly in a desperately hopeless gesture.

“It feels like a void, doesn’t it? Your world’s just as big as it always was, but now there’s this void where they should be. A hole you can’t fill with anything,” Laura said.

Lexi met her eyes. “You’ve lost someone before?”

“My mum. And then later… some friends as well. But I was about your age when I lost her. Got the news in a hospital a lot like this.” She looked around at the room. “I know where you are now. I know that there’s nothing I can tell you that will make this better, no cliche phrases or anything dumb like that.”

Laura put a hand on her Lexi’s shoulder.

“But I do know for absolute certain that it’s better to go through this with people. You are not alone, you’re wrong there. There are still people who care about you. One in particular I think.”

That got a flicker of a smile from the girl. “Abi. They took her to a different room and won’t let me out of here to see her. I’m fine, though.” She flexed her arms and swung her legs up before scowling. “They’re being assholes.”

Laura suppressed a laugh. “She’s fine. She’s with her parents right now. I asked around. They said I can take you to them.”

Lexi’s face lit up at that. “Really?”

“Yeah, really. But first I have one more thing to talk to you about.” At Lexi’s quizzical face she continued. “I said it’s best to not have to go through what you’re going through alone. With that in mind I’ve got an offer for you and Abigail.”

“And an offer?”

“A fresh start, away from here. This was supposed to be your last year of high school right?”

Lexi nodded.

“There’s this university in Austria, Silas. It’s where I went after high school. It’s undergoing some… rebuilding but I know the people taking care of it. I trust them completely. While they’re rebuilding there’s a lot of free dorms just waiting for someone to stay up all night eating cookies, drink too much, procrastinate on assignments and do other general college stuff in them. If you want it, I can make sure you have a place there for as long you want.”

“You’re offering me and Abi a scholarship?”
“I’m offering you a chance to go somewhere new. Somewhere you’re not always reminded of the horrible things that happened. Oh, and somewhere where you don't have to deal with, well… I met some of your fellow students recently.”

“I hate them,” Lexi said.

“Yeah, they're the worst. Somewhere where you won't have to deal with them ever again too.”

“Wow,” Lexi said. It seemed all she could manage.

“I know it's a lot. You don't have to answer now. I just wanted to put it in your mind. To have at least something good to look forward too, after everything that's happened.”

Laura stood up and beckoned Lexi to follow. “C'mon, I'll take you to Abigail.”

Lexi didn't move. A pained expression had come onto her face.

“While you were looking for us. Did you spend much time with my mum?”

“I did. She’s the one who found us in the first place. She never gave up on you. Not even for a second. If it wasn’t for her, we’d never have found you.”

Lexi looked down at her feet. “We were fighting the last time I talked to her. I hate that. Did she say anything about me? I know that’s probably such a stupid question to ask, it’s just-”

Laura knelt down in front of her and found her eyes. “She loved you. That was so, so clear in everything she said and did. She wanted me to tell you that she loved you, more than anything in the world. I’m glad that I got to keep that promise to her in the end.”

She found Carmilla exactly where she thought she would. Lounging in a dark forgotten corner that they could see the whole room from.

This particular corner lay at the back of the hospital's cafeteria. The closest ceiling light to it had failed, which was so perfect that Laura couldn't help but consider the crazy idea that Carmilla had somehow broken it herself without anyone noticing. She also doubted the chair Carmilla sat in had been there before she’d arrived, nor the second empty one beside her.

“I see your burn was so much of a ‘nothing to worry about thing’, that they had to wrap it up in more bandages than a mummy,” Laura said, looking at Carmilla’s heavily bandaged foot.

Carmilla rose her arms above her head in a lazy stretch. “What does second degree even mean anyway?” When Laura sat next to her she brought down one arm around Laura’s shoulders.

“Does it hurt?”

“No. They rubbed something on it. They said it'll be fine. I should ‘avoid strenuous activity’ for a bit.”

“Oh, no!” Laura said through a giggle. “That’s so awful. Knowing how much you just love strenuous activity.”

Carmilla curled the side of her mouth upwards into a coy smile. “I don’t know. Depends on what kind of activity we’re talking about.”
Laura laughed and leant in to kiss Carmilla’s cheek. “I’m glad it’s nothing serious.”

A loud thud of something hitting the floor drew their attention. On the other side of the room, Lexi and the Bishops were still hugging and talking where Laura had left them.

It seemed like Lexi and Abigail were so focused on their tight embrace they hadn’t noticed they’d knocked over a chair. As they hugged, Lexi had a hand held out that Mrs Bishop firmly grasped with both of her own. The two parents were beaming.

The night’s lateness meant the happy sight was the only thing to be seen in the otherwise empty cafeteria. After everything that had happened, Laura found watching them almost entrancing. The smiles on their faces, the affectionate hugs and touches, the comforting words she could see them saying even if she couldn’t quite hear them. It all felt like the best reward she could hope for at the end of this whole thing.

“This is nice,” Carmilla said, watching on like she was.

Laura looked at her in surprise. Carmilla rarely would comment on such things, unless to complain in some way about them being overly saccharine. But there was no complaint from her this time, no dry sarcastic joke.

She smiled at her. “Yeah, it is.”

“Back when I was a vampire working for Mother,” Carmilla said, her tone thoughtful. “Sometimes I would track down the families of the girls I’d… you know. I’d never talk to them or anything like that. Just observe from afar. Mother would always say the girls were worthless cattle. It didn’t matter if they disappeared from the world. But to them it mattered, to their mothers, their fathers, their brothers and sisters. I could see it on their faces, how they moved and talked, when they broke down when they thought no one was looking.”

“There were missing something they could never get back,” Laura said.

Carmilla nodded.

“Something I took from them. For so long that’s what I did. I was the one who took. Who caused the worst kind of pain you can inflict on someone.”

The hug between Lexi and Abigail had turned into a group hug now. One that was lasting quite some time.

“What’s it like, to do the opposite thing?” Laura asked.

Her eyes still on the group, Carmilla broke into a genuine smile. “It feels pretty good.” She turned to Laura. “Thank you.”

“For what? You did this just as much as I did. If anything I should be thanking you.”

Carmilla shook her head. “This feeling I have right now, from being able to look at this.” She gestured to the group. “And know that I was a big part of why it’s happening. That this time I helped bring someone back. It’s one of the best feelings I’ve had in centuries. That’s because of you. Because of the path you’ve put me on.”

She looked down for a moment as she let out a good-natured “hmm.”

“I like this path a lot more than the one Mother had me on, that’s for sure.” Her short laugh was
almost nervous. Something that Laura had learned to take a sign Carmilla was being as genuine as she could be. She found Laura’s eyes. “I’m a better person now for being with you. I can’t thank you enough for that. In all my years as a human and a vampire, I’ve never got to feel like a hero before I met you.”

Laura grinned. “Carmilla Karnstein finally accepts the truth. She’s a big damn hero.”

They laughed together and pulled each other close.

“I’d never be able to do any of this without you either. You know that right?” Laura said as her hand decided on its own to start brushing Carmilla’s hair back. “And more importantly, I’d never want to.”

“There’s another good feeling you give me. Being wanted.”

Laura placed an index finger to Carmilla’s lips. “How long can you hold that thought?”

Carmilla’s eyes sparkled. “I think I could just about manage to hold it for about a taxi ride from here to our hotel length of time.”

“Perfect.”

It took a few tries for her tired arms to lift her suitcase off the ground and onto the bed. That her hands were still wet from being in the spa for the last few hours probably didn’t help. Droplets of water dripped down from her hair onto the bed as she used one hand to keep her towel around her and the other to unzip the case.

Her movements were tired and clumsy. As time wore on, Carmilla began calling for her.

“Laura? Where’d you go? I already checked, there aren’t any cookies. I’ll get you some later.” The words came out slurred and trailed off. Carmilla was as exhausted as she was.

“Just give me a minute;” she called back and started rummaging through the case.

That minute turned into ten and most of the case’s contents had been thrown onto the ground by the time she found what she was looking for. A tiny box buried in the corner underneath a number of flannel shirts. She started to open it when Carmilla came into the room wrapped up in a towel of her own.

“Are you okay in here? What are you doing?”

Laura slid across the bed, placing herself in front of the box so Carmilla couldn’t see it. “Everything’s fine. I was just looking for something. You seemed pretty tired, so I thought I’d do it myself.”

“I’m awake,” Carmilla said, blinking her eyes rapidly and stretching out her arms with a yawn. “What’s up?” She gestured to the mess all around the bedroom.

With a jolt of anxiety, Laura realised what she’d thought would be happening later today was happening now. She took a breath and straightened up on the bed.

“Well, I’ve been thinking about us waiting til I have a ring of my own to give you and when we’ve got more of what kind of wedding we want planned before we made things all public and official.”
“Hey, it's okay. I get it, we've been kinda busy for either of those things to happen. Don't feel ba-” She paused as Laura reached behind her and put the box in her lap.

“If we can learn anything from these last couple of weeks. It's that life's too short to wait until everything's perfect. So what if I don't have a ring for you yet and we’ve come up with zero plans for what kind of wedding we want? I know I love you, I know I want to marry you.” She opened up the box and put the ring inside on her finger. “And I want the whole world to know that too.”

Carmilla eyes were glued to the ring. She didn't respond. Instead, she knelt in front of Laura and caressed her hands over the ring. She looked up and her smile was as wide as Laura had ever seen it. A look of pure joy on her face.

Kellan had been right. Putting on the ring now had been the right choice. She was glad to have made it.

Forgetting the spa and the mess around them, they came together on the bed and fell under the covers into a much-needed rest. It would be a great many hours later until either of them managed to get back up.

Sunlight poured through every window her father's house had. Along with the constant chatter and laughter, it filled the place with a bright and happy energy.

As she walked into the back garden, she heard the barbecue sizzling and was greeted by the salivating smell of cooking meat. Her father loved barbecues. Probably because they were difficult to mess up, even for him.

“Yeah, no, that's dumb. What you need is for the place to be packed with our sorority sisters. They'll make sure everything runs smoothly. We fought a battle for Silas, we can handle anything,” Mel said from her seat around a wooden table as weathered and scratched as the one inside.

“All those girls are so uptight. A wedding isn't a battle, it should be fun! Us bros would make sure Carmilla and Laura have a great time before they get all boring like everyone who gets married does,” Kirsch retorted next to her. “I mean, like, boring in a good way. You'll always be cool to me,” he called out in her direction.

Arms slid around her waist from behind and a chin nestled on her shoulder. “How comforting. The puppy bro thinking I'm cool has always been of such importance to me,” Carmilla whispered in her ear.

Laura giggled. “This isn't as bad as I thought it would be. They're genuinely trying to help. Plus they did agree to take Lexi and Abigail in at Silas for no tuition fee. We should probably try to be nice.”

Carmilla’s grunt was good natured despite its apparent grumpiness. She released Laura and they both walked past her father fussing over the barbecue towards the table.

“I brought the plates and serviettes. I colour coordinated them so we know which ones are whose and which ones are for dessert,” Laura announced brightly to roughly zero reaction.

“Yeah, I brought the drinks,” Carmilla said to general cheers from everyone.

As they prepared the table, Carmilla broke through the intensifying argument between Mel and Kirsch with a new topic.
“Checked on the local Savannah, Georgia news on Laura’s laptop. ‘Suspected Serial Kidnapper’s
Trial to Start Tomorrow.’”

“I talked to Detective Beattie about it. She says they’re pretty sure they got her. Even with all the
supernatural weird stuff that will never make it to trial,” Laura said.

“What about those Corvae goons? Shouldn’t they be on trial too?” Mel asked.

“You’d think so, but Beattie said no. Apparently whatever was inside of them using them as puppets
died like everything else Baba Yaga controlled when she died. But after the hospital released them
an army of Corvae lawyers rescued them.”

“Wait, they didn’t help that Gravenberg lady as well?” Kirsch asked.

Carmilla snorted. “Why would they? She’s not one of them. As much as she wanted to be. They’ll
be happy for her to take the fall for everything. Probably also upset about her murdering one of their
head guys too. Shitty father or not.”

Laura finished sharing out the last of the plates and sat down. “I know I should just be happy things
worked out as well as they did, and I am. But I do admit to being a bit annoyed. Corvae didn’t just
know what Gravenberg and Baba Yaga were doing, they helped them do it. Seems unfair that they
got off Scot free for it.”

“That’s super evil corporations for you. You never get that satisfying sense of final vengeance on
them you get when you brutally murder regular evil people. They always slink away to annoy you
again.”

“I’d replace vengeance with justice and brutally murdering for locking up. But otherwise, I’m kinda
feeling that sentiment,” Laura said with a shrug.

“Alright, that’s enough about trials and disappointments and brutally murdering people,” her father
said as he brought over a giant platter of delicious smelling food. “We got sausages, we got patties,
we got salad with dressing, we got about a dozen kinds of sauce.” He placed the platter on the table
with a loud thunk and looked at her with serious eyes but a smiling face. “And we have a wedding to
plan.”

That planning went on well into the night and consumed an amount of food Laura would never
admit to anyone. At the point where her father had started offering musical suggestions for the after
party, she and Carmilla finally tapped out to find a nice spot for themselves. One of the big comfy
chairs near the fireplace worked nicely.

“This chair feels so good,” Laura said as Carmilla got the fireplace going. “I love this house. Can
you believe I said I was a little bored before we left for Savannah? I must have been crazy.”

Carmilla laughed and sat in the chair with her. The heat from the fireplace felt good and Laura found
herself humming a little as the comfort of the chair, Carmilla and the warmth combined into some
kind of bliss.

“Nothing like a week of almost getting killed in various but all terrifying ways to help someone
appreciate their nice and safe old home that little bit extra,” Carmilla said.

“Yeah, definitely not even a tiny bit bored anymore. Super okay with absolutely nothing happening
and us staying in this chair in front of the fireplace for the next eternity. Dad can bring us food.”
Laura rubbed her belly. “If I’ll ever need food again anyway.”
Carmilla sniggered quietly and kissed Laura on the top of her head.

“Whatever you say,” she said in a tone that suggested more than a hint of sarcasm.

“What?”

“You’re good for now, sure. But I give it maybe a few months at most and you’ll be itching for another adventure. You said it yourself Cupcake, there’s a part of you that needs to help people. That part of you isn’t going to be satisfied with the domestic life and nothing else. As much as I know you love that stuff as well.”

Laura was quiet for a moment, letting Carmilla’s words sink in.

“Yeah, about that.” She shifted a little in the chair nervously.

“Hmm?”

“I’ve been thinking about that too. I mean, after we get married. Oh wow, that felt good to say. We have to think about what we want to do with our lives. We have a lot of zeros in our bank accounts right now, but will that last forever?”

“You’re talking about us getting jobs? Getting stuffed behind a counter or an office cubicle while you work on becoming a journalist isn’t quite what I meant by you needing something other than the domestic life.”

“What if the job wasn’t at all domestic? What if that job was about helping people.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out the fake Private Investigator badge Kellan had given her. “I actually really liked flashing these around. Wouldn’t mind having a real version.”

Carmilla’s face was dubious. She took the badge out of her hand and studied with narrowed eyes.

“You want to become a PI? You know they’re mostly about catching asshole guys cheating right?”

“I want us to become PI’s. Together. And we have enough money to be picky with what cases we choose. I’m talking about the cases like the one we just handled. Things didn’t work out perfectly, but no one else but us could have saved those girls and stopped Baba Yaga. We’re good at this and who knows how many people are out there getting hurt by things regular police can’t handle.”

Carmilla regarded her carefully before responding. “And your apparent lifelong dream of Lois Lanedom?”

Laura laughed. “I’ll admit, ‘Laura Hollis, Investigative Journalist’ still makes my inner child really excited. But things change, we change. I’d still be investigating to bring bad things into the light. It’s just maybe I don’t want to sit on the sidelines and report on them anymore. I want to do something about them.”

She was about to stop and let Carmilla process what she was asking. But then she realised she’d forgotten a very important part of what she wanted to say.

“I’d only want to do this with you. If you hate this idea, then we’ll forget it. I won’t bring it up again.”

She waited for Carmilla to respond, unable to help feeling a little anxious the longer they were silent. Finally, Carmilla spoke.
“If we do this. How long can our vacations be between cases?”

Knowing that meant yes, Laura let out a happy squeak and threw her arms around Carmilla.

“Okay, okay,” Carmilla said, hugging her back. “I can’t pretend that after how nice it felt to save those girls what you’re proposing doesn’t have an appeal. But seriously. Long vacations between every case. I’m talking a trip to Paris or Vienna after every one, no matter how small. And I also get you in that trench coat.”

“Agreed, totally agreed. You were right before. I’m good to do exactly nothing for the next two, three, six months other than wedding planning. Long vacations, big thumbs up.”

They sat together well into the night. The bubble around them was back and this time Laura could settle snugly within it. Whether it was here in her father’s house, their Cottage in Styria, a hotel suite or a dorm room in Silas, home was where she was now. It was the vibrations of Carmilla’s heartbeat when she rested on her chest, the feel of her arms around her, the sound of her breathing the same air she was. She couldn’t think of a better way to close a chapter on a latest adventure than right here at this moment.

Although, there was at least one more question to be asked. One of such great importance that could very well turn into one of the biggest arguments of her life. She prepared herself for a long night of passionate arguing that she honestly couldn’t predict the winner of.

“Carm,” she said innocently. “When we get married. Who’s taking whose last name?”

Chapter End Notes

Hello!

It’s over! All done! I thought that it wouldn’t feel as good as completing my first multichapter fic but no, definitely very happy :D

I cannot thank everyone who read all the way through to here enough. Thank you so so much. And for those of you who commented, there has been and is a huge amount of love coming your way. Those comments have been some of the loveliest things I’ve gotten to read in the year I’ve been writing this story and in the couple of years I’ve been writing Carmilla fanfiction. They’ve been pick me ups when I’ve been down, they’ve motivations to keep writing and they’ve been all so nice to get. Thank you ♥

I really do apologize for how long it’s taken me in the end. Especially how the length of time between chapters increased after getting about half way through. My organization/Planning has improved since New Beginnings but it’s clearly got a lot of room for improvement :D Those annoying gaps are just another reason why I’m so thankful to those who stuck with it.

I hope that it was enjoyable all or at least most of the way through. I felt like I took a few risks this time, with adding an OC in Mary Kellan with more page time than any in NB and delving into Laura’s past with her mother, something that hadn’t been talked about much in the canon. I hope these things worked out alright for you guys :)

Funnily enough, Laura and Carmilla taking cases as kind of supernatural PI’s were what
I’d originally wanted to do at the end of New Beginnings. I love the Carmilla series so much and am so sad at the idea of it just fading away, I loved the idea of fic that ended with the prospect of Hollstein going on many adventures all over the world with all kinds of supernatural things. Even if those adventures would just be in our imaginations :D As it turned out, I needed two stories to take Laura and Carmilla from the end of S3 to there, instead of just the one I’d originally thought ;p

As for the future. I will admit that sadly (for me anyway ;D I love this series) I have no plans or any concrete ideas for any more Carmilla fanfics right now. I really want to improve as a writer and at the moment I think I’d like to take a break from the grind of writing a multichapter fic to instead look at studying the skill a bit more through reading books, blogs and articles about writing and maybe just doing some one shots.

I do have a kernel of an idea for a fic in a much different fandom than Carmilla (though it would be F/F if any of you might be interested in that :D ) Though its long way away from getting started. And there is a genuine possibility of me writing some Carmilla one shots in the future as well every once and awhile. All of which would probably all be very fluffy with maybe some smut ;p

Thank you all again, it means so much to me all the kind words I’ve gotten, the people who’ve given kudo's and the people who've been reading silently. Thank you so much. I sincerely hoped you enjoyed this story :) ♥

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