Pandemic
by Puntrest

Summary

A deadly virus plagues humanity. The Infected and their blood relatives are placed in quarantine camps where illegal experiments take place. When Laura Hollis’s father falls ill, the two of them are sent to a camp known as Silas. There Laura befriends a group of outcasts who have plans to escape, and she becomes roommates with a mysterious loner named Carmilla.

Notes

In case you missed the tag, I just want it to be clear that this NOT a zombie apocalypse fic.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The clinking of medical tools stirred Laura Hollis from her induced slumber. Her eyes struggled to adjust to the harsh overhead light. She tried to bring a hand up to block it out, but found that her wrists and ankles were strapped down.

That’s when the panic set in.

She began kicking and thrashing, anything to free herself from the restraints. But it was useless. She wasn’t going anywhere on her own. The silhouette of tall figure appeared in the light. A shiver ran down her spine against the cold table. Despite the thin hospital gown sticking to her clammy skin, she felt utterly exposed.

“Stay calm, you’ll be released shortly. The examination is over.”

“Examination?” Laura croaked, barely able to speak from how dry her throat was.

Slowly, the doctor’s face came into focus. “Don’t worry, disorientation and short term memory loss are normal side effects.”

“Where am I?” Laura looked around the small room. A few trays of intimidating medical tools were on a counter close by, a toxic waste bin was the in the corner, and a door was to her right.

“Silas.” The doctor answered distractedly while jotting down notes.

“Silas.” Laura repeated. She knew that name. It was on the tip of her tongue, leaving an awful taste.

“Silas is your new home, uh…” The doctor paused her scribbles to flip through the pages on her clipboard. “Laura Hollis.”

“Where’s my dad?” Breathing was becoming increasingly difficult.

“Laura.” The doctor placed a hand over hers. It was supposed to be a comforting gesture, but the sickly feel of her latex glove was far from calming. “I know that things are a little scary right now, but I need you to answer a few very important questions for me before I can let you go. Okay?”

The queasy feeling in Laura’s stomach started to rise, but she swallowed it back down with a nod to the doctor.

“Do you know where you are?” The doctor’s tone slipped into a dull clinical drone, like she’d done this a hundred times over.

“Silas.” And suddenly it hit her. Silas. Silas, the quarantine camp. Silas, the place where people were sent to die. “Am I sick?”

“Your lab results came back negative. Now…” The doctor glanced up. “Do you know who I am?”

“Should I know?” Sweat ran down Laura’s forehead. In stark contrast to the unnerving cool of the examination table, the room was sweltering hot.

The doctor made a few notes before answering. “My name is Dr. Vordenburg. We met when you first arrived. Do you remember?”
Laura shook her head, regretting it immediately as she grew dizzy from the movement.

“That’s okay.” Dr. Vordenburg said with a small smile. “Everything will come back to you in time.” She returned her attention to the clipboard. “Do you have any allergies?”

The questions were endless. What were her dietary habits? Did she smoke? Did she drink? Was she sexually active? Had she even been pregnant? Had she ever broken a bone? Had she ever left the country? Had she ever handled toxic chemicals? What animals had she been around in the past month? When was the last time she used a public transit? Had she ever donated blood? Had she ever had a blood transfusion? How many times had she caught the flu? How many Infected had she come into contact with? How did her mother die?

It felt like they’d been in that room for hours by the time Dr. Vordenburg finished writing on the final page. “Thank you, Laura, for your patience and cooperation. I know the formalities can be a bit stressful.”

“I want to see my dad.” She knew what the doctor was going to say, but she had to at least try.

“Only certified personnel are permitted to see the sick.” Dr. Vordenburg explained as she began unstrapping the wrist and ankle restraints.

“Where is he? He is okay?” Laura gently rubbed the red marks on her wrists as soon as they were free.

“I’m afraid I can’t answer those questions for you.”

“Can I see him?”

There was bit too much hope in her voice, and the doctor frowned at the sound of it. “The sick are cared for in a restricted section. Only certified personnel are permitted access that area. Healthy blood relatives who have recently cohabitated with the sick, such as yourself, are cared for at a neighboring facility within Silas. You’ll be taken there once you’re finished here in Medical.”

“If I’m healthy, can I leave?” Laura questioned, her eyes travelling to the door.

“It’s not that simple. Blood relatives of the sick remain at Silas for several reasons.” Dr. Vordenburg repeatedly tapped her pen against the clipboard as she talked. Each little hit was somehow more irritating than the last. “You’ve been exposed to a deadly infectious disease. Your lab results may have returned negative, but that doesn’t mean you won’t show symptoms in the future. This disease is still a mystery to us. We can’t take the risk of releasing you back into society just yet. I’m sure you are well aware that a cure, or any kind of preventative measure, has yet to be discovered. Here at Silas, we strive to not only help those who are suffering from this disease, but to learn as much as we can from them. We want to know why your father caught the disease, and not you. We want to learn how it spreads, how it attacks, and who may be immune. Your stay at Silas won’t be for nothing. You never know, your DNA could be the key to the cure.” A loud buzzing noise drew Dr. Vordenburg’s attention to a tiny pager clipped to her belt. “Sorry to rush out on you, Laura, but I’m needed elsewhere. I’ll call in a nurse to assist you.”

The doctor was out the door before Laura could think of anything to say. The room felt different without Dr. Vordenburg in it. Still hot, still small, still unnaturally clean, but different. She sat up, having to fight back the nausea that bubbled in her empty stomach as she did. It occurred to her that she could make a run for it. Just open the door and start running until she found an exit, until she was free. But where would she go? Her father was holed up in some restricted area. Even if she could find her way out, she’d never be able to leave him behind like that.
The door swung open and a grumpy middle-aged nurse strode in. She adjusted her reading glasses while peering down at the clipboard in her hands. “Laura Hollis?”

“Yes?” If possible, her voice had grown even hoarser.

“Come with me.” The nurse unenthusiastically beckoned for her to follow, already turning back out of the doorway. Laura, to the best of her wobbly ability, trailed after the nurse. They walked down a long sharply lit hallway. The tile felt icy cold against her bare feet.

“Where are we going?” Laura asked as they turned a corner.

“Right this way, kid.” The nurse pointed to a room up ahead. “In you go.”

Laura stepped through the open doorway, wrapping her arms around herself as she did. To the left was a small barrier almost her exact height. Hanging from the ceiling over a small drain in the floor was a hefty shower head. Laura cringed when the room’s foul odor enveloped her; it was a hot diabolical mix of dehydrated piss and dog breath.

“Strip down, please.” The nurse instructed before moving to a lever on the opposite wall.

“What?” Laura halted in her tracks. She looked at the door-less shower, at the small privacy wall, at the open doorway from which they’d entered, and then back to the nurse.

She tapped her foot impatiently. “It’s a sanitation shower, same as the one you had coming into the building.”

Laura had no memory of showering, but then again she couldn’t even recall what day it was. The last thing she could remember was seeing her father being wheeled into an ambulance, but even that felt like it may have just been a dream.

The nurse snapped her fingers and pointed to the waiting shower. “We don’t have all day, let’s go. It’ll be over before you know it.”

Laura tiptoed her way into the shower. The floor was moist and grimy against her bare feet. She considered asking for a pair of shower shoes but the irritated look on the nurse’s face silenced her. With shaky fingers she undid the hospital gown and placed it over the barrier. She was just tall enough to see over it. The nurse pulled the lever without warning, and a wall of shockingly cold water rained down on her. She shrieked, using every last bit of her willpower to remain under the harsh spray.

The water cut off and Laura shivered violently. The nurse appeared by the barrier and handed her a towel. She wordlessly left the room while Laura dried off. When the nurse returned, she had in her hands freshly washed scrubs and a pair of cheaply made slip-on shoes.

“Put this on for now.” The nurse placed the clothing on the barrier. “The belongings you packed this morning will be waiting for you in your room.”

Laura dressed herself quickly. Though it felt strange to go commando, the clean scrubs were a big step up from the hospital gown.

“This way.” The nurse took off at a fast pace that Laura had trouble matching. They walked out of the room and back down the hallway they’d come from. They took a different turn, speeding down a new hallway until they reached a locked glass door. On the other side was a second glass door, but through that Laura could see the outside world. The nurse ran an ID card through a scanner and the doors opened on their own. The sun was nice and warm on Laura’s chilled skin. She squinted...
through brightness, taking in her surroundings all while trying to keep up with the nurse.

The Medical building they’d exited was small compared to the formidable structures that it was sandwiched between. The two massive buildings looked like hospitals from the outside. Around the outskirts of the buildings were trees as far as Laura could see. It was as if they’d built Silas in the middle of a forest. At the edge of the trees was a tall barbed wire fence complete with guard towers. It was then that Laura noticed the militarized personnel walking the grounds. They wore dark gray outfits, with black ties and heavy boots. Strapped to their belts were flashlights, batons, and Taser guns.

The nurse glanced over her shoulder at Laura and noticed her apprehension. “Hey, kid, just follow the rules and you won’t have any trouble here.”

“The rules?” Laura tried to clear her throat, but that only made the hoarseness worse.

“You’ll be filled in on everything, don’t worry.” The nurse gave a weak salute to the armed guard they were approaching. “How’s the wife, Johnny?”

“She’s doing just fine, Gloria.” The guard grumbled as he escorted them to the front doors of the larger building. The keys hooked to his belt jingled as he walked. They walked the rest of the way in silence. When they reached the doors, the guard punched in a code on the numbered keypad. He waved up to the camera that was watching them and the automated doors slid apart.

“See you in a few, Johnny.” The nurse called back as she and Laura walked inside and straight to an elevator. Gloria looked over at Laura while she ran her ID card through a scanner. “Doing okay, kid?”

Laura nodded, but the truth was that she was far from okay. Her throat was dry, her stomach was empty and twisted up in anxious knots, her wet hair was dripping cold droplets down her back, the sun had warmed her up to the point that she’d begun sweating, she felt defenseless and exposed, and on top of all that she still couldn’t remember how she’d gotten to Silas in the first place or how her father was doing.

“We’re going up to Young Adult Residence on the fifth floor.” The nurse explained. “Ground level is for Silas personnel only. Just a bunch of offices and such. If you’re needed down there, you’ll be escorted. Second floor has the cafeteria, third floor has your recreation rooms, fourth floor is for kids under eighteen, fifth floor is the young adults, sixth floor has your thirty and older crowd, and the top floor is restricted. Oh, and from now on, you’ll have to take the stairs when you go to different floors. Only the staff get to use these babies.”

The elevator came to an abrupt stop. The doors separated with a whine, and Laura followed the nurse out.

“To your left…” Gloria pointed in the direction. “You’ll see a few office rooms. Those belong to the counselors. If you have any questions or concerns, try taking it up with those guys. They’ll be the ones who’ll run all of your activities and let you know when it’s time for your checkups.”

“Checkups?” Laura asked uneasily. She dreaded the idea of going back to that Medical place.

The nurse began walking again. “Listen, kid, this place ain’t no resort. Serious business is going on here. I’ve seen people waltz in just as fit as can be, then see them get wheeled right on out in a body bag by the end of the week. Now, I don’t mean to alarm you or anything, but it’s stuff like that we’re trying to prevent. A few checkups here and there could save your life.”
They stopped in front of a door marked 307. It was the same as all the other doors they’d passed, and all the ones still down the long hallway. The nurse gave a few knocks before entering. The room was exceptionally small and dull, with gray cinder block walls and the same boring tiled floors as the rest of the building. It held two single beds at opposite walls, each with its own night stand and lamp. One of the beds had a cheetah print pillow and a tattered old book on it. On the other bed, Laura’s duffel bag sat on the bare mattress beside her favorite yellow pillow and folded white sheets. A thin window with plain curtains filled the wall space between the two sides of the room. To the left of the doorway was a cramped bathroom with a toilet and shower, the sink to which was across to the right of the doorway. The mirror that hung above the sink reflected back to Laura an image of herself that she almost didn’t recognize.

Laura turned to face the nurse. “How long do I have to stay here?”

With one foot out the door, Gloria shook her head. “It’s complicated, kid. Your counselor will be around soon. Stay here until then.”

With a final “see you around”, the nurse shut the door and Laura found herself alone at Silas for the first time. She walked over to the window and peered out. Down below was a view of the seemingly endless forest. A few mountains and hills filled out the landscape in the distance.

She turned her attention to her duffel bag. Rifling through it, she found a week’s worth of clothes, the locket that her father had given her as a high school graduation present, and the framed family portrait that had sat atop her bedroom dresser for as long as she could remember. She ran her fingers along the picture. Her parents looked so happy, so young and full of life. Laura could tell that she’d been crying just before the photo had been taken. Her little toddler cheeks were all red and puffy.

Not sure how much time she had before that counselor would arrive, she quickly changed into something more comfortable and hit up the bathroom. Everything was kept fairly clean, with the exception of the ungodly large tangle of dark hair in the shower drain. She headed over to the sink and used her hands to drink from it. Minutes passed before her thirst was fully quenched. The relief was heavenly. Laura slipped out of the Silas shoes that nurse had given her and put on a pair of her old favorites. The soles were worn down from years of use and they had a few stains splattered across them, but they felt like home. Laura used the clean sheets to make her bed, placing the yellow pillow by the headboard when she was done.

When a knock finally came on the door, it startled her. A tall blonde, not all that much older than Laura herself, poked her head inside. “Laura Hollis?”

Laura nodded. “Um, yeah, that’s me.”

The blonde opened the door wider and extended her hand. “Hi, Laura. My name is Elizabeth Spielsdorf, but you can call me Betty. It’s so nice to meet you.”

Laura shook the offered hand. “Nice to meet you, too.”

“I’m one of the Young Adult counselors here at Silas, which means that it is my job to help you acclimate to life under quarantine. I bet you have a lot of questions, and I’ll be happy to answer anything that I can.”

Laura fidgeted nervously with her hands. “When can I leave?”

Betty’s upbeat attitude never faltered. “That’s a good question. Leaving Silas prior to the quarantine being lifted actually calls for an approval process that has to be okayed by your assigned
doctor, the Silas board of disease research professionals, and the Director.”

Laura didn’t bother hiding her disappointment. “Can you at least tell me how my dad is doing?”

“Well, I don’t actually have that information at this particular moment in time, but you should rest assured that he is in good hands. The Silas treatment facility is one of the best in the country. Has anyone briefed you on the rules?” She handed Laura a paper with a bulleted list. “Just keep up with this and you’ll have no problems.”

Laura scanned the page. “Must carry an ID card at all times? I don’t have one of those.”

“Oh, silly me.” Betty reached into her pants pocket and pulled out a laminated picture ID card swinging from a lanyard. “Now you do.”

“Where did this picture come from?” Laura asked as she took the card into her hands.

“That picture was taken when you arrived this morning.” Betty answered with a friendly smile. “It’s okay, the memory loss will go away after a while.” She checked the time on her wristwatch. “You’ll notice on the list that meal times are designated by age group. Your age group eats breakfast at eight, lunch at one, and dinner at seven. Young adult group activities are scheduled from two to four. On the weekdays, lights out is at ten. On the weekends, it’s at midnight. Weekends are the only time that group activities are optional.”

“Group activities?” She felt nervous from merely saying the words out loud.

Betty lit up. “Oh, yes! Our group activities are phenomenal. You’ll love them, trust me. This morning we had our monthly book discussion on Dracula, and we voted on The Styrian as our novel to read for June. I’ll find you a copy. We do a lot of community building exercises, and on nice days we like to take supervised trips outside. Sometimes we watch movies, sometimes we do crafts. It all depends. We counselors really listen to your feedback and try our best to cater toward how the group is feeling.”

“How many people are quarantined here?” Laura felt dumb for asking, but it was a question that had been on her mind for a while.

“Technically, everyone here is under quarantine. All personnel who work at Silas live here as well.” Betty clarified. “It’s just too risky to let anyone leave. The whole purpose of having quarantined locations is to prevent the further spread of a disease. Any one of us could be carrying it and we’d have no idea. As of right now, Silas is a one-way trip. For everyone. But to answer your question, there’s roughly about a eight hundred people at Silas overall.” She gestured to the hallway. “In a few minutes it’ll be your meal time for dinner. We should head down to the cafeteria.”

Folding up the list of rules, Laura slipped her ID card around her neck and followed Betty out of the room.

“You won’t need a key to get back in. Residence rooms have no locks.” She pointed to a wall mounted camera as they walked by it. “Stealing is strictly prohibited at Silas, but with our guards watching the security monitors night and day, it’s nothing to worry about. Your belongings will be safe in your room.”

“What about my roommate?” Laura asked as they headed down a stairwell. “What if she turns out to be some kind of kleptomaniac or something?”

Betty laughed. “Oh, you won’t need to worry about her.”
Laura was about to ask exactly why she didn’t need to worry about her new roommate, but she stopped short as the stairwell erupted into chaos. People seemed to enter from every floor. Laura had trouble keeping up with Betty through the traffic. By the time they reached the cafeteria doors on the second floor, Laura was out of breath. She and Betty stood out of the way, watching the sea of young adults filter inside.

“Wait here.” Betty instructed before skipping off to flag someone down. She returned quickly with a redhead in tow. “Laura, this is LaFontaine. LaFontaine, this is Laura. Today is Laura’s first day at Silas.”

LaFontaine gave a polite nod. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Laura glanced around. The crowd had finally died down, with the last few stragglers finding their way in.

“LaFontaine agreed to show you how the cafeteria works.” Betty clapped her hands together. “Well, I’m off. If you need anything, Laura, my office is on the fifth floor, second door to the left. You can’t miss it. I’ll see tomorrow at your first group activity. I hope you enjoy your stay at Silas.”

Laura wanted to roll her eyes, but LaFontaine beat her to it. Oblivious, Betty turned on her heel and reentered the stairwell.

“They, them, their.” LaFontaine said once they were alone in the hallway.

“Sorry?” Laura raised a perplexed brow.

LaFontaine shrugged. “My pronouns. I go by they, them, and their.”

“Oh. Okay.” Laura had never heard of such a thing, but she wasn’t about to disrespect the wishes of a total stranger.

They gave her a curious look. “Really? That’s it?”

“Um…” She felt her own awkwardness caving in on her. “Yeah? Why, were you just joking?”

LaFontaine shook their head. “Definitely not joking. I just usually get a lot of funny looks and grammar related lectures from people when I mention it. But I don’t identify as male or female, so it doesn’t make any sense to use those pronouns, you know?”

Laura made a mental note to do some research on this topic at another time. Exploring the gender spectrum would make a great article for her Journalism 101 class in the fall—if she would even be able to still take it, that is.

LaFontaine nodded toward the open doors. “You hungry?”

On cue, Laura’s stomach growled. LaFontaine led the way into the cafeteria. It was enormous, twice the size of the one Laura had known in high school. Despite its sheer size, not a single table was left empty in the entire room.

“The food isn’t too bad.” LaFontaine said as they handed Laura a tray. “Could be a lot worse.” They slid their tray down the counter, looking through the glass cover at their options. They smiled at a burly cafeteria worker awaiting their request. “I’ll take some of the pasta, please.”

Laura watched as the worker scooped up a generous portion of pasta and messily dumped it on
LaFontaine’s tray. The worker looked to Laura as LaFontaine slid down to the next choice of food. Feeling the pressure, Laura panicked and asked for the pasta as well.

When the two of them had full trays, Laura followed LaFontaine through the crowded cafeteria to a table in the back. LaFontaine took a seat between two other redheads, leaving Laura with the only remaining seat on the end.

“Everyone, this is Laura. Laura, this is everyone.” LaFontaine announced before shoveling a spoonful of pasta into their mouth.

The girl with red curls smiled politely across the table at Laura. “Lola Perry, but most people just call me Perry.”

The other redhead, an exceptionally tall girl, waved at her from down the table. “Hey, I’m Danny.”

“Kirsch.” The boy next to her declared. He pointed his thumb at the girl to his right. “That’s SJ.” The girl made no sign of greeting or recognition. She simply stared at the tray of food in front of her. Kirsch leaned in and whispered, “She doesn’t talk much to any of us these days. It’s nothing personal.”

Once the table’s interest in her had fizzled out, Laura was able to eat her dinner while quietly observing the group of friends. They were all older than she was, though only by a year or two. It was clear that the five of them had known each other for quite some time. They finished each other’s sentences and brought up old inside jokes with ease. None of them seemed to mind Laura’s lack of contribution to the conversation, but she assumed it was something they’d grown used to with their silent friend SJ.

Most of the people in the cafeteria had already cleared out by the end of the hour. When a bell tone sounded over the loud speakers to signal the official end of meal time, the group collected their trays and headed for the door. As they weaved through the tables, Laura noticed a dark haired girl sitting alone across the way.

She was absolutely gorgeous. She held a book in her hands, which she intently read despite the loud cafeteria chatter. Laura was so utterly fixated on the stranger that she nearly bumped into Kirsch’s back when he came to an abrupt stop to toss his tray in the collection bin. Laura placed her tray on top of his, glancing back to get one last look at the beautiful girl sitting alone before the flow of traffic pushed her out of the cafeteria doors.

Hesitantly, Laura tapped LaFontaine’s shoulder. “Hey, uh, do you know who that girl sitting by herself was? The one who kept reading while everyone else was leaving?”

LaFontaine grinned as they began the long ascent up the stairwell. “Pale, wears all black, kind of broody and mysterious looking?”

Laura nodded eagerly.

“That’d be Carmilla.” LaFontaine answered before giving Laura a sly look. “I get it now.”

“Get what?” She asked, checking behind them to see if the girl named Carmilla was anywhere in sight. Unfortunately, she wasn’t.

“Why Betty introduced us.” They explained.

“I’m lost.” Laura admitted. In front of them Danny and Kirsch began taking the stairs two at a time in a race to see which of them could make it to the fifth floor first.
LaFontaine chuckled at the pair of goofballs bounding up the stairs, or possibly just at Laura’s naivety. Maybe even both. Laura couldn’t really tell. “Betty wanted to make sure that you met the other queers. That woman truly has a sixth sense when it comes to spotting us.”

“Wait, what—“ Laura nearly tripped over her own feet. Luckily, she was able to grab the railing and keep herself steady. “So all of you are gay?”


“Oh. Okay.” Laura had assumed that LaFontaine identified as queer, but she never would have guessed that the entire table did as well. The news certainly put a lot of their jokes and stories into an entirely new perspective. “But about that girl…”

LaFontaine gave a hearty laugh. “Well, like I said, she’s broody and mysterious. A bit of a loner, you know? All she does is sit by herself and read. She rarely ever talks during group stuff. No one really knows anything about her. I mean, she aged up from the Under Eighteens at the beginning of the year, but that’s about all I know.”

Laura wasn’t quite satisfied with that answer, but she let it go. She’d have plenty of time to revisit the subject later.

When they reached the fifth floor, Laura once again found herself out of breath. Climbing that many stairs every day was going to be a major adjustment for her.

“Hey, Laura.” Danny had a victorious glow about her, having easily beaten Kirsch in their race. “In a little while we’re heading down to the rec rooms. Want to join us?”

“Maybe tomorrow.” She decided quickly. “I’m pretty exhausted. I think I’ll just head to bed.”

Laura bid farewell to LaFontaine, Danny, Perry, Kirsch, and SJ. They were nice people and she was glad Betty had introduced her to them. Making friends on the first day seemed like a good sign.

After a brief moment of confusion, Laura headed down what she hoped was the right hallway. She was relieved to find the door marked 307 about halfway down. The room was empty, still no roommate to be found. She kicked off her shoes, grabbed a towel and a change of clothes from her bag, and went into the small bathroom. In the middle of her hot shower, she heard someone enter the room from the hallway. She was glad she had preemptively brought her sleep clothes into the bathroom with her. Walking out in just a towel would have been an awkward first encounter. She dried off and pulled on her pajama shorts and oversized Veronica Mars shirt. Taking a calming breath and hoping for the best, she exited the bathroom.

Her roommate was there, sprawled out on her bed with a book covering her face. Laura swallowed hard as a wave of nerves hit her.

Of course, she thought. Of course it would be her.

The beautiful, broody, mysterious, dark haired girl named Carmilla curiously peered over the top of her book at Laura, who blushed as she realized she was staring.

“Uh, hi.” Laura hastily looked away. “I’m Laura.”

“Carmilla.” She replied lazily as she brought the book up to hide her eyes.

Unsure of what to do, Laura awkwardly took a seat on her bed. She ran a hand through her wet hair.
“So…what happened to your last roommate?”

“Transferred.” Carmilla grumbled indifferently.

“Transferred?” Laura asked. “Like to a different quarantine camp?”

She let out an annoyed sigh. “Like to the Infected section.”

“Oh.” Laura dropped the attempt to converse with her. She contemplated apologizing for bothering her while she was reading, but the silent tension in the room held her back. Turning off her lamp, Laura slid into bed and faced the wall. She could practically feel Carmilla’s eyes on the back of her head, but chose to ignore it.

Though she was tired, she had trouble falling asleep. The day’s events, or at least the events she could remember, consumed her thoughts. So much had happened in such a brief amount of time. She wondered how her dad was doing, and if the room he was being kept in was anything like the room she was in now. She wondered what would happen if a cure was never found. Would they stay under quarantine forever? Would the healthy relatives be able to leave after a certain amount of time? She wondered about her new roommate. Which of her family members was sick? How long had she been at Silas? Was there a crazy personality hiding underneath all that beauty?

Laura rolled over to find that Carmilla was fast asleep on the other bed, still in her day clothes with her lamp still on. Her book rested on her chest, rising and falling with every breath she took. She looked so peaceful.

When Laura closed her eyes, she effortlessly drifted off to sleep.
June

Inside the large recreation room that doubled as both a library and a meeting place for group activities, Laura found a seat on one of the provided chairs. She shifted around on the hard plastic, but finding a comfortable position was a difficult task. Betty, pacing in the middle of the circle with a clipboard in hand, had requested that Laura be in her group for the day’s activity. Laura hadn’t objected, both Perry and Kirsch were in that group as well.

And Carmilla.

The broody beauty slouched low in her chair with her legs spread and her arms crossed; no one looked less pleased to be there than her. She hadn’t been in the room that morning when Laura had woken up, nor had Laura seen her at breakfast. The aloof girl did, however, make an appearance during lunch. She’d sat alone while reading and grazing through her meal at a leisurely pace. Laura knew, because she’d sent an embarrassingly amount of curious glances across the cafeteria at her. So many, in fact, that LaFontaine had given her another one of those “your gay is showing” type of looks.

But Laura couldn’t help herself. There was just something about Carmilla that captivated her. Her fascination had grown extensively at breakfast when she’d revealed to the table that Carmilla was her roommate. Perry had said that on Carmilla’s first day after aging up from the Under Eighteens she’d claimed her own table in the cafeteria by scaring off the ones who originally used to sit there. More interesting than that, Danny had revealed that there were rumors Carmilla used to have a secret lover named Ell.

That tidbit of gossip was intriguing for several reasons. For one, it confirmed that Carmilla was into girls. It hadn’t been that big of a question on Laura’s mind, and she didn’t really know what to do with that information, but just knowing it made her all the more interested. Another reason for intrigue was that “physical intimacy” was prohibited at Silas.

Laura had taken a few minutes out of her morning to study the list of rules that Betty had given her, and boy was she glad that she had. Silas’s rules were like a condensed version of those awful student code of conduct handbooks they passed out back in high school. They had everything on there. No weapons, no leaving your room after lights out, stay out of restricted areas, stick to the dress code, wear your ID at all times, expect random room inspections, follow the requests and commands of all Silas personnel, blah blah blah. The point was that if Carmilla did have a thing with some girl named Ell back when they were in the Under Eighteens, it was essentially forbidden love.

Laura looked across the circle at Carmilla, who grumpily picked at her nails while Betty droned on and on about something unimportant, and she wondered if the absence of a girl named Ell in the Young Adults was the reason that Carmilla was so distant from everyone.

“Laura, would you like to go first?”

Betty’s question caught her off guard, and she stammered out a reply as cohesively as she could. “Uh, I…um, sure.” She felt her cheeks heat up as all eyes, including Carmilla’s, redirected to her. “Sorry, what is it that I’m doing?”

The pep never left Betty’s tone. “Introducing yourself to the group! Don’t forget your three interesting facts about yourself.”
Laura typically wasn’t the type to shy away from a good brag fest, but she blanked under the pressure. Luckily, Perry came to the rescue.

“I’ll go first.” She offered. “Hello everyone, my name is Perry. I’m majoring in German, I collect turtleneck sweaters, and my favorite word is antibacterial.”

Kirsch, who Laura hadn’t even realized was sitting to her left, raised his hand. “Those are the same facts you always give.”

“Yes, but Laura hasn’t heard them before.” Perry pointed out.

Betty waved a hand of her own to get their attention. “Would you like to go next, Kirsch?”

“As a matter of fact, I would.” He sat up straighter. “I’m Kirsch, and my totally awesome and totally brand new interesting facts are: I accidentally wrecked my first car trying not to hit a squirrel—the squirrel lived, by the way; the best birthday party I ever had was when I turned eight because we rented one of those bouncy fun houses and I broke my arm, it was awesome; and closest thing to a celebrity encounter that I’ve had is when I saw the local weatherman at the grocery store.”

Perry scoffed. “You talked about the weatherman last time!”

“No I didn’t!” He fired back.

Perry leaned forward. “Then how do I know that he was buying beans and asparagus?”

Kirsch’s defense wavered. “Yeah, well…Laura hasn’t heard it before. So like, whatever.”

Amused, Betty shook her head before prompting, “Laura?”

“Oh. Okay.” Laura cursed herself for not using the stalled time to think of what she should say. “Hi, I’m Laura. I graduated from high school about two weeks ago, I’m planning on being a journalism major, and I like to eat junk food when I’m stressed out or sad.”

“Thank you for sharing, Laura.” Betty smiled politely before scanning the circle. “Who wants to go next?” When no volunteers came, Betty singled someone out. “Carmilla, how about you?”

Carmilla shrugged, looking like she’d rather set herself on fire than participate. Maybe even set the whole world on fire. There was definitely a pyromaniac kind of vibe about her. “Carmilla. Literature enthusiast. Cat person.”

Betty blinked. “And?”

“And I hate being forced to do things that I don’t want to do.” Carmilla sneered.

With a sigh, Betty let it go and moved on to the handful of others sitting in the circle. Laura tried to pay attention to the introductions, but she found herself glancing back to Carmilla. Her slouch had increased so that she now used the top of the chair as a headrest. If she went down any farther she’d probably slide right off of it. Her boots, crossed at the ankles, kept her in place. Laura allowed her stare to travel up tightly fitted jeans, over the wrinkled plaid button up, and to eventually land on a pair of narrowed dark eyes. She immediately averted her gaze while a fierce blush reddened her cheeks. After a reasonable amount of time, a whole two seconds to be honest, she dared a quick glance back to her roommate to find that she was still watching her.

“Alright, guys. Activity time!” There was a little skip to Betty’s step. “We’re going to do one of my
personal favorites. It’s called Fear In A Hat. For those that may not know how to play…” She shot a friendly wink Laura’s way. “The rules are very simple. All you have to do is write down a fear of yours, staying completely anonymous, and add it to this hat over here. When they’re all in, we’ll take turns picking out a fear and reading it aloud. You’ll give your thoughts on the fear you’ve selected, even if it’s your own. You can write down whatever fear you want. Maybe you’re scared of bugs, maybe you’re scared of walking home alone at night, maybe you’re afraid of heights. It’s up to you what you share, but keep in mind that we will be discussing it as a group.” She began passing around slips of paper and pencils. “Remember, the first step toward conquering any fear is to admit that you are afraid.”

Laura tapped the eraser of her pencil against her chin. It was hard to focus on the task at hand with the knowledge that Carmilla was keeping close tabs on her. With a sly stretch of her neck, she covertly glanced across the circle. She was a little disappointed to see that Carmilla was no longer staring. Having the girl’s attention had been a bit of a thrill for her. Instead, Carmilla was busy scribbling down her fear. It was strange to see her playing along with the activity, but perhaps Carmilla’s time at Silas had taught her not to object to these little games.

“Does everyone have their fear in the hat?” Betty asked, mixing up all of the collected papers with her hand. Laura looked down at her empty slip of paper. She quickly wrote out a fear, hoping that it was a happy medium between too dark and too light. She folded it up and tossed it in with the rest.

“I’ll go first.” Betty eagerly plucked a piece of paper from the hat. “This person is afraid of… germs! Discuss.”

Kirsch nudged Laura with his elbow and nodded toward Perry’s raised hand. He whispered, “She gives herself away every time.”

Pleased to see some involvement, Betty gestured for Perry to share her thoughts with the group. Perry happily dived into a detailed lecture on the amount of germs and bacteria the average person comes into contact with on a daily basis. Laura tried her best to pay attention, but the subject only served to remind her of the current predicament she was in. The schedule, the good meals, the cafeteria, the friendly counselors, the summer camp atmosphere, the routine of it all had somehow lulled her into lowering her defenses. It was all too easy to forget the reality of what Silas was. This was no vacation, after all. She was under quarantine. The government had deemed her a potential threat to society, to humanity itself. She could be carrying the infectious disease that was killing her father. She could show symptoms any day, without warning. The walls of Silas could very well be the last she ever saw. Silas was no summer camp, it was a tomb.

Laura’s attention was brought back to the group activity as she heard her own fear read aloud.

“And what do you think about that fear, Elsie?” Betty prompted.

The blonde girl shrugged. “I don’t know. Having a fear of failure sounds like maybe this person is putting too much pressure on themselves. Like, maybe they should learn not to stress over the outcome and just focus on the process. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

“Sure, sure.” Betty nodded. “Any other thoughts, guys?”

Kirsch raised his hand. “I think it’s pretty normal to fear failure. If we didn’t, we wouldn’t care about anything. Failure leads to disappointment, you know? And letting people down really sucks, even when you’re just letting yourself down.”

“Very insightful, Kirsch, thank you.” Betty opened the floor for further comments. When none
came, she pressed on. “Laura, why don’t you go next?”

Laura pulled a paper from the hat before smoothing it out to read aloud. “This person is afraid of… losing their brother to the The Bite.”

The group grew quiet. Even Betty’s persistent optimism noticeably wavered. Laura had heard the nickname The Bite before, but she’d never used it herself. It was certainly easier to use in casual conversation than the actual scientific name, but it was a little too whimsical and childish for her tastes. It took away the severity of a very real and very dangerous disease. Then again, maybe that was the point.

“And what are your thoughts on this fear?” Betty asked, keeping a watchful eye on everyone’s reactions.

“I get it.” Laura tiptoed around the issue. She didn’t want to say the wrong thing, but she didn’t want it to seem like she wasn’t ready to fully engage in the discussion either. “I think we’re all scared of losing our loved ones. I know I’d do just about anything to hear how my dad is doing. It’s hard to sit by and do nothing. Especially when I know he’s in pain. I can’t even imagine losing him. So, I guess I just understand how this person feels.”

A boy whose name Laura had yet to retain raised his hand to speak. He reiterated her points, and added a few details about his sick younger sisters. While he was talking, Laura realized that Carmilla’s eyes were on her again. Laura stared back determinedly, she wasn’t going to be the one to bashfully look away this time around. Her heart raced when a smirk tugged at the corner of Carmilla’s lips. It seemed as though Laura’s resolve had presented her roommate with a little entertainment, or rather with a challenge. Carmilla narrowed her gaze, and Laura mirrored the movement. She wasn’t about to let this girl intimidate her, not anymore. The mysterious aura was definitely an attractive façade, but Laura had the rising suspicious that there was a lot more to Carmilla than just an apathetic tone and a grunge aesthetic.

At dinner that evening, Laura had a long conversation with everyone about life at Silas. They told her a lot of the things that she had expected to hear: that the routine never changed, that the days would eventually begin to blur together, that the hope of getting out any time soon was fairly thin. But they revealed quite a bit of new information as well. There were, as LaFontaine had called them, unwritten rules of Silas. For instance, it was an unwritten rule that breaking the actual written rules typically resulted in minor consequences like earning a few janitorial duties or working in the kitchens for a set amount of time. But there was more than just that. Breaking the rules meant extra checkups, which puzzled Laura at first.

“Why would they send you to get an extra checkup for breaking a rule?” Laura asked. Five sullen faces stared back at her. Even SJ, the resident mute, pried her eyes from her tray to look at down the table at Laura. While Laura radiated naïve innocence, SJ exuded a peculiar blend of dread and pity. Something about SJ’s expression effectively put an end to Laura’s appetite.

“Listen…” LaFontaine sighed. The others looked away, choosing to pick at or, at least in Kirsch’s case, play with their food rather than watch the explanation unfold. “These aren’t your normal checkups. They…well, they take you over to Medical and your doctor does a routine check for symptoms. They’ll take a blood sample, swab your cheek, listen to your heart, all that regular stuff. But then other stuff happens. Most of the time they’ll just inject you with something and won’t tell you what it’s for, but sometimes it’s more than that.”

Kirsch leaned in. “There was this one checkup about a month ago when they hooked me up to this super creepy machine. It was like something straight out of a horror movie. When they turned it on, all I could feel was, like, stinging needles all over my body. It was the worst pain I’ve ever felt
in my entire life. I blacked out and woke up back in my room.” He pulled down his shirt collar to show a circular scar. “I’ve got a few of these now. They looked pretty brutal at first.”

“Is all of that part of the cure research?” Laura could recall Dr. Vordenburg mentioning that one of the reasons blood relatives remained at Silas was so that they could be studied, but she never would have dreamed that testing on people against their will would be a part of that.

“Depends on who you ask.” LaFontaine shrugged. “There are always conspiracy theories. Personally, I like to believe that it’s all a part of the search for the cure.”

Laura lowered her voice. “Isn’t what they’re doing illegal?”

“They’re desperate.” Danny ran a hand through her long hair. “Experimenting on a few to save the rest is better than letting millions of more people die, or at least that’s how they see it. We’re not just being kept in here to stop the spread of The Bite. We’re in here because Silas is a cage, and we’re the lab rats.”

Laura tried to keep her voice even. She didn’t want the others to see how shaken up she was. “The Infected are being tested on too, aren’t they?” Even as she asked the question, she knew it had to be true.

LaFontaine nodded. “More so than us, I would expect.”

“A necessary evil.” Perry muttered.

“Necessary?” Danny snapped. “Did you forget who those people are over there in Infected? They have your mom, Perry! They have people we love, they have our families. Look at all of the shit they’re doing to us. Just think about what they must be doing to them. It’s not right. It’s inhumane.”

“We’re facing a global crisis.” Perry defended. “Hundreds of people are dying every day from this disease. If this is our contribution to fighting back, I’m happy to help.”

Danny balked at her. “I never signed up to be walking a test subject.”

Perry scoffed. “You make it sound like they’re sticking needles in your arm twice a day. For goodness sake, it’s not like we’re growing third eyes from any of this.”

“Look at SJ!” Danny pointed to the mentioned girl. “They did this to her. She hasn’t talked in weeks. They did that. Look at this rash on my wrist. Look at the marks they left on Kirsch after they caught him sneaking around after lights out. Things are getting bad, you guys, and they’re only going to get worse from here.”

Perry aggressively stabbed her broccoli. “I am sure that the proper legal action will be taken against Silas after the cure has been found.”

Danny shook her head. “And what good would that do us if we’re all dead by then?”

“This isn’t about just us. This about all of humanity.” Perry huffed. “At the rate that The Bite is spreading, mankind could be facing extinction.”

“I’m not arguing about this anymore.” Danny grumbled. Laura shared a look with Kirsch, who appeared to be just as conflicted as Laura on the matter.

After dinner, Laura spent the evening in the athletics recreation room with the group. Even though she’d never been very good at sports, and honestly she stood no chance against Danny and Kirsch
anyway, she found herself having fun for the first time at Silas. It was nice to run around and act a little silly for a change. She’d been too tense and anxious for far too long.

When the call for lights out came, Laura wasted no time in heading straight back to her room. The fear of being caught out of bed after dark had significantly increased since she’d seen the scarring consequences on Kirsch. Carmilla was there when she walked in. Just as the night before, she was laid out on her bed reading. This time around, however, she paid no attention to Laura whatsoever.

After a quick shower, Laura readied herself for bed. Despite her efforts not to, she would check every so often to see what Carmilla was doing. The results never changed, much to her disappointment. Laura went to bed without trying to strike up a conversation with her. If she was going to get the girl to lower her guard and talk, taking things slow was the best course of action. Besides, she didn’t really know what to say to Carmilla anyway.

The following days were fairly uneventful. She fell into the routine of Silas with ease. Breakfast, lunch, group activity, dinner, lights out. It was a simple schedule to follow. All of her free time was spent with LaFontaine, Perry, Danny, Kirsch, and SJ. She’d grown extraordinarily fond of those five individuals in the weeks’ worth of time that she’d known them. Even SJ, who had never said a word to her, already felt like a dear friend. Laura had never had a group of entirely non-heterosexual pals before. It was new and exciting. She loved when Kirsch would openly talk about how much he missed his boyfriend, or when Danny never missed an opportunity to talk about girls.

“Okay, what about this one…” Danny grinned mischievously. She and Laura were sitting in the library together, both supposed to be reading *The Styrian* but having a hard time staying focused due to the obnoxiously loud chatter coming from a group of Over Thirties nearby. They’d taken up a game of would you rather, using the older women as their selection pool. “Soccer mom in the jean shorts, or the MILF in the jean jacket?”

“Why do you always assume that they’re moms?” Laura questioned with an amused smile.

“I don’t assume.” Danny replied. “I know. My first month here I made the rounds through the lonely divorced moms.” She wiggled her brows suggestively. “Fun fact, Sheryl over there with the pink glasses is into some really kinky stuff.”

“Oh my god.” Laura giggled into her hand. “How did you get away with that? Isn’t physical intimacy against the rules?”

“Having to be sneaky just makes it that much more exciting.” Danny laughed. “There are plenty of places to hook up with the Over Thirties. We all have way more free time to kill than the Under Eighteens do. A lot of the counselors and staff don’t give two shits what we get up to most of the time. They’re way too busy keeping track of all those unruly kids.” She leaned in. “There was this one time when Betty caught me and Sheryl getting down and dirty over there in the Nonfiction Aisle, over where the cameras can’t see you. It was hilarious. She got all flustered and told us to take it somewhere else before we really got caught.”

“So the counselors don’t care about that rule?” Laura glanced to the corner of the library where a certain dark haired girl was reading.

Danny followed her gaze, a knowing smile spreading across her face when she saw Carmilla. “Some of them do, some of them don’t. Betty’s cool, though. If you’re going to get caught doing some shit that you shouldn’t be doing, you should hope it’s her that catches you and not one of those asshole counselors.”

“How does someone become a counselor? Are those paid jobs?” Laura wondered aloud. “Like, do
people from outside apply for those jobs and get themselves stuck under quarantine just to do them?”

“No idea” She shrugged. “Why, you interested in applying or something?”

Laura looked at the wall of windows to their left. The view was limited to the Medical building and the Infected building, but the sun that poured in made up for it.

“No.” She answered, looking back to Danny. “I’d rather not stick around Silas for any longer than I absolutely have to.”

Week two went by much the same as the first had. Perhaps faster, if anything. During the day, Laura had the room to herself. She could take naps, have friends over, or maybe even enjoy a little private time. She could do whatever, it didn’t matter, because Carmilla was only ever in the room during lights out. The nights were awkward. Awkward for her, at least. She’d tried several nights in a row to get Carmilla to talk to her, and she was shut down each and every time. For whatever reason, Carmilla’s apathy was driving her up the wall.

Laura sat on her bed staring blankly at the pages of *The Styrian*. Carmilla was across the small room sitting on her own bed reading a book so battered that the title was no longer decipherable.

“Got any big plans for the weekend?” Laura might as well have been asking her book. “Yeah, me neither. Oh, what’s that?” Laura brought *The Styrian* up to her ear. “Why, yes, nice book, I am trying to get my stubborn roommate to talk to me.” She glanced to Carmilla, catching her in the middle of an eye roll. “You know, *Styrian*, I’m starting to think that she doesn’t like us.”

“Some of us are actually trying to read over here.” Carmilla groaned.

Laura feigned a gasp. “Did you hear that, book? She speaks! I wonder what else she can say.”

“Oh, I’ve got a few choice words.” Carmilla’s gaze found Laura’s. “But I don’t want to traumatize your poor little heart.”

Laura dropped the book to her lap. Now that she finally had Carmilla’s attention, she scrambled to figure out what to do with it. “You can say whatever you want.” She thought of the perfect Betty quote to add in. “It’ll be a ‘therapeutic bonding experience and all that jazz’.”

Carmilla smirked, which somehow managed to look both cute and sexy on her. “There’s nothing in the world that’s less jazz than fucking group therapy sessions.”

“Yeah. Totally.” Laura agreed, not having listened to jazz a day in her life. “I mean, it’s more of a saying than a literal reference toward music…” Carmilla’s smirk started to fall, causing Laura to backpedal as fast as she could. “But yeah, no, fuck group therapy, am I right?”

Carmilla laughed, her eyes falling back to the book in her hands. “You don’t swear very often, do you?”

There was no use denying it now. “That obvious?”

“Clear as the sky is blue.” She glanced at Laura from the corner of her eye. “But you’re cute when you try.”

Cute. Carmilla called her *cute*. She bit back the goofy smile that threatened to take hold. “I’ll keep that in mind. Maybe in the future I’ll try whipping out a few expletives when I feel like wooing a girl.”
Laura watched Carmilla carefully, but a reaction of surprise never came. Instead, Carmilla simply replied with, “For starters, you might want to refrain from calling it *wooing*."

“What would you call it then?” Laura asked.

“I’d call it what it is.” She looked up. “Seduction.”

“I’ll add that to the list.” Laura paused. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

Carmilla sighed. “I suppose.”

“Me and my friends, we were talking about how none of us have ever heard anything about our family members over at Infected. They keep telling us that it’s classified information. I was just wondering, have you ever heard any news about your brother?”

If looks could kill, Laura would’ve been six feet under by morning light. Carmilla glared at her with an intensity that sent a shiver down her spine. “Who told you about him?”

“You did.” Laura squeaked. She cleared her throat and tried to keep her composure. “I mean, not directly, but you were the source of the information. I figured it out. We did that Fear In A Hat game, and you wrote down that you were scared for your brother. I know it was you, because no one else that was in our group has a sick brother. Perry’s mom is sick, Kirsch’s grandmother, Elsie’s parents…” She trailed off as Carmilla abruptly jumped to her feet.

“So, what, you went around and asked all your little pals what their fear was so you could figure out mine?” She crossed her arms, glowering down at Laura.

“No!” Laura shifted her sitting position so that she was facing Carmilla. “No, I just had all the clues and put them together. I’ve been here for two weeks, you know, I’ve gotten to know everyone pretty well from all these group activities.”

“Don’t ever talk about my family again.” Carmilla growled through gritted teeth. “And if I find out you’re going around snooping for information on me, we’re going to have some major problems.”

Laura scoffed. “Even if I was doing that, which I’m *not* by the way, you never talk to anyone so it’s not like you’d ever find out.”

She only grew angrier at that. “Yeah, well, look what happens when I *do* talk to someone.”

“What’s happening is us getting to know each other.” Laura could feel Carmilla closing up again. “Hey, I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t know that it was a sore subject. I won’t mention your family again.”

Carmilla stormed toward the door, and Laura rushed after her.

“Where are you going? It’s after lights out!”

Carmilla opened the door, revealing the dark hallway.

“There are cameras out there!” Laura whispered.

Carmilla turned on her heel, nearly bumping to Laura. “Step back, newbie. It’s clearly past your bedtime.” Without another word, she slipped out the door.

Laura’s third week at Silas was rough. Carmilla’s casual indifference had morphed into actual hatred, so it seemed. She actively avoided Laura at every turn. She went out of her way to make
sure they weren’t placed in the same group for activities, she left any rec room that Laura entered, and, most appallingly, she was never in the room at nights. Laura, of course, had told her friends all about what had happened. Danny had suggested that Carmilla was probably sleeping with one of the guards or counselors to be able to pull off a stunt like that so continuously. The others had their theories, but it was Danny’s that really stuck with Laura. What if Carmilla really was sleeping with a guard or a counselor? It was sad how even the mere thought made her jealous. Carmilla was, without a doubt, the worst crush that Laura had ever had.

Thankfully, the mystery didn’t last forever. When Laura strolled into the room on the last Thursday night of June, she was pleasantly surprised to find Carmilla there. Sprawled out, her nose in buried in a book, just like normal. Laura smiled all through her shower. She knew that Carmilla couldn’t stay away forever. Well, she’d at least hoped that much was true.

It wasn’t until she settled into bed with The Styrian, which she only had a few more days to finish, that she noticed something was wrong. She hadn’t been able to see Carmilla’s face beforehand, but from the new angle she could just make out a black eye in the dim lighting.

“That looks like it hurts.” Laura commented, one foot under the sheets and one still hanging over the side.

Carmilla ignored her.

“Who did that to you?” She asked quietly.

Carmilla’s grasp on her book slipped a little as her hands began to shake. “Just go to bed, cupcake.”

“Okay.” Laura raised her hands in mock surrender. “I’ll leave you alone.” She hesitated before adding, “Goodnight.”

When Laura woke up the next morning, the first thing that she noticed was the occupied bed across the room. Carmilla had the sheets pulled up to cover her face, but Laura could still see her long dark hair messily strewn across her pillow as if she’d been tossing and turning on it all night. Laura tiptoed around as she got ready for the day. She thought about waking Carmilla to let her know it was time for breakfast, but she decided it was probably safer not to. She’d yet to experience the wrath of Carmilla in the morning, and she’d honestly prefer to never experience that if it was something she could get away with. Besides, it was a special day and Carmilla needed some rest if she was going to fully enjoy it to the best of her snarky ability.

For their group activity that afternoon, the Young Adults went outside. They separated into predetermined groups, and spread out across the grassy area. There were extra guards on duty, but their presence was easily ignorable.

“Okay, guys, listen up!” Betty exclaimed as she gathered everyone around. Laura was glad that she’d been put into Betty’s group for three specific reasons. Reason number one, Betty was by far the best counselor. Reason number two, Danny had also been put into that group. And, most importantly, reason three was that Carmilla was there too.

Carmilla hid her black eye behind a pair of stylish sunglasses. The slightest shadow of the bruise could be seen, but only if you were really looking—which, admittedly, Laura was doing a lot of. Carmilla had her hair up in a messy bun, and she’d swapped the usual skinny jeans for a pair of nicely fitting shorts. So, yeah, Laura was looking.

Betty whistled to get her group’s attention. “Alright, today we’re playing Pairs!”
As Betty delved into a rehearsed lecture on the rules, Danny leaned over and whispered, “Your roommate’s looking pretty hot today.”

Laura knew that Danny was only teasing her, she hadn’t been the best at keeping her interest in Carmilla a secret, but still the comment rubbed her the wrong way. “Don’t even think about it.”

Danny grinned. “Relax, she’s all yours.”

The game was simple enough to play. Betty would call out a subject such as birth month or favorite color, and then the players had to pair up with someone else whose answer matched their own. For any players left without a match, the game turned into a free for all musical chairs kind of frenzy. The odd man out had to pick the next subject.


Laura made a beeline straight for Carmilla. It helped that the girl made no moves toward actively participating, making her a steady target among the chaos. Getting a little carried away with her speed, Laura tripped over her own feet just before reaching her. Carmilla managed to catch her with a grunt.

“Oh, wow. Thanks.” Laura blushed as Carmilla helped her back up. “That could’ve been a lot more embarrassing.”

Carmilla shrugged it off. “Don’t mention it, cutie.”

If her cheeks weren’t noticeably red before, they certainly were after that.

Betty clapped her hands. “Free pair time!”

The remaining non-matches found partners, leaving Danny standing on her own as the odd man out. The tall redhead took Betty’s place without protest. “Okay, uh…next topic is…find someone that has the same hair color?”

The time flew by while they played Betty’s activity. More than once, three more times in fact, Laura paired up with Carmilla. The first time had been on purpose, the second time had been an accident, and the third time had been Carmilla’s doing. Laura had been walking around, trying her best to find someone who was also a Gryffindor, when a hand had grabbed her elbow and pulled her to stop.

Laura laughed when she saw that the hand belonged to Carmilla. “Okay, I don’t believe for one second that you are a Gryffindor.”

Despite the sunglasses, Laura knew that Carmilla was rolling her eyes. “Whatever. Just stand here. I don’t want to go up there.”

Laura reluctantly stayed by Carmilla’s side. “Now people are going to think that I think that I’m a Slytherin.”

Despite the sunglasses, Laura knew that Carmilla was rolling her eyes. “Whatever. Just stand here. I don’t want to go up there.”

Laura reluctantly stayed by Carmilla’s side. “Now people are going to think that I think that I’m a Slytherin.”

“No one even cares about this stupid game.” Carmilla sighed.

“Don’t say that too loud.” Laura warned. “You’ll hurt Betty’s feelings if she hears you.”

Carmilla smirked. “You’ve got a thing for Betty?”

“What? No!” Laura lowered her voice. “I do not have a thing for Betty. She’s just really nice and
she puts a lot of effort into these activities.”

“Whatever you say, princess.”

The game ended shortly after, with Betty dismissing them for some free time outside. They weren’t allowed to go far, but they could mingle with the rest of the Young Adults as they pleased. Laura was walking with Danny on their way to meet up with the regular crew when she noticed Carmilla taking a seat by herself on the grass.

“I’ll meet up with you guys later.” Laura told Danny as she changed her direction.

Danny searched for what Laura was heading for, and grinned when she spotted Carmilla. “Yeah, just make sure you two keep your frisky hands to yourselves. We’re being watched, remember?”

Laura ignored the teasing comment and took off toward her roommate. When she reached Carmilla, the girl had reclined back on to her hands. She looked beautiful and carefree, just sitting back and soaking up the sun.

“Mind if I join you?” Laura asked, half expecting her to say no.

“Do what you want.” She replied lazily.

Laura took that as the best version of a yes she could hope to get. She sat down beside Carmilla, close enough to talk but not too close. Her fingers idly picked at the blades of grass around her.

She decided there was no use for trying small talk. “So what are you going to do when we go inside and you can’t wear the sunglasses?”

“Who says I can’t wear sunglasses inside?” She countered.

“I guess people would talk less about the sunglasses than they would a black eye.” Laura allowed.

“I don’t care what people talk about.” Carmilla replied flatly.

“Of course you do.” Laura shrugged. “Everyone does.”

“Not me.”

“If you say so.”

“You’re annoying, you know that?”

“I’ve been told.”

Carmilla glanced around them. “Why are you over here?”

“What do you mean?”

“All your little friends are over there staring at us.”

Laura looked around and, upon noticing her friends’ stares, smiled. “They’re just convinced that I have some kind of crazy crush on you or something.”

Carmilla smirked. “Do you?”

Laura tried to play it cool. “Definitely not.”
“I think you do.”

“Well, you’re wrong.”

“You’re just in denial.” She crossed her ankles. “Don’t worry, many others have fallen for my charming ways before.”

“You? Charming?” Laura laughed. “You’re not exacting a smooth talker.”

Carmilla brought up a hand and lowered her sunglasses just enough so that she could peer over them. “You’re not fooling anyone, creampuff.”

“What’s with all these nicknames you keep coming up with? Cupcake? Creampuff?” She took a deep breath and dared herself to finish the joke. “Sounds like someone thinks I’d be pretty tasty.”

Carmilla froze. Laura could practically see a little buffering icon pop up over her head while she pondered on her reply. “Play your cards right and that little theory can be tested.”

Laura bit back a smile. “You know, you’re pretty okay when you want to be.”

“Gee, thanks.” She pushed her sunglasses back up and looked away before adding, “You’re not half bad yourself.”

At dinner, Laura was the center of attention. Everyone wanted to know what she and Carmilla talked about outside, when they started being friendly in the first place, and when all that was settled they began placing bets on how long it would be before the two roommates hooked up. Laura tried to protest, but all attempts at denying her crush on Carmilla only increased their jokes.

When their meal time was up, Laura decided to spend the rest of her evening in the room rather than with the group. They teased her about that, saying she was running off to go canoodle with Carmilla, and okay maybe part of her was hoping that Carmilla would come back to the room early too, but the reason for her early turn in was that she really just needed to finish reading *The Styrian*. The monthly book discussion was days away and she still had a few chapters left.

To her delight, Carmilla entered the room not long after she did. She gestured to the book in Laura’s lap. “You’re still on that one? I finished it the first weekend.”

“Not all of us can read a page per second like you can.” Laura smiled.

Carmilla tossed her sunglasses on to her nightstand, and Laura couldn’t stop herself from staring at the glaring black eye. “If you keep looking at me like that it’s going to start to hurt my ego.”

“Sorry.” Laura wiped the grimace from her face. “It just…it really looks like it hurts.”

“Just don’t get caught hanging out in a counselor’s room after lights out and you won’t have to worry about getting one.” She sighed, kicking off her boots and preparing a change of clothes.

“Oh.” So Danny had been right after all. “You’re sleeping with one of the counselors?”

“No.” Carmilla stopped, her back to Laura. “But even if I was that’s not really any of your business.”

“I guess not.” She admitted.

“One of the counselors, the big oaf with the beard, he was transferred over to Infected. I was using his empty room.” Carmilla turned to the side, just enough so that she could look at Laura without
craning her neck. She smirked. “You thought I was fucking a counselor? Bet that made you all kinds of jealous.”

“Yeah, you wish.” Laura rolled her eyes. “So, how exactly did you get the black eye then?”

“The new guy startled me. He got in a lucky punch.” She smiled. “But I kicked his ass.”

Laura tried not to let it show that Carmilla’s smile gave her butterflies. “Did they send you to Medical?”

Carmilla’s smile fell. She knew what Laura was really asking her. “Not yet. I’m sure it’ll happen soon though.”

“I’ve heard the stories of what they do.” Laura bit her lip. She waited for a reply, but one never came.

Wordlessly, Carmilla grabbed the edges of her shirt and slipped it over her head. She unbuttoned her shorts and slid them down to her ankles. Stepping out of them, she grabbed her sleep clothes and walked toward the bathroom. She added a little extra sway to her hips, giving a good show. When the bathroom door shut and Laura heard the shower turn on, she finally released the breath that she hadn’t meant to hold.
July

“The ending sucks.” Carmilla pointed to the novel in Laura’s hands, the pick for July’s monthly book discussion.

Laura marked her page before acknowledging her roommate. “You better not spoil the ending for me.” She warned with a playful smile.

Carmilla surveyed the surrounding area of the library, then pointed down to the empty seat across from Laura. “Is this seat taken?”

“All yours.” Laura shrugged. “So you already finished Hastur’s Sword? It’s been, what, two days?”

“I like to read.” She answered nonchalantly while flicking a speck of dirt from the table.

“You’ve probably read every book in this place by now.” Laura teased.

“All the good ones, at least.” She looked at the aisles around them. “There’s not much to choose from.”

Laura bit her lip while skirting around the idea of directing the conversation into something more personal. To hell with it, she decided. “How long have you been here? At Silas, I mean.”

Carmilla leaned back in the chair and crossed her arms. “Almost a year.”

“Wow.” She clicked her tongue. “I didn’t even know Silas was that old.”

“It used to be an independent research facility, before the government stepped in.”

“How do you know that? Did you work here or something?”

“Or something.” Carmilla kicked her feet up onto the table.

“Just being a here for a month feels like it’s been an entire year already. It must feel like you’ve been here for a lifetime.”

“Just about.” She agreed.

“I miss the outside world.” Laura confessed, playing with the edges of her handmade bookmark. Carmilla watched her fingers intently as she listened. “I miss the news. I hate not knowing what’s going on in the world. I feel like I’m missing everything.” Carmilla didn’t make any signs of wanting to add to the discussion, so she continued. “I miss music, too. I know they play it sometimes in the athletics room, but it’s not the same. On my computer at home, I have like fifty playlists on there.”

“What would you possibly need fifty different playlists for?” Carmilla asked. A hint of a smile was on her lips.

“A playlist for every occasion.” Laura explained. “Songs for when I’m sad, songs for when I’m happy. Songs to fall asleep to, or to have playing in the background while I do stuff around the house. There’s a workout mix on there. It’s filled with, you know, lots of jams to get me pumped.” She paused, waiting for Carmilla’s inevitable show of amusement. She wasn’t disappointed at the beautiful smile that lit up her roommate’s face. “You think it’s funny now, but just wait until you
see me up in the gym with my super pumped jams going.”

“You say that like we’re ever getting out of this place.”

“We’ll get out.” She tried to ignore the edge of sadness in Carmilla’s tone. “Because if we don’t, you’ll never get to see me in my pumped up prime.”

Carmilla gave her a look that she couldn’t quite place. “Keep dreamin’, cutie.”

Laura gestured to the windows nearby. “Don’t you miss the real world, too?”

Carmilla turned to the windows, and the natural light streaming in illuminated her features. The bruising around her eye, not yet fully healed but looking significantly better, appeared to be a lighter shade of purple. Her eyes, normally so dark that they seemed black, were clearly a rich brown. Her complexion, aside from the healing black eye, was flawless. Her slightly parted lips looked exceptionally soft and kissable. Maybe someday she’d find out just how soft and kissable they really were. Maybe. Hopefully. She’d like that. She’d like that an awful lot, to be honest.

“Cupcake?”


She smirked. “You’re drooling a little bit over there.”

On impulse, Laura brought a hand up to check her chin. She was relieved to find that Carmilla had only been joking. “Ugh. I can’t believe I fell for that.”

She dropped her feet to the floor, moving forward to lean against the table on her elbows. “It’s not my fault you’re so gullible.”

“I am not gullible!” She protested.

Carmilla raised a skeptical brow. “Says the one who still thinks there’s life after Silas.”

“There will be life after Silas.” Laura insisted. “They’ll find a cure.” She paused. “They have to.”

Noticing Laura’s change of tone, Carmilla sighed. “To answer your question from before, yes. I miss the outside world.”

Laura glanced to the windows. “Do you think we’d have been friends if we’d met in the real world?”

Carmilla grinned. “And what makes you think that we’re friends in here?”

“Of course we’re friends.” Laura countered with a smile of her own. “I mean, really, what are we up to now? Four whole conversations with each other? Considering your social record, I’d say that sounds like friendship to me.”

“I don’t normally use this word, but you are the biggest dork that I have ever been forced to cohabitate with. I’ve been through my fair share of roommates, and you out dork them all.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Carmilla cocked her head to the side. “Should you though?”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a little dorky.” Laura laughed. “I take full pride in my
dorkiness. Being a dork is awesome.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but was silenced when Perry popped up beside them.

“Good afternoon, Laura.” Her smile faltered as she turned to Carmilla. “Hello, Carmilla.”

Ignoring Perry’s greeting, Carmilla stood from the table and walked away.

Perry looked uncertainly at Laura. “Was it something I said?”

As the days flew by, Laura grew used to Carmilla’s flighty ways. She never spoke to Laura when others were around to hear, especially when it was Laura’s friends. There were even still times when Carmilla refused to socialize with her when it was just the two of them. They could be completely alone in their room, and Laura would try to start up a conversation, and Carmilla would merely state something like “I’m reading, cutie” and that’d be the end of it. The hot and cold routine bugged Laura like nothing else, but she let it slide because being on debatably good terms with Carmilla was exceedingly better than being shut out completely. It was a strange and fragile friendship, but it was a friendship nonetheless.

Things were going well with her other friends, too. LaFontaine and Perry kept meal times interesting with their amicable bickering, Kirsch never failed to give her a good laugh, and Danny could always be counted on to endure all of her rants about Carmilla. Even SJ, whose voice she’d never heard, was nice to be around. Laura hadn’t realized just how attached she’d grown to SJ’s reliably silent presence until the second weekend of July when she’d sat down at the table for breakfast and realized a seat was empty. It was empty again at lunch, and at dinner, and the following day, and the day after that.

They had learned from Betty that SJ had gone over to Medical for a checkup the first morning that she’d missed breakfast, but that was all the information that the counselor had. But they didn’t need to hear anything else. That was enough for them to know that their friend was gone for good.

SJ’s transfer to Infected, or perhaps, in the more upsetting scenario, her death at the hands of Silas’s medical research professionals, left a heavy weight in Laura’s heart. Every meal with SJ’s empty seat was another painful slap of reality. She’d let herself forget what Silas was, and what it was capable of doing. Silas worked outside of the law, outside of the real world’s humane practices, outside of morality and ethics. The quarantined were, as Danny had put it, nothing more than a bunch of lab rats.

The others were even more shaken up from losing SJ than Laura was, though that was to be expected.

“She was the first friend I ever made here.” Kirsch revealed on a rainy day in mid-July. He and Laura were in the athletics room, tossing a ball back and forth. A group of Over Thirties were using the small half-court as a space for their yoga class, but the two friends were otherwise alone.

“Back when she talked, what was she like?” Laura asked, having to jump to catch the ball as it nearly soared right over her head. Though Kirsch was clearly more skilled than she was when it came to activities with balls, their difference in height made the game much more difficult than it was supposed to be.

He caught her bad throw back to him with ease. “She was cool. Funny. I don’t know. She liked to talk about clothes and stuff. One of those mall queens, I guess.”

“I bet she hated being in here.” Laura guessed.
“Definitely.” He tossed the ball up high and Laura scrambled to stand in the spot where it would eventually land. “That girl could do some talking. That’s why it was so weird when she just sort of, you know, stopped.”

She caught the ball, and tried to mimic Kirsch’s vertical throw. It reached half the height as his toss, if that. “So you never found out why she stopped talking?”

Showing off, he caught the ball with one hand. “Nope. She never said what happened. She never said anything. She showed up all chatty at breakfast, went out for a checkup, and came back for dinner as Silent Bob.”

“That’s terrifying.” Laura halfheartedly tried to catch his throw, failing miserably. She watched it roll away from them with little interest in going after it. She looked back to Kirsch. “Do you really think that they killed her?”

He shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. “For our sake, I sure hope not.”

The rain carried on throughout the day, growing worse during the night. The thunder and lightning kept Laura awake long after lights out. The storm didn’t seem to bother Carmilla, who was tucked into bed with the covers up to her chin.

Laura contemplated turning on her lamp and reading a little of Hastur’s Sword, because really if her roommate could snooze through the little hurricane raging outside their window she could surely handle the light from Laura’s nightstand, but she was cut off mid-thought by the sudden violent thrashing from across the room. Laura wasted no time in getting out of her bed and rushing to Carmilla’s.

“Hey, hey! Carmilla!” She grabbed onto Carmilla’s shoulders through the bed sheet that she was becoming increasingly tangled up in. “It’s just a dream. You’re okay. It’s just a dream.”

Carmilla’s eyes shot open. Her chest heaved as she sucked in as much air as her lungs could hold. She pushed herself up to a sitting position, and with shaky hands she swatted away Laura’s hold.

“Are you okay?” Laura tried to keep her voice down, but the whirling storm drowned out anything resembling a whisper.

“Just peachy.” Her eyes squeezed shut as she forced her breathing under control.

“Are you thirsty? I can get you some water.” Laura made like she was going to stand, but Carmilla’s hand pulled her back to the bed.

“I’m fine.” She said unconvincingly. Her hand lingered on Laura’s arm before releasing.

“Do you have nightmares often?” Laura asked.

“Oh, gee golly, I didn’t realize it was fucking sharing time.” She scoffed. “What’s next, Betty? Going to dissect my dreams and tell me all of my deeply rooted fears?”

Laura sighed. The harsh attitude did little to faze her these days. “I’ll just leave you alone.”

“Wait.” Again, Carmilla’s hand darted out and held her in place. Quietly, barely audible over the rain, Carmilla pleaded, “Stay.”

All Laura could do was nod and remain frozen where she sat. Not once during the entire month and a half that they had been living together had Carmilla requested Laura’s company. A clap of
thunder startled them both, and Carmilla’s hand fell back to her lap.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Carmilla grumbled, absently running a hand through her messy hair.

“Oh. Okay.” Laura readjusted herself so that more of her was facing Carmilla, who was visibly struggling with her decision to let Laura stick around. “We don’t have to talk about it. We can talk about whatever you want. Or I could do the talking, if you’d rather just listen?”

Carmilla let out an uneven breath and leaned back against the headboard. “I’m all ears.”

Laura racked her brain for something worth sharing. She ran with the first humorous story that came to mind. “Okay, so I first started realizing I liked girls in high school, right? And I had this friend, let’s just call her…actually, let’s not call her anything. She’s just this friend that I had. Anyway, she and I were pretty good friends and I was having all these feelings about realizing I liked girls and I went to her to talk through it with. She straight up told me I was the gayest of the gays, and that she’d known from the first moment we’d met in our freshman Biology class. Keep in mind, she and I met at least two years before I came out to her.”

Carmilla waited expectantly for Laura to go on, and was perplexed when she didn’t. “That’s the whole story? That your friend knew you were into girls before you told her?”

“Years before I told her, but…yeah.” Laura crossed her arms. “It was funny when it happened.”

“I know there has to be more to the story than just that.” She smirked. “What did she do to make you hate her?”

“I don’t hate her.” Laura weakly objected.

“You can’t even say her name.” Carmilla pointed out. She was clearly starting to enjoy herself. How the tables turned so quickly, Laura had no idea. “It must’ve been unforgivable, what she did. Downright cruel, even. Don’t hold out on me now, cutie.”

Laura narrowed her eyes challengingly. “I’ll tell you what happened, if you tell me a story in return.”

She thought it over for a moment before nodding. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

Laura took a deep, steading breath as she prepared to divulge. “Okay, well, it’s a bit cliché, but I sort of did the whole falling in love with a straight girl thing. I didn’t even have to tell her how I felt, she figured it out all on her own.”

Carmilla absentmindedly used her finger to trace patterns on the bed. “Hate to break this to you, but the art of subtly isn’t quite in your skillset.”

Laura ignored the comment. “Needless to say, my feelings for her kind of ruined everything. We had a huge fight during winter break, and for the first time ever…I cried on Christmas. We haven’t talked since.”

“Do you regret loving her?” Her finger traced long spiraling loops into the fabric of her bed sheet. Laura found herself unable to look away.

“No.” She answered confidently. “I had no intentions of loving her. And you can’t regret something that you had no choice in.”

“You could’ve ignored how you felt. You could’ve denied it.” Carmilla proposed as a flash of
lightning lit up the bedroom. They were sitting much closer to each other than it had seemed in the dark.

“That would’ve been even worse. I’d be lying to her, lying to myself. That’s no way to live.”

Her finger ceased its motions. “Sometimes that’s the only way to live.”

“I guess. Anyway, it’s your turn.” Laura pulled at a loose string hanging from the hem of her pajama shorts while she waited for Carmilla to follow up with her end of their deal.

“Her name was Ell.” She began softly. “We’d known each other before Silas. Our mothers had been coworkers. She was elegant and kind, far too good for a train wreck like me; but she loved me all the same.”

“They caught you?” Laura assumed.

“No, we were careful.” She avoided Laura’s eyes. “They transferred her.”

“Do you think she’s still alive?” The question slipped out, and Laura tensed as she waited for some form of backlash.

Gravely, Carmilla replied, “She’s dead.”

Laura wanted to ask her how she knew, how she could be so certain, but Carmilla’s heartbroken expression and the fact that the girl didn’t even bother hiding how hurt she looked made furthering the conversation a path that Laura couldn’t go down. Taking a huge risk, Laura scooted closer to her on the bed and placed her hand over Carmilla’s in a comforting gesture. Neither girl could look the other in the eye.

They stayed that way for a few quiet moments before Laura said, “SJ’s gone.”

“I noticed.” Carmilla revealed.

“Danny said there’s talk that they’re killing us off one by one on purpose.”

“It’s not on purpose.”

Laura couldn’t resist this time around. “How do you know?”

“Let’s just say that I have an inside connection. A trustworthy source.” She answered dismissively.

“Oh. Okay.” Laura let it go as her thumb ran across the back of Carmilla’s hand.

Carmilla closely watched the gentle caress. “It’s late. You should go back to bed.”

“Are you sure?” Laura stopped her movements. “I don’t mind staying up if it helps.”

A feeble smile touched her lips. “Get some sleep. I’ll be fine.”

Laura climbed back into bed with a surplus of emotions and feelings to sort through. She was surprised that Carmilla had opened up to her about Ell. Usually the girl would become withdrawn and irritable whenever Laura tried to get more personal with her. She chalked it up to being a moment of vulnerability, nothing more. Carmilla would surely be back to her normal shielded self when they woke.

Unless it wasn’t just a onetime thing. Unless Laura was finally starting to grow on her roommate.
Unless Carmilla was starting to trust her. Unless their connection was starting to resemble a genuine friendship.

Unless, unless, what if, what if. The possibilities kept her awake long after the rain had stopped.

The following Monday, Laura had her first checkup at Medical. Gloria the nurse arrived at her door bright and early. With a clipboard in hand, she guided Laura down to the ground floor and out of the building. It was a nice day out, sunny with a few clouds floating by. The sun felt amazing on her skin, and she reveled in its warmth while she could.

Much to her displeasure, she was put through the demeaning and painfully cold process of a sanitation shower upon entering the building. After that, she was left alone in an examination room. They didn’t restrain her to the table this time, for which she was grateful. She used the opportunity to snoop through the cabinets and drawers. She found a plethora of medical supplies, but nothing of any real interest. Though Laura was nervous of what they had in store for her, the true anxiety didn’t set in until Dr. Vordenburg walked through the door.

She glanced at the file in her hands. “Laura Hollis, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see you, too.” Her reply was devoid of all sincerity, but the doctor looked too exhausted to care.

“How have you been feeling?” She asked while taking a seat in the stationary chair beside the examination table. “Any fevers? Any upset stomachs?”

Laura put on the most assertive mask that she could muster. “I want to see my dad.”

“Only certified personnel are permitted to see the sick.” The reply was cold and rehearsed.

“Please, I just want to know how he’s doing.” Laura begged. “Can’t you tell me anything?”

Dr. Vordenburg let out a tired sigh. “That information is classified. Now, how have you been sleeping?”

“Has there been any progress with the cure?” Persistence had always been a strong attribute of hers.

“If you remain uncooperative—“

“Why are you experimenting on people without their consent?” Laura cut in.

“If you remain uncooperative…” Dr. Vordenburg cautioned. “There will be consequences.”

She thought about her dad and how disappointed he would be if she went and got herself into trouble. She recalled Carmilla’s unmistakable anguish over losing Ell and her brother. The image of Kirsch’s scars came to her mind, followed by the scabbed over rash on Danny’s forearm and the empty seat at their cafeteria table.

Fear rooted itself deep inside of her. Its thick venom surged through her veins and effortlessly vanquished her resolve.

“Laura!”

Laura was shaken awake by a pair of hands on her shoulders. Disorientated, she had trouble placing where she was. The hands dropped their grip, and Laura tried to pry her eyes open. The ceiling light
was harsh against them, and she struggled to focus on the two figures beside her bed.

“What did they do to her?” Carmilla’s tone was strikingly angry.

“Keep your voice down.” Hushed the other figure. Slowly, Betty’s features came into view. “From what I can gather, it was just a routine check for symptoms and a shot of JSLF.”

“Since when do they inject that shit on a first checkup?” Carmilla snapped.

“How should I know?” Betty retorted. “Those are questions for—“

“No!” Carmilla interrupted. “I could be on my death bed, and I still wouldn’t want anything to do with her.”

Betty fidgeted with her hands. “She asks about you at every staff meeting.”

“I don’t care.” Carmilla crossed her arms.

Betty nodded before pointing toward Laura. “Looks like someone is finally waking up.”

Carmilla’s entire demeanor softened as she dropped down to her knees beside Laura’s bed. Her hand moved to cover Laura’s, but she retracted it before it could reach. “Hey, creampuff. How’s it going?”

Laura did a quick assessment to find that her throat was dry, her head was dizzy, and her sweaty limbs shook when she tried to push herself up.

“On top of the world.” She joked.

“Glad to see that you’re still just as delusional as you were before you left.” Carmilla smiled.

Noticing the shift in tension, Betty slinked back to the door and bid them a quick farewell.

“Since when are you friends with Betty?” Laura questioned once they were alone in the room.

“We’re not friends.” Carmilla passed her a cup of water from the nightstand. “She’s just the easiest counselor to intimidate.”

She brought the cup up to her lips, enjoying the way Carmilla’s eyes lingered on them. After a few sips, she set the cup back on her nightstand. “So…should I be embarrassed that I fainted on a first checkup?”

“No. Especially not if they’re dealing out injections on first visits these days.” Carmilla sat back on her heels. She narrowed her gaze as a thought occurred to her. “Did you do something in Medical to piss them off?”

“No.” She paused. “Well. Maybe. I can’t really remember. The word uncooperative does come to mind though.”

“Of course.” Carmilla rolled her eyes. “Got a death wish, do you?”

“It’s not fair that they refuse to tell us how our family members are.” Laura propped herself up on her elbow. “It’s killing me not knowing how my dad is.”

“There are worse things that could kill you in here.” Carmilla replied flatly.
Laura chewed on her lip to buy herself a few moments. “Thanks for taking care of me.”

“I got you water.” She shrugged. “It’s nothing.”

“It is something.” Laura grinned. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say someone had a crush on me.”

A twinkle glinted in her eye. “It’s definitely the other way around.”

“If you say so.” Laura fell back on her pillow, feeling better already.

On the last weekday of July, after the monthly book discussion on *Hastur’s Sword*, Laura stayed in the library with Perry after the crowd of Young Adults had cleared out. The two friends sat at the secluded table in the corner, discussing their dreams for the future.

“It’s back to school for me.” Perry declared. “After I finish that up, I plan on doing a bit of traveling around Eastern Europe. I have some distant relatives in Austria that I’d just love to meet.”

“That’d be really neat.” Laura replied. “I’ve never done much traveling myself.”

Perry lit up. “Oh, it’s lovely to travel. It’s so wonderful to experience other cultures.”

“It’s on my bucket list, for sure.” Laura nodded.

Perry cleared her throat. “Your, um, girlfriend is staring at us.”

“Girlfriend?” Laura glanced over her shoulder in time to catch Carmilla peering around a book at them. Upon being found out, she slouched down to full hide behind the book. Laura couldn’t contain her smile as she faced Perry again. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“Sure.” Perry was unconvinced. “Does she stare at you like that while you sleep too?”

“No! Trust me, she’s not the big creep that everyone seems to think she is. She’s just, I don’t know, misunderstood.”

“Misunderstood? There’s nothing to misunderstand, the girl never talks.”

“She talks to me.” Laura protested.

“Yes, but you’re her girlfriend.” Perry countered.

Laura glanced over her shoulder again, disappointed to find that the seat Carmilla had occupied was empty. She turned back to Perry. “She’s definitely not my girlfriend.”

Later that evening, Laura was combing the tangles from her wet hair when Carmilla showed up in their room.

“It’s after lights out.” Laura said as she watched Carmilla quietly shut the door behind herself.

Walking in, Carmilla kicked off her boots. “Huh, so that’s why all the lights were out.”

Laura rolled her eyes at the sarcastic remark. “You’re such an irritating person to live with sometimes.”

“Not half as bad as you are.” Carmilla faced her with a smirk.

Laura playfully threw her wet towel at the other girl. “I know you are but what am I? Seriously?
“Your flirting game is weak, if that’s the best you’ve got.”

After a sequence of swift movements, Laura found herself pinned against the wall with Carmilla’s face inches from her own. “You couldn’t handle the best that I’ve got.” Her voice was different. Lower, raspier. She absently licked her lips as her eyes locked with Laura’s.

“Try me.” Laura dared. Her pulse was racing as she waited to see what Carmilla would do next.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Her eyes traveled down to Laura’s lips.

“So would you.” Laura challenged. It was taking all of her willpower to remain still. It would be so easy to give in and crush their lips together. In that moment, it was all she wanted.

“Can’t argue with you there.” The air shifted, and it was then that Laura could tell there was something holding the other girl back.

“What’s wrong?” She asked. Ell’s name was on the tip of her tongue.

“I want to kiss you.” Carmilla confessed softly. “That’s what’s wrong.”

“It is her?” Laura didn’t need to say her name for them to know who she meant.

Carmilla pushed away from the wall, and away from Laura. “No. It’s this place.”

“It’s okay.” Laura ran a hand through her wet hair. “I understand.”

Abruptly, Carmilla cupped Laura’s face, swooped down, and pressed their lips together. The kiss was soft and slow, but left Laura feeling lighter than air. When they parted, Carmilla retreated away from Laura until her back was pressed against the opposite wall.

“I shouldn’t have done.” She whispered, her fingers coming up to feel her lips. She kicked off the wall, and for a moment Laura thought she was returning for another kiss, but she rushed into the bathroom instead. The door shut, and it didn’t open again until hours had passed and Laura had given up waiting for her to emerge.

When Carmilla finally slipped out of the bathroom and tiptoed over to her bed, Laura squinted through the dark at her. Even in the dim moonlight that was streaming in from the window, Laura could tell that she’d been crying.
Seventy days. It had been seventy days of living under quarantine, which meant it had been seventy days since Laura had last seen her father. It was easy to lose track of time at Silas, but Laura made sure to keep an accurate record of the passing days. Harboring as much detail as possible would come in handy after the cure was discovered. Surely the least she could get out of her experience at Silas was a best seller or a front page article on a prestigious newspaper. She could probably even swing a movie deal out of it, if she was lucky.

“Doing okay over there, cutie?”

Laura snapped out of her daydream to find Carmilla looking at her from across the table. She glanced around the library to see that, aside from a handful of Under Eighteens gossiping a few aisles down, they were still alone. “Doing just fine. Why?”

Carmilla placed her book to the side. “You’ve got one of those starry-eyed looks on your face.”

“Yeah, so?” Laura slouched down in her chair. “What about it?”

“It’s cute.” She commented, keeping her tone casual.

Laura watched her roommate carefully. Though she’d spent that last couple of months living with her and gradually getting to know her, Carmilla was still very much a mystery. There were days where she would flirt with Laura almost as much as she breathed, then there were days where she all but ignored Laura’s entire existence. There were times when Laura was certain Carmilla would kiss her again, but something always held the other girl back. And there were times when Laura thought she’d ruined everything between them from getting too personal.

There was no denying that Carmilla liked her back. The kiss that they had shared at the end of July, the one she’d refrained from gushing over with her friends, was no ordinary kiss. It had been slow, but hot. Soft, but sensual. The kiss, and the fact that Carmilla had cried after they’d done it, had consumed Laura’s thoughts as of late.

Carmilla raised a curious brow. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.” Laura tried to shake the memory of how Carmilla’s lips had felt against her own. “I’m fine. Really.” An idea that Laura had been wanting to bring up to her came to mind. “Hey, I’ve been thinking and….you know how you said that you have an inside source? A trustworthy one?”

“I know someone on the inside, and I trust something that they once told me to be true.” She clarified. “But I wouldn’t trust them with much else.”

“Oh.” Laura’s face fell.

“Why?”

“Well, I was just thinking…that maybe you could ask your friend—or I guess your not-friend, if they could see how my dad is doing?”

Carmilla avoided her eyes. “I can’t do that.”

“Right, yeah. It’s okay.” Laura dismissed the issue. “I was just wondering.”
Carmilla shrugged. “Your best bet is to try squeezing it out of Betty.”

“I thought the counselors weren’t allowed to go into the Infected section?”

“They’re not. But they have access to our files.” She explained. “Files that say who our Infected family members are. Files that will say whether they’re deceased or not.”

Laura’s breath caught in her throat. “Deceased?”

“It’s just a possibility.” Carmilla stretched out a hand and placed it over Laura’s. After a few moments, she added, “Try going to Betty’s office during dinner. Your chances of not getting caught are pretty good around that time.”

“Thanks.” Laura muttered while she played with Carmilla’s fingers.

“Laura?” Her voice was small.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t get caught.”

When it came time for Operation Information, Laura was fully prepared. She’d rehearsed exactly what she planned to say to Betty, and she’d gone over a list of excuses that could be used if someone found her wandering the halls. She was ready. The plan was solid.

While the rest of the Young Adults filtered into the stairwell to head down to the cafeteria, Laura stayed in her room. She waited precisely ten minutes before poking her head out to make sure the coast was clear. As she walked, it felt as if the cameras, which normally seemed like nothing more than wall decorations, were following her every move. By the time she reached Betty’s office, her paranoia was an all-time high. She rushed into the room and shut the door behind her. She turned on her heel, expecting to see Betty at her desk but finding the room empty.

She hadn’t prepared for this. The plan was no longer solid, it was Jell-O. The plan was Jell-O. Thinking on her feet, she quickly ran around the desk and slid into the rolling chair behind it. Her hands hovered over the computer keyboard. She had no idea what the password to Betty’s computer was, she had no idea how to locate the files of the quarantined, and she had no idea how much time she would have before Betty came back. She began rummaging through the desk drawers, looking for a clues. There were office supplies, stacks of paper, candy bars, tissues, nothing of any use. She opened the bottom drawer and gasped at what she found. Staring up at her was a drawer full of confiscated goods. She shuffled through it, finding among other things a pack of cigarettes, a few torn out pages of a pornographic magazine, a travel-sized bottle of coconut rum, and large cucumber that she really didn’t want to know the story behind. She contemplated taking a souvenir, Carmilla would get a real kick out of that, but decided it would be a dead giveaway that someone had been in the office.

She wheeled the chair around so that she was facing the file cabinets against the back wall. The first few weren’t locked, but the paperwork inside of them was mundane and irrelevant. She tried the remaining ones, but they were locked. She turned back to the desk, and immediately began typing random passwords into the computer. Again, and again, and again, she was denied access. She was about to try typing in the word “password” for her next attempt, but the office door swung open before she could try. A burly guard smiled at her.

And that’s when things went black.

She woke up to the sound of Carmilla’s voice. “Laura, can you hear me?” Sweet, raspy, melodic.
Such a nice voice.

“Yeah.” Laura grumbled in response. It was hard to wake up. She hadn’t felt so tired in ages, and her bed felt softer than normal.

She heard Carmilla let out a breath of relief. “You sure aren’t making things easy for me.”

“What?” She tried to blink away the sleep.

“Nothing.” Was Carmilla’s lame response.

“I don’t feel so good.” Laura noted as a piercing headache made itself known.

“You a spent a night in Medical.” Carmilla explained grimly. “Do you remember what happened?”

Laura tried to recall her last events. “I went into Betty’s office, but she wasn’t there. A guard showed up and…I don’t know. It’s all fuzzy after that.”

Carmilla played with a lock of her hair, and it was then that Laura realized her head was in Carmilla’s lap. “They always tell us that the memory loss is a common side effect, and that we’ll get our memories back with time.” Her fingers lightly brushed against Laura’s jaw. “But we never get them back.”

Laura looked up at her. “I went to Medical last night?”

“Yes.”

“For breaking the rules?”

“It gets written down as a random checkup. But, yes, they sent you there when you got caught.”

“They test on us as a punishment.” Laura deduced.

“Sort of.” Carmilla’s fingers ran through the length of her hair. “They’re constantly doing checkups, and they try to keep things on a fair schedule, but breaking the rules almost always gets you a pass to the front of the line.”

“You never went to Medical.” Laura realized, embarrassed that it had taken her so long to notice. Carmilla’s black eye had long since healed, and there had never been any repercussions. “Why?”

Her hand froze, lost within Laura’s hair. “If I tell you something…you can’t tell anyone else. Especially not your little gang of friends.”

Laura stuck out her pinky. “It’ll stay between us, I promise.”

Carmilla rolled her eyes but hooked her pinky around Laura’s anyway. They stayed locked together while she spoke. “The insider that I know…it’s my mother. She’s the Director of Silas.”

“So your mom is in charge?”

“She just does what people tell her to do.”

“What people?”

“The government, the researchers, the doctors.” She shrugged. “Whoever makes the most convincing case.”
“Did she put you in here?” Laura swallowed hard. “You and your brother?”

Carmilla took her time in answering. “Silas was never meant to be a quarantine camp. It was an independent research facility, run by people looking to do some good for the world. They took in patients that couldn’t afford medical care on their own. They did things by the book. They helped people. But then The Bite started to spread and people got scared. The government stepped in, took over. They flew in a bunch of new scientists and doctors, and they turned a reputable institution into the prison it is today. They kicked out anyone who objected to their methods. My mother gave up her values and ethics…just to keep her job. And when Will started showing symptoms, she forced her own children into Silas. She knew what they were going to do to us, but she quarantined us without breaking a sweat. She’s a coward.”

Laura didn’t quite know how to respond. It was a lot of new information for her to process.

Surprisingly, Carmilla kept going. “She’s the one who told me Ell died. She was trying to get on my good side, trying to win back my affection by letting me know that my dear friend had passed. She keeps sending me letters through the counselors, begging me to come see her.”

“Why doesn’t she just come to you?” Laura questioned.

“The other quarantined can’t know I’m related to the Director. It could give the more rebellious ones…leverage.” Though they were clearly alone in the room, Carmilla lowered her voice. “Even if they did try to use me against her, it wouldn’t matter. She’d hand them the damn knife to slit my throat if it meant she could stay in power.” She shook her head. “And that’s the biggest laugh of all. She thinks she’s the one with all of the power, but she’s just hanging on by a thread like the rest of us.”

Laura took in a deep breath. “I don’t know if we’re at a place yet where I can ask, and you don’t have to answer if you’re not comfortable with it, but…do you know how your brother is doing?”

Carmilla’s hand resumed its motions through Laura’s hair. “When my mother told me about Ell, she said he was alive and doing ‘remarkably well with the latest treatment techniques’. But that was a long time ago.”

“Were you close to him?”

“No. And I regret that.”

“You talk about regrets a lot.”

“Do I?”

“No one should have that many regrets.”

“I regret new things every day.” She paused. “I regret telling you to go into Betty’s office.”

“You suggested that I go talk to Betty, not that I snoop around her office.” Laura pointed out. “Going to Medical was my own fault, not yours.”

“I should have gone with you. Hell, I should’ve just done it for you.” She whispered the words. “They wouldn’t have tested on me if I’d gotten caught. My mother might not be the one running this place, but she isn’t the type of person you want to anger. They go easy on me to please her. I’m so stupid for letting you go alone.”

“You’re not stupid.” Laura forced herself into a sitting position. She turned so that she was half
facing Carmilla. “I’m okay. See? I’m fine.”

“Laura…” A pained expression took hold of her. It broke Laura’s heart to see. “Go look in the mirror.”

Confused, Laura let Carmilla help her to her feet and over to the sink. The reflection that stared back at her was frightening, to say the least. Her eyes were bloodshot, the whites of them completely red. She was sickly pale, and matching circular marks were on her temples. As she looked at the marks, a sharp pain stung behind her eyes and made her gasp. Carmilla’s hands were on her forearms, keeping her steady.

“What happened to me?” Laura asked as Carmilla guided her back to bed.

Once she was securely tucked in, Carmilla gingerly ran her fingers over the marks and replied, “These look like they’re from some kind of brain monitoring machine.” She dropped her hands. “As for the rest, I don’t know. How much pain are you in?”

“It’s just a little headache.” She gritted her teeth as another bolt of pain hit. “I’ll be okay.”

Skeptical, Carmilla let it go with a nod. “For someone so small, you’re pretty tough.”

“We’re practically the same height, you know.”

“I’ve got a few inches on you that say otherwise.”

“It’s just those boots of yours.” Laura smiled through the discomfort. “It’s all an illusion.”

“We can test that theory sometime.” Carmilla suggested, taking a seat on the edge of Laura’s bed.

Laura smirked. “Before or after we test the ‘tasty as a creampuff’ theory?”

Carmilla smiled. “It’s definitely naptime for you.”

“Do I get a goodnight kiss?” Laura let her eyes fall shut.

She felt a shift in weight on the bed, and her heart swelled when Carmilla’s lips pressed lightly against her cheek. “Goodnight, creampuff.”

Though it wasn’t the kind of kiss she had hoped for, she was more than content with it. “Goodnight, Carm.”

Laura had returned to being fully functional and free of marks after a long weekend of rest. Carmilla had taken good care of her, even smuggling up cafeteria food to her after the meal times that she was too weak to attend. And her friends had visited her, much to Carmilla’s displeasure, though they kept their visits short. Probably because of the glares from Carmilla that they received upon entry.

After her weekend of post-Medical recovery, the days of August rolled on as uneventful as ever. She and Carmilla grew closer, and the flirting certainly increased, but they kept things friendly between them. Laura couldn’t complain, though. She loved getting to know Carmilla. She loved just spending time with the girl, even during the times when neither of them felt very talkative.

It didn’t take very long for her friends to notice just how often she and Carmilla were alone together.

“You spend more time with her than you do with us nowadays.” Kirsch said through a mouthful of
“I split my time with everyone equally.” Laura objected.

“Yeah, okay.” Danny laughed. “Sure you do.”

LaFontaine added, “I’d like to see your time management calculations, because something is going very awry there.”

“Leave Laura be.” Perry requested. “She can spend her time however she likes.”

Laura smiled at her. “Thank you.”

Perry shrugged and poked around at her food. “Besides, if any of us had a girlfriend, we’d indubitably spend more time with her than with the rest of us, too.”

“She’s not my girlfriend!” Laura protested for the hundredth time. Her words were met with an uproarious laughter from the table.

“On a more serious note…” Danny drew in the group’s attention. “I think it’s time we told Laura.”

“Told me what?” She searched their faces for an explanation.

“It’s time.” LaFontaine agreed. They directed their full attention to Laura. “We were waiting to tell you until after you’d had your first real checkup at Medical. We wanted to see how you’d handle it.”

Kirsch gave her a thumbs up. “You didn’t disappoint.”

LaFontaine nodded. “We were definitely impressed.”

“What’s going on?” Laura demanded to know.

Danny lowered her voice to just above a whisper. “We’re planning to jump ship.”

“Jump ship?” Laura raised a quizzical brow. “You mean leave Silas? Escape?”

“Exactly.” Danny answered. “We’re not going to sit around and be subjected to this kind of treatment anymore.”

“But it’s risky.” LaFontaine frowned. “If we get caught trying to leave, it may as well be considered a death sentence.”

“There was this kid a few months back…” Kirsch scratched his head. “An Under Eighteen. Must’ve been thirteen or fourteen years old at most. He tried to get out, made it into the woods and everything, but the guards chased him down. They shot him on sight.”

“How do you know?” Laura asked.

“We all heard the gunshot.” Perry murmured uneasily.

“You know how gossip spreads around here.” LaFontaine added. “When that kid didn’t show up for meal time, the Under Eighteens knew it was him.”

Kirsch tossed his fork down to his empty plate. “He never stood a chance.”
Laura looked at them, one by one, searching for any sign that their talk was merely a bad joke. “You’re serious? You want to try getting out?”

Danny checked around them to ensure that no one was eavesdropping. “Very serious. We’ve got a plan, we just have to find a way to execute it.”

“We could be carrying the virus!” Laura whispered. “What if we make it out, and all we end up doing is infecting people?”

LaFontaine sighed. “It’s a nonissue. We’ll have to live in the woods, if we make it that far. Totally off the grid. Illegally leaving quarantine means that we’d be fugitives.”

“And you want to just be on the run for the rest of your lives?” Laura questioned. “You guys have lost your minds. You’ve been in here for too long, you can’t—”

“Exactly.” Danny cut in. “We’ve been in here for too long, Laura. We can’t do this anymore. We’re just sitting ducks, wasting our time until they kill us. We either die in here, or we try to make it on our own out there. I’d rather die fighting to live than just sit in Silas and wait the wrong injection.”

Laura shook her head. “Guys, they aren’t just experimenting on us for fun, they’re trying to find a cure.”

“You don’t know that.” Danny countered. Laura wanted to say that she did know that, but couldn’t without revealing Carmilla’s secret.

Perry cleared her throat. “I agree with Laura. I think that leaving would be incredibly selfish. I would much rather give my life so that others could live, than die running around in the woods.” She looked to LaFontaine. “Wouldn’t you rather give your body to science? Give your death a meaning? We don’t know how to live out there. We’d never make it through a winter.”

Danny scoffed. “Perry, you don’t have to come. We’ve told you before, you can stay if you want to.”

“Of course I would have to go.” Perry huffed. “You expect me to stay behind? I’d be the first person they’d come asking questions to. There’d be a room in Medical specifically reserved for me.”

LaFontaine shuddered. “Perr’s right. No one can be left behind. It’s all or nothing.”

Kirsch groaned. “We’re never getting out of here then. All we do is argue about the plan, argue about the timing, argue about including more people.” He gestured to SJ’s empty seat. “We’re just going to keep arguing until there’s none of us left to argue with.”

The discussion ended there. It was never debated at meal times after that, only in pairs or groups of three. Even then, they kept things brief. After all, getting caught planning a breakout would probably be just as bad as actually attempting one.

As the month progressed, one thing became very clear: things at Silas were getting worse. Checkups were becoming more frequent, and more often than not people were returning with visible side effects from their visits to Medical. In the last week of August, Perry returned from a checkup unable to control the movements of her left hand. It twitched all throughout dinner. The following day, Danny showed up for group activity queasy and lightheaded. She threw up on Kirsch halfway through Betty’s trust fall exercise. In LaFontaine’s trip to Medical later in the week, their assigned doctor had drawn so much blood from them that they had to spend the rest of the day
in bed, too weak to move.

When it came time for lights out on the last day of August, Laura was heading up to her room when she ran into Betty in the stairwell.

“Oh, Laura! Hey, I’ve been meaning to talk privately with you.” She beckoned for Laura to follow her away from the door to the fifth floor. She checked over the railing to the stairs down below and listened. There were still a few stragglers heading up, but they had a few moments to spare before they’d reach them.

“What’s up?” Laura asked quietly. Though she’d already profusely apologized to Betty for snooping around her office, the counselor’s grim features worried her. “Am I in trouble or something?”

“No, no.” Betty whispered. “This is, um…this is about your dad.”

Her heart froze. “My dad?” Tears brimmed her eyes. “Is he okay? What happened?”

“I’m so sorry, Laura.” Betty shook her head, distraught. “From what I can find, it looks like he passed away the day after you both arrived.”

The tears began to fall before it had really hit her. When it did, when the words “my dad is dead” finally echoed inside of her, a gut-wrenching sob escaped her throat. She brought a hand up to cover her mouth, but stifling her cries only made them worse. Betty wrapped an arm around her shoulder and led her up the stairs. Quickly, keeping Laura’s head down, Betty walked her to Room 307.

Carmilla was up on her feet the moment that Betty and Laura made it through the doorway. She rushed to them, her arms wrapping around Laura in a tight embrace. Laura held on to her like her life depended on it. She dug her fingers into Carmilla’s back, buried her face in the crook of Carmilla’s neck, and she wept until breathing became a chore. When Laura opened her eyes again, she found that the two of them were alone and hadn’t moved an inch from the spot where Carmilla had met her. She leaned back enough to see that Carmilla had been crying as well.

Carmilla cupped Laura’s face and used her thumbs to wipe away a few stray tears. “I may have blackmailed Betty into looking at your file.”

Laura opened her mouth to ask what kind of information Carmilla had on Betty that she could use for blackmail, but before the words could even leave her lips she had decided that she didn’t care. She didn’t care about anything in that moment. All she could do was feel. Feel sad, feel hurt, feel alone. She hadn’t felt so devastated since the death of her mom.

“She um, she looked at my file, too.” Carmilla’s bottom lip quivered. “Will’s dead. Which is probably why my mother has been so insistent on talking to me in person.”

Laura felt a fresh wave of tears brewing. “This sucks.”

Despite everything, Carmilla cracked a sad smile. “Yeah, it does.”

Laura bit back the urge to breakdown again. Her face was hot, her cheeks were puffy, and she was sniffling more than she was getting words out. She was tired of crying, tired of the heaving sobs and the ache in her chest. “I never even—” Her resolve broke, as did the floodgates. “I never got to say goodbye.”

Carmilla pulled her in again, just as tightly as before. She soothingly rubbed Laura’s back while
she cried. It was a different kind of bonding. Vulnerable and raw. Their emotions were pure and exposed as they grieved together. It was profoundly comforting to Laura to know that Carmilla knew how she felt. Perhaps not to the same degree, she hadn’t lost a parent and wasn’t even close to her brother to begin with, but she’d lost someone too. It also helped that Carmilla didn’t ask her how she was doing, and didn’t pry into how she felt. She just stood there and held her, and that was all she could’ve asked for.

After they separated, Laura took a shower so long that the water was cold by the time she finished. She numbly dressed herself and dried her hair. Going through her bedtime routine like nothing had happened felt silly. It felt pointless. It felt like she was trying to go about things like she hadn’t just learned her father had been dead for months. She exited the bathroom and angrily threw her towel across the room.

She paced the floor, more furious than she’d been in long time. Anger practically radiated from her in waves. “I hate this place. I hate the stupid doctors and the stupid ‘research professionals’ and the stupid rules and everything is just so stupid here.”

Wordlessly, Carmilla scooted over in her bed and raised the covers. Laura looked at the offer, then back to Carmilla, then back to the space, then back to the girl. She climbed into Carmilla’s bed without another thought. She laid on her side, and Carmilla wrapped a secure arm around her waist. She pulled Laura in close, her front pressed against the length of Laura’s back.

“Thanks.” Laura muttered against Carmilla’s pillow. It smelled like her.

“I’m sorry about your dad.” Carmilla replied quietly.

Laura placed her hand over Carmilla’s, their fingers interlacing. “I’m sorry about your brother.”

Sleep came slowly, but if it hadn’t been for Carmilla holding her through the night, she probably wouldn’t have slept at all.
Laura fiddled with the ID card hanging from her neck. She’d grown so used to feeling it against her chest that she now felt naked without it. She wasn’t smiling in the picture they’d taken for it, in the picture that she’d never regained the memory of. She looked cold and stoic. What had they done to her before taking the picture? Had they given her a sanitation shower? Injected her with who knows what? Let her say her final goodbyes to her father? Was that another memory forever lost to her?

She slid the lanyard from her neck and let the ID card slip from her fingers. It made a sad, pathetic noise as it hit the ground. Then again, everything seemed sad and pathetic these days.

Carmilla trailed her fingers up Laura’s arm as she moved to stand behind her. “You missed breakfast.” She murmured into Laura’s hair before wrapping her arms around the shorter girl’s waist.

“Wasn’t hungry.” Laura replied. It was the truth, her appetite had dwindled since receiving the news about her father. It’d been a week, and she knew that it was time to start acting like things were fine, but she felt safe in Carmilla’s arms. Safe enough to let her true feelings show, safe enough not to lie.

“You’re friend, the tall one that’s into Over Thirties, she asked me about you when we were in line. Your friends are getting suspicious. They know something’s wrong.” Carmilla placed a soft kiss on her shoulder before releasing her hold. She bent over and grabbed Laura’s ID card before slipping it back over Laura’s head where it belonged.

“I won’t tell them.” Laura assured her. “I know if I tell them about my dad, I’ll have to tell them how I found out.”

Carmilla nodded and the conversation fell. If things weren’t so complicated between them, Laura would’ve liked to kiss her there. But she didn’t kiss her, because things were more complicated than they’d ever been.

“It’s time for a nap, don’t you think?” Carmilla asked. She fell back on her bed and opened her arms expectantly. Laura happily climbed in with her.

“Definitely time for a nap.” She rested her head on Carmilla’s shoulder and draped her arm across the girl’s waist. “This is nice.”

“Yeah.” Carmilla agreed, playing with Laura’s hair.

They’d been doing a lot of cuddling and holding each other since the news. A lot of sharing the same bed at night. A lot of letting their stares linger on the other’s lips. It was becoming a bit of a habit for them to express as much physical affection as they possibly could without going too far. Carmilla had made it very clear after their first kiss that she didn’t want them to go too far again. And now that Laura knew how it felt to lose someone in Silas, she understood why.

“We should probably stop doing things like this.” Carmilla quietly acknowledged.

“We can stop whenever you want.” Laura closed her eyes and listened to the rapid beat of Carmilla’s heart.

“I don’t want to stop.” She whispered the words. “But I can’t go falling in love again.”
Laura’s eyes shot open. She pushed herself up on an elbow so that she could look down at Carmilla’s conflicted expression. In a voice that she hardly recognized, she asked, “We’re going to die in here anyway, so what does it matter?”

Carmilla’s brows drew together. “Who said anything about us dying?”


Carmilla pushed herself into a sitting position. She leaned back against the headboard while her hand traced patterns into Laura’s back. “Not everyone dies here.”

“We’re all just waiting for our turn.” Laura shook her head. “They’re never going to let us out.”

“They will. After they find the cure.” Carmilla objected.

“And what if they never find it?”

“They will.”

“We could be dead by the time they get around to it.”

Carmilla ceased her patterns. “Pessimism looks bad on you, cupcake.”

“Stop!” Laura snapped. She jumped to her feet, wheeling around to glare down at Carmilla. “Just stop with the cute nicknames already.”

“What’s gotten into you?” Carmilla asked, hanging her legs over the side of the bed so that she faced Laura.

“Why are you defending Silas?” Laura interrogated. “Why are you so sure there’ll be a cure?”

“They’re not injecting shit into us for funsies.” Carmilla scowled. “Millions of dollars are going into this research, people’s lives are going into this research. There will be results, you just have to be patient.”

Laura trembled with anger. “I don’t want to die. I don’t want my life to be wasted as a failed experiment. I want to go to school, and become a journalist, and get married, and have kids, and grow old, and…I can’t do that here. I can’t do any of that here.”

“You’ll get your chance to all of those things after the cure is found.” Carmilla promised. A look of doubt crossed her face, and Laura knew that her words were nothing that Carmilla hadn’t already thought of.

“You’re not in danger like the rest of us are.” Laura placed her hands on her hips. It wasn’t really a comfortable stance for her, but she couldn’t stand there with her arms uselessly hanging by her sides any longer. “I can’t pretend like everything will be okay, or like the cure is right around the corner. Maybe you can, but I can’t.”

Carmilla stood, making sure to keep a good distance from her. “Why is this starting to sound like a goodbye?”

“It’s not a goodbye.” Laura dropped her arms. “Not yet.”

She crossed her arms. “And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”
“We both know that this—“ She gestured between them. “Whatever this is, it won’t last forever. It won’t even last long. One of us will get transferred to Infected, or maybe the testing in Medical will go a little too far…either way, something is going to end this. End us. There’s not even an ‘us’ to an end, but you know what I mean.” She shrugged. “I didn’t get to say goodbye to my dad, and I don’t want to miss that chance with you.”

“You don’t have to say goodbye.” Carmilla looked desperate and horrified, as if she were watching a puppy walk itself into oncoming traffic. “Not yet.”

“Yet.” Laura nodded. “There it is. I don’t have to say goodbye yet. You know it’s coming. Somewhere down the road we’ll have to say goodbye. That’s why you don’t want me in your bed anymore. That’s why you don’t want to kiss me. It’ll make saying goodbye that much harder. So, let’s just get it over with then, shall we?”

“You want to say goodbye?” She raised a skeptical brow. “Right now? We live together, Laura. We’ll see each other at lunch, at group, at dinner, at night. Saying goodbye right now, when it could be months before we’re separated…why are you acting like we’re not going to see each other tomorrow?”

“What if we don’t?” Laura took a step away. Standing so close to Carmilla, especially while seeing her so distraught, was getting hard for to do. “What if you woke up, and I wasn’t here?”

“Planning on skipping town, are you?” Carmilla had meant it as a joke, but Laura’s face gave her away. “Please don’t tell me that you’re thinking of trying to escape.”

“Maybe I am.” Laura tossed out indifferently.

She narrowed her gaze. “That little band of miscreants, they’re the ones putting these ideas in your head, aren’t they?”

“They’re my friends.”

“They’re morons if they think they can get out of here without being caught.”

“They have a plan.”

Carmilla rolled her eyes. “A brilliant one, I’m sure.”

Laura stilled. “You could come with us.”

“Laura…” Carmilla watched her closely. “We can’t leave. We—“

Laura held up a hand to stop her from continuing. “There’s no ‘we’ here.”

“In a different world, there could be.” Carmilla softened.

“Come with us.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“Laura, I can’t leave.”

“Why not?”
Carmilla scoffed. “Because if I leave, everything that I’ve gone through will have been for nothing! I lost my family, I lost Ell, I lost everyone that I cared about. I’ve endured Silas for over a year. Do you know how many trips to Medical I’ve had? They go easy on me, sure, but they don’t forget about me.” She began pacing the floor. “Do you know what this place was like a year ago? The doctors wore hazmat suits. There were no nurses, only guards with real guns. Guns that they pointed at you for even looking at them the wrong way. There were no counselors, no nice little group activities to make everyone feel all loved and safe. Things have changed, things have gotten better. You can’t see it, because you weren’t here in the beginning.”

Laura laughed dryly. “You’re the last person that I expected to stick up for them.”

Carmilla stopped her pacing. “I’m not defending what they do to us. I’m giving you some perspective.”

“Things aren’t getting better. Things are getting worse. You don’t go to Medical as much as the rest of us do. You don’t know what they’re doing in there.” Laura huffed. “You’re the one that needs a new perspective.”

“I know what they’re doing. I can see what they’re doing. I see it everywhere. I see it when Betty can’t look people in the eyes, I see it when the guards have to carry kids back to their beds, I see it when people collapse in group, when the Over Thirties turn into substitute parents for the orphaned children. I see all of it just fine.”

“Then how can you stand there and say it’s getting better?”

Carmilla threw her hands up. “The suffering is getting worse because the cure is getting closer.”

Laura shook her head. “They’re speeding things up because they’re desperate, not because they’re close to the cure.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Neither do you.”

They stared at each other, neither quite sure why they were arguing.

“I can’t lose anyone else.” Carmilla took a step forward, her hand interlacing with Laura’s as they locked eyes.

“You don’t have to lose me.” Laura could barely get the words out. A storm of emotions was battling it out inside of her.

“If you try to run…” Carmilla tightly closed her eyes. “They’ll kill you for it.”

“They’ll kill me anyway.” Laura rested her forehead against Carmilla’s. “By experiment, by disease…maybe even from just losing my sanity. Doesn’t matter how. The fact still remains.”

“I’ll talk to my mother.” Carmilla offered in a pained voice. “I can ask her about the research. I can get some information.”

“Would she even tell you anything useful?” Laura asked.

Carmilla opened her eyes, her gaze falling to Laura’s lips. “I don’t know. I’d rather set myself on fire than see her, but I can’t let you walk out of here without trying to stop you.”
Laura bit her lip. “You can’t say things like that to me. You’re not the only one trying not to fall in love over here, you know.”

Carmilla kissed her. It was rough and hot, and it was everything that Laura needed. In the heat of the moment, everything faded from mind. There was no death, no Silas, no escape plans, no disease, no experiments, no doctors. There was only desire. They existed outside of reality. They pushed their surroundings away, and focused solely on each other.

Carmilla pulled away, her face still close to Laura’s. “I’m having a hard time resisting you.”

“Hadn’t noticed.” Laura breathed. Their lips crashed together again. Carmilla’s hands entangled in Laura’s hair, and Laura placed her own hands on Carmilla’s hips so that she could pull their bodies even closer together.

Kissing Carmilla was fun. It was new and exciting. It was dangerous. It was a selfish indulgence. It was wrong in so many ways. She knew that she should end things where they were, before it was too late. But she couldn’t stop. And neither could Carmilla. Because with everything horrible that was going on around them, being so close and intimate together was like finding a light in the dark. She was drawn to it. She craved it. She couldn’t look away from it. She didn’t have the strength to extinguish it. She was a slave to the light, to the girl, to the feeling of Carmilla’s soft lips.

And that’s when she realized that it was already too late.

That night, Laura didn’t climb into Carmilla’s bed at lights out. She stayed in her own, determined to use what little willpower she had left. Halfway through the night, she awoke from a nightmare in a shrieking panic. Without a word, Carmilla slid into her bed and held her until the imaginary images of her father didn’t feel so real.

That was the new pattern. They would start the night in different beds, until one of them couldn’t handle the loneliness anymore. They held out on the kissing, though. It was both easier and harder than Laura thought it would be to fight the urge. Whenever they found themselves too close, or saw that one of their resolves was faltering, they would break apart and take a few moments alone to collect themselves. It was a taxing strategy, but it was working. For now, at least. Laura wasn’t entirely sure how much longer she could manage it.

During the second weekend of September, the escape plan snuck its way back into a group discussion at dinner. The tension was thick amongst those at the table.

Perry nervously fidgeted with her fork. “It’s not the right time.”

“Then when is the right time?” Danny, who looked as if she hadn’t slept in days, pushed her tray of food away from her. “After we’re dead? I’m tired of being injected with stuff that I can’t even pronounce. I’m tired of them taking blood samples and rubbing weird creams on my skin and hooking me up to machines that fry our brains.”

“What good are we out there on our own? We’re being useful here!” Perry hissed.

“We’re being used here.” Danny corrected.

“Lower your voices.” Kirsch warned. He scanned the cafeteria. Two guards were posted across the way at the exit. “We’ve got company.”

“That’s new.” LaFontaine sighed. “Not all that surprising, but new.”

“If I have to spend another month in here…” Danny trailed off.
Perry scoffed. “If you’re out in the wilderness when they find the cure, you’ll still be a fugitive.”

“At least I’ll be free.” Danny’s voice cracked. “What happened in my last checkup...I won’t go through that again.”

“Big needle? Feels like your arm is being sawed off?” Kirsch asked knowingly. “Yeah, me too.”

Danny looked around at the others. “I’m leaving with or without the rest of you.”

LaFontaine groaned. “All or nothing, that was the agreement.”

“I can’t wait for that.” Danny gestured to Perry. “Some of us are never going to make up our minds.”

“My mind is perfectly made up.” Perry sat up straighter. “I’m not going. I refuse to consider it.”

“You see?” Danny looked back to LaFontaine.

“I’m in.” All eyes turned to Laura. “I’ll go.”

“You’re in?” LaFontaine asked, surprised. “What made you change your mind?”

“Perspective.” Laura shrugged. “I’m with Danny and Kirsch, I don’t want to die in here. I’d rather take my chances on the outside.”

“Laura, you’ll be a fugitive.” Perry reminded. “Breaking quarantine is a serious offense. They won’t take you back lightly. After the cure, they’ll still punish you for it.”

“What does it matter?” Laura questioned. “The futures that we had planned for ourselves are over. We’re not getting them. Perry, you’re not going to travel to Eastern Europe. I’m not going to be a journalist. Kirsch isn’t going to see his boyfriend again. LaF isn’t going to be a bioengineer. Danny isn’t going to break the world record for sleeping with most middle-aged women in a single lifetime.”

“Hey!” Danny exclaimed. She paused, shrugged, and let it go. “Laura’s right, guys. Our old lives are over. We can’t keep holding on to them.”

Kirsch played with his food. “We’ll need a new plan. Now that Perry’s out.”

“The plan can stay.” Perry declared. “I’ll still help you get out.”

LaFontaine slammed down their spoon. “All or nothing. We agreed on that.”

Danny shook her head. “All or nothing isn’t going to happen.”

“Then I’m staying, too.” LaFontaine placed a hand on Perry’s shoulder. “Because friends don’t leave friends behind.”

Laura glanced across the cafeteria at Carmilla. She was sitting alone at her table, book in hand. The others continued arguing back and forth, but Laura’s attention remained on her roommate.

*Friends don’t leave friends behind.* The words replayed themselves over and over in her head while she watched Carmilla read. Were they friends? They were something, that much was undeniable, but friends? She liked to think they were.

Later that night, when they were curled up together in Carmilla’s bed, Laura asked her about it.
Carmilla took her time in responding. “I suppose we are.”

“You’re my best friend.” Laura blurted. She wasn’t sure why she said it. Even as Carmilla physically recoiled, she was still trying to figure out why she’d done it.

“Best friend, huh?” Carmilla asked, scooting away from her.

Laura rolled onto her side so that they were facing each other. “Sorry, it kind of slipped out. But I mean it. You know things about me that I’ve never told anyone else before. That’s kind of ‘best friend’ territory.”

Carmilla licked her lips. “Can you really be best friends with someone you spend all day trying not to kiss?”

Laura swallowed hard. The temperature was rising along with her frustration. “Don’t talk about kissing.”

“Sorry.” She muttered, her eyes on Laura’s lips.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

“You’re awfully bossy tonight.”

“Well, you’re making this whole not kissing thing hard to do.”

“This doesn’t really sound like a conversation that two best friends have.”

“So we’re best friends?” Laura was surprised at herself when she smiled.

Carmilla matched her smile. “I guess we are.”

“Best friends that really…” Laura felt Carmilla moving closer to her. “Really…” Their faces were nearly touching, their lips mere inches apart. “Really want to tear each other’s clothes off.”

Carmilla groaned, or whined, or made a noise of general displeasure that pulled them from the moment. She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. She took a few calming breaths before asking, “Why are we doing this to ourselves?”

Laura didn’t have an answer for her. Not a good one, not one that would suffice. Not one that would bring back the moment or soothe their troubles or fix anything. An answer would do more harm than good, so she said nothing. In the silence that followed, Laura came to understand something important.

She realized that there was, in fact, an answer to Carmilla’s question. At first she’d thought it was because they’d grown addicted to suffering. But that wasn’t it. No, they were torturing themselves with their would-be love affair because it was a bittersweet type of pain they could control. They were the ones doing the hurting this time, and it felt good.

Laura decided that if she was going to hurt, she wanted Carmilla’s love to be the reason why.

September passed by quickly. The nights with Carmilla were filled with flirting and cuddling, and the days with her friends were consumed with planning and detailed debates on the imminent escape. Danny and Kirsch led the charge, while Perry remained adamant about staying behind. LaFontaine grew increasingly conflicted, and with every passing night spent in Carmilla’s arms, so did Laura.
Laura didn’t tell Carmilla about the escape plan being green lighted. They hadn’t talked about her friends since the beginning of the month. She didn’t feel like fighting. Not with her. Despite knowing it was useless, she was still holding out hope that Carmilla would change her mind and go with them. Maybe with the right words, Laura could get Carmilla to see that leaving was the better choice. That leaving was the only choice they had.

On the last day of September, Laura decided to tell Carmilla the truth. She was going to leave with Danny and Kirsch, possibly with LaFontaine as well. They were going to escape Silas and flee the country. They were going to lay low for a while, maybe until after the cure had been found, then rejoin society. They’d change their names if they had to. They’d do whatever it took to survive.

She practiced the conversation in her head at lunch. She wanted to anticipate all of Carmilla’s arguments. She focused on the empty chair across from her while she ran through the possibilities. She was so wrapped up in her own thoughts, that she almost didn’t notice when Betty took a seat at the table.

LaFontaine grew pale. “Betty? What is it? What’s wrong?”

Laura looked around at the group’s apprehension. Did Betty know their plan? Had they been found out? Were they in trouble? Was she here to warn them? Would they all be spending the night in Medical? It wasn’t until Betty began talking that Laura realized someone was missing.

“I’m not supposed to tell you this, but I couldn’t keep it to myself. I came straight here as soon as I found out.” Betty lowered her voice. “It’s Perry. She’s been transferred to Infected.”
“This is stupid.”

“It’s not stupid.”

“Laura, this is stupid.”

“Carmilla, it’s not stupid.”

“You’re going to get caught.”

Laura scoffed and sarcastically threw out a phrase that had stuck with her since it’d left Carmilla’s mouth. “Pessimism looks bad on you, cutie.”

Carmilla stopped with a frustrated growl. Laura whirled around to face her. She was a step above Carmilla in the empty stairwell, which only served to make the tension between them even stranger. She wasn’t used to fighting with Carmilla, just as she wasn’t used to looking down while speaking with someone.

“I’m trying to help you.” Carmilla leaned against the wall. Though she looked calm and collected on the outside, Laura knew her well enough to see the small signs of distress cracking her composure.

“Stopping me isn’t helping me. It’s counterproductive.” Laura checked over the railing to ensure that they were still alone.

“You’re going to get caught.” She repeated. “Or worse, you’ll actually make it into the woods and get yourself shot.”

Laura tugged at the ID card around her neck. “Arguably a much better fate than dying as test subject number eight hundred and whatever.”

Carmilla smirked. It was forced and empty. “I should’ve seen this coming. I should’ve known better. You’re naïve and gullible. You’d probably run headfirst into a bear’s den if someone told you there was honey inside.”

“I know what I’m doing. I’m not a naïve little kid!” Her voice echoed throughout the stairwell, reminding the pair of roommates where they were. “I’m leaving. Tonight. With the others. It’s happening whether you like it or not. And I really want you to come with us—“

“I’d sooner claw out my own eyes than live in the wild with those children.” Carmilla sneered.

“You do realize that all of them are older than you are, right?” Laura let out an annoyed sigh. “See, you don’t even know anything about them. They’re good people. They don’t deserve to die in here.”

“I don’t care about them.” Carmilla hissed. “I only care about you.”

Laura’s defenses melted as she took in the broken face that stared up at her. “Come with us. Please, just…don’t let this be our last conversation.”

“This doesn’t have to be a goodbye.” Carmilla pushed away from the wall.
“If you come with us, it won’t be.” Laura knew that she was beginning to sound like a broken record, but the thought of leaving Carmilla behind was eating away at her. They still had so much to learn about each other. There was so much potential.

So Carmilla wasn’t the nicest person in the world and maybe she could be a little petty and distant at times, but she was Laura’s best friend. She was caring and romantic, even if she’d never admit to being either. She loved books and the stars and the way that Laura ranted about trivial things like Harry Potter and Doctor Who. Carmilla loved that Laura was a huge dork. And Laura loved that Carmilla loved that about her, because a girl that couldn’t sit through an hour long spiel about how effective a time turner would have been during the Battle of Hogwarts wasn’t really a girl that Laura wanted to be with.

Sidestepping past Laura, Carmilla began walking up the stairs again. “I’m tired of this. Do what you want, I won’t stop you.”

Laura chased after her, pointlessly repeating her pleas for Carmilla to join the escape party the whole trek the way back to their room. The hall lights flickered off just as the door was swinging shut behind them.

Laura pointed a finger at Carmilla and said, “And another thing—“

“Fuck it.” Carmilla interrupted before stepping closer and kissing her. The kiss was hot and wet, the result of months of tension, of longing stares, of repressed feelings. There were more kisses that followed, a fluid stream of them, as they worked together to back themselves further into the room. They hit a wall, Laura’s dresser, a nightstand, the window, and finally their little waltz found them beside Carmilla’s bed. They fell into it together.

Laura rolled on top of Carmilla so that one of the girl’s thighs was between her own. She wasted no time in moving her hips to build up friction. Carmilla moaned into her mouth. The sound shot straight through Laura, fueling her desire that much more. Laura’s speed increased as Carmilla’s hands moved up her sides, down her back, and over her ass. It was over the clothes touching, it was timid teenage sexuality in its finest form, but Laura had never been so turned on in all of her life.

She took Carmilla’s bottom lip into her mouth, running her tongue across it and sucking. Laura could feel Carmilla’s chest rise against her. Her lungs didn’t stop expanding until Laura released her lip. Carmilla held the air in while she stared up at Laura. Slowly, she exhaled. Laura slowed the movements of her hips. She trailed kisses down Carmilla’s jaw and neck. Carmilla leaned her head back, exposing more of her neck for Laura to reach. Laura had just begun kissing along her collar bone when Carmilla started to move her hips against Laura’s thigh. Things were heating up. Things were getting good. Things were definitely going somewhere.

The door to Room 307 opened with little noise, but the shocked gasp that flew out of Danny’s mouth was loud enough to pull the two roommates apart. Laura shot out of Carmilla’s bed, her fists raised as she readied to defend herself.

“Wow, okay.” Danny tried to control her amusement.

“What are you doing in here?” Carmilla glared menacingly at Danny from the bed. Her face was flushed red, but Laura had a feeling it wasn’t from being walked in on.

Danny glanced between the pair of roommates. “She didn’t tell you?”

Laura ran a hand through her hair, halfheartedly attempting to fix the mess it had become. “I did. I just…lost track of time.”
“Well, it’s time.” Danny turned to face the dark hallway. She harshly whispered, “Keep it down out there!”

Laura could hear the voices of LaFontaine and Kirsch whispering back a few apologies. She turned to Carmilla. “Come with us.”

“Laura…” Carmilla stood, not bothering to keep an appropriate distance from her anymore.

“Please.” Laura begged. A weak smile touched her lips. “I really like you, okay? And I don’t want to say goodbye.”

Carmilla turned to Danny. “Do you mind?”

Danny, consumed with the anxiety, tensely shrugged. “Oh, yeah, I’ll just give you two a minute alone. Don’t worry about us, we’ll just sit in the hall after lights out and wait. It’s not like we could get caught or anything.”

“Danny.” Laura pleaded.

The tall redhead threw up her hands. “Okay, okay. Just remember that we’re on a tight schedule here.”

They waited until Danny had slipped out of the room to look at each other again. Laura rushed into Carmilla’s arms as she bit back the urge to cry.

“I don’t know what I’ll do without you.” She admitted. Carmilla had been her rock, her support, her crutch.

But maybe it was time she learned how to stand on her own again.

Carmilla kissed her shoulder. “If you’re expecting me to chase after you in a grand gesture of my undying love, prepare to be disappointed.”

“I know you’re not coming.” Laura pulled back enough so that she could see Carmilla’s face. “I know how it is. I can’t stay, and you won’t leave.”

Carmilla deprecatingly laughed. “We were always destined to be another failed love story. At least this way we have some say in how it ends.”

“Is that why you’re staying?” Her arms fell to her sides as she stepped out of Carmilla’s embrace.

“I’m staying for the same reason you’re leaving. We’ve both weighed our odds of survival. My best shot at a normal life is sticking it out in here. Your chances are greater on the outside.”

Carmilla shrugged. “I was being selfish, asking you to stay for me. I can admit that. And I can admit that I’m scared for you. Scared you won’t make it out, scared you’ll get caught.”

“Carm—“

“You should go.”

“Carm, I—“

“You should go.” She repeated. “You don’t have much time. The night shift will be taking over any minute. If you’re going, it needs to be now.”

Laura stumbled over her words as she tried to form a complete sentence. “I…but you…and
“There’s no ‘we’ here.” Carmilla reminded her.

Laura nodded. She could fall apart later, after she was far away from Silas. Now was not the time to let her emotions get the best of her. “In another life.”

“In another life.” Carmilla agreed. It was the closest to saying ‘I love you’ that they’d ever been.

Moving quickly, Laura scrambled around the room to grab what she needed. Bringing her entire duffel bag full of belongings would’ve been too much to carry, so she had to settle for the clothes on her back and what she could fit into her pockets. She made sure to get the locket that her father had given her as a high school graduation present and the family portrait from the frame on her nightstand. She ran her finger across the photo, across the smiles of her parents. She wasn’t just leaving for herself. She was leaving for them. She was going to survive for them.

After rifling through her nightstand, Carmilla held out something for Laura to take. “Use this. I stole it from that counselor’s room I stayed in a few months ago.”

Laura unfolded the paper to reveal a small, detailed map of the forest surrounding Silas. She gave Carmilla an incredulous look. “You had a map this whole time?”

Carmilla crossed her arms. “So I’m not very good at sharing. Whatever.” Carmilla stared at the ground. “It’s weird. I know this is goodbye, but…it still doesn’t feel like one.”

Despite everything, Laura smiled. She tucked the map into her back pocket and pulled off her ID card. She handed it to Carmilla. “You should keep this.”

“And what would I do with this?” Carmilla asked, taking the ID card and examining the picture on it.

Laura half-shrugged. “Stare at longingly it as you pine after the girl that got away?”

She smirked. “Yeah. That sounds about right.”

A soft knock sounded on the door, and they knew that their time was up. Laura rushed forward and pressed a kiss against Carmilla’s lips. They leaned into each other, letting the kiss linger for a moment longer. Laura walked to the door and opened it. The light from their room poured out into the hallway, blinding Danny, LaFontaine, and Kirsch.

“I’m sorry, really.” Danny whispered, shielding her eyes from the light. “But we have to go. Now.”

“I know.” Laura said before turning back to Carmilla. She felt the pressure of all eyes being on her, but she didn’t care. “Maybe someday we’ll meet again.”

Carmilla nodded sullenly. “Maybe.”

Danny, LaFontaine, and Kirsch headed down the hallway, and Laura quietly followed. When Carmilla shut the door to her room, Laura’s world was consumed by darkness.

A numbness filled her body. Her limbs felt heavy, but the rest of her felt weightless. Her sense of reality grew fuzzy. How long had she been walking down the hall? Had she missed her turn? In the back of her mind, she knew something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong. She tried to open her mouth to call for help, but her lips were glued together. Her jaw refused to move. Her head bobbed back and forth and her heart pounded in her chest. Something was wrong. Something
was wrong. Something was wrong. The words played on a loop in her head as she tried to get her limbs moving the way they should. She felt sluggish. She felt weak. A light sparked at the end of the hall. She floated to it. She reached out for it. She tried to grab it.

Laura’s eyes flew open as a burst of pain shot into her arm. She’d barely gotten a scream out when reality hit her. Two nurses held her in place on an examination table while Dr. Vordenburg pushed a large needle deeper into her skin. Satisfied with the placement, Dr. Vordenburg pushed down on the syringe pump and injected a thick cream-colored liquid into a vein of her arm. As the contents of the syringe emptied, Laura started seeing double. Two giant needles, two emotionless doctors, four nurses holding her still. And as the doctor removed the syringe from her arm, Laura wasn’t seeing anything at all.

The next time she awoke from the darkness was much nicer. It was a slow, gentle rise to consciousness. Her eyes opened and she noticed that Carmilla was in the bed next to hers. She smiled at the sight. Despite the unflattering fluorescent lighting and hospital gown, Carmilla still looked lovely.

Laura pushed herself up, nearly tumbling out of her bed as she did. She frantically looked around. They were in a long horizontal room. Nothing but beds and monitors lined the walls. In the bed to her left was Carmilla, in the bed to her right was Danny, and in the bed across the aisle from her was Kirsch.

“Easy, tiger.” Carmilla crooned from her bed when Laura made like she was going to stand.

It was then that Laura noticed the IV drip hooked into her arm. She hoarsely asked, “What happened?” “Are we…” Her chest heaved as she began hyperventilating. “Are we in Infected?”

“Bingo.” Carmilla sighed.

“What happened?” Laura asked, breathless as she broke out in a cold sweat.

Kirsch let out an empty laugh. “Uh, well, it appears that we majorly fucked up.” He pointed to Carmilla. “And it would appear that we brought everyone down with us.”

“We didn’t do this.” Danny sat up so that she could glare over Laura at Carmilla. “She did this. She ratted us out!”

Carmilla rolled her eyes. “Here we go again. I told you before, Sasquatch, I didn’t do anything.”

“You’re the only other person who knew!” Danny barked, gaining the attention of a few neighboring beds. Laura didn’t recognize any the faces that curiously looked her over.

“Could you two just chill out?” Kirsch exclaimed. “Every day it’s the same damn argument. Give it a rest already.”

Carmilla scoffed. “Stay out of it dudebro.”

Danny glared even harder. “Don’t tell him what to do!”

Laura zoned out as the bickering continued. She looked around the long room and counted a total of eighty beds. A good ten beds to her right, Laura could see LaFontaine’s red hair and Perry’s curls. LaFontaine noticed Laura looking and waved. When Perry turned to see who they were waving at, Laura felt sick to her stomach. Perry’s eyes were sunken in and her skin was a sickly pale yellow. She was hooked up to an IV drip like the rest of them, only hers was a different color. Laura followed her own IV drip up to the bag of fluid it was attached to. Unlike the pink liquid in
Perry’s, Laura’s was clear.

“Are we sick?” Laura asked, looking between Danny, Kirsch, and Carmilla. “Is that why we’re in here?”

“We got caught.” Danny answered. “Because someone narked on us. That’s why we’re in here.”

“We’re not sick.” Kirsch glanced down the rows at Perry. “At least, not all of us.”

“You’re healthy.” Carmilla reassured her.

Laura was relieved, but far from content. “If we’re healthy, why did they put us in here with the Infected?”

“Because you are a risk.” The sudden appearance of a doctor in the doorway to Kirsch’s left startled Laura and the others. The doctor’s thick accent only increased her intimidating demeanor. “And this is where we contain risks.” Laura hadn’t realized how loud the chatter in the room had been until she was faced with the heart-pounding silence that resulted from the doctor’s arrival. With a smile, the doctor made her way over to Laura’s bed. “I’m glad to see that you are awake, Laura. I can finally introduce myself to you. My name is Dr. Klaus.”

“You know my name?” Laura questioned uneasily. In a place treating hundreds of Infected people, being known by name wasn’t a good sign.

“Of course, child. I know the names of all my patients.” She answered.

Laura nervously laughed. “Must be a lot of names to keep up with.”

“Oh, it’s not too much.” Dr. Klaus scanned the room. “After all, I see my patients every day. It’s good to know your names.”

“So you’re the doctor for this floor?” Laura could see the growing discomfort of those around her.

“My dear…” Dr. Klaus gestured to the room. “This is the only floor for the sick.”

“This is it?” Laura asked, shocked. “This one room holds all of the Infected people at Silas?”

“And a few extra, such as yourself and your colorful friends.” Dr. Klaus snickered.

“Colorful?” Danny snapped. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Your language, my little Lebkuchen, it really is quite atrocious.” Dr. Klaus tsked. “We mustn’t have that. No, that is not acceptable at all.” She turned back to Laura. “Surely Danny would have learned by now. There is no place for vulgarity here. Ah, surprises do happen every day I suppose. You’ll have to excuse me, dear. The operating room is calling to me.” She smiled sadistically at Danny. “It is so nice to have healthy patients here again. I’ll be back soon, sweet girl.”

Dr. Klaus skipped out of the doorway she’d entered from. The door shut behind her with an echoing click, and the chatter resumed.

“Danny!” Kirsch groaned. “You know she hates when people talk back to her.”

“What’s she going to do?” Laura asked before thinking of an equally important question. “How long have we been here?”

“A week.” Carmilla answered nonchalantly.
“A week?” Laura repeated. “I was asleep for a whole week?”

“Just be glad you woke up at all.” Danny replied. “They say SJ’s been in a coma since she got here.”

“She’s in a coma?” Laura’s face fell. With all the troubles of planning an escape and the drama of dealing with her feelings for Carmilla, Laura had completely forgotten about SJ. Guilt sunk her heart like an anchor.

“We can barely see her from here.” Kirsch craned his neck to look across the ward. “But she’s down there.” He waved to someone with a goofy smile. “Grandma Kirsch is in the bed next to her.”

“Oh my god!” Laura sat up straighter and followed his line of sight. “Our family members are here.”

“Laura…” Danny frowned. “Your dad, he’s…he’s not here.”

“Oh.” Laura knew he wouldn’t be, she’d already mourned for him, but the reality slapped her in the face all the same. She looked at the IV drip again. “Are we allowed to get out of bed?”

Carmilla was the first to answer. “They take us into the bathrooms every few hours. And if we’re good little pets, sometimes they take us on a walk through the building. Supervised, of course. Can’t have any of us running off and then blaming others when they get caught.”

Danny opened her mouth to throw out an insult, but was silenced when the door opened and a bed was wheeled in. The room was quiet enough to hear the wheels squeak as Dr. Klaus and an assistant placed the bed into a vacant spot. Laura nearly didn’t recognize the blonde girl in the bed without her counselor uniform on.

“Now.” Dr. Klaus turned to smile at Danny. “You’ll be coming with us.”

No one uttered a word as Dr. Klaus and her assistant readied Danny for relocation. They wheeled her out of the room to no one’s protest. The chatter picked up once they were gone.

Later that night, after Danny had returned from Dr. Klaus’s operating room with a sick stomach and sore back, Laura asked for every detail of how their escape plan had gone awry. Kirsch retold the story of how they’d gone down to cafeteria, snuck inside, slipped into the kitchens, traveled down the garbage chute, and made it all the way to the fence before getting a dozen loaded guns pointed at them. Danny remained confident that the guards had been tipped off by Carmilla, and Carmilla remained confident that Danny was full of shit.

“Then why are you in here?” Danny demanded to know.

“For helping you morons escape.” Carmilla answered, growing angrier with every accusation. “They knew I gave Laura the stolen map. It was watermarked with the counselor’s name.”

“Why is Betty here?” Laura asked quietly, grabbing their attention.

Carmilla glanced at the ex-counselor a few beds away from them. “They probably came asking questions. And knowing her, she probably cracked under the pressure.”

Laura was done asking questions after that. She’d had enough bad news for one day.

Life in Infected was rough. The food was disgusting, the overpowering smell of body odor was
even worse, and the lack of privacy was mortifying. They were restricted to their beds unless under the careful watch of certified Silas personnel. An armed guard escorted them in groups to the bathrooms. There were no doors on the toilet stalls, and no privacy walls in the showers. They weren’t given soap or shampoo, just a few minutes’ worth of cold water to stand under.

Dr. Klaus and her collection of assistants wheeled them in and out of the operating room with little regard to how often they were selected. There was no routine checkup schedule, there was only the childlike enthusiasm of Dr. Klaus. Mostly, the healthy were used to take samples from. A tissue sample here, a little bone marrow over there, some blood plasma all around. It left them weak and defenseless. By the end of her first conscious week in Infected, Laura didn’t even care about the degrading showers or the horrible food or the time spent in Dr. Klaus’s operating room. She was exhausted, completely wiped out, and she spent the majority of her time sleeping.

The scariest part of it all was what happened to Betty. Slowly, as the month progressed, the once beloved counselor turned into a completely different person. With every trip to Dr. Klaus’s OR, Betty grew colder, more judgmental, and unreservedly rude. She whined and complained about everything, to the point that Carmilla and Danny would occasionally team up to yell at her together.

It was all just a surreal and excruciatingly long nightmare.

By the end of October, Laura almost couldn’t stand on her own. Her muscles had grown too weak, and her determination to push through the pain had dropped to astoundingly low levels. Sharing a living space with actual Infected people, watching them deteriorate to nothing but skin and bones, crushed her spirit. She’d had to endure watching Kirsch lose his grandmother, endure seeing Perry wither away before her eyes, endure witnessing a candid close-up of what The Bite was truly capable of. She’d endured thus far, but she wasn’t sure just how much longer she could keep enduring.

Somewhere around Halloween, honestly Laura had begun to lose track of the days, came the end to Laura’s last sliver of hope. When Dr. Klaus strolled into the Infected ward that morning, she had an extra skip to her step and a smile plastered across her face. Her assistant trailed behind her with an IV bag of pink liquid, the same color as the one hooked up to Perry and the other Infected. Together, Dr. Klaus and her assistant replaced a clear fluid bag with the new pink one. Laura’s eyes followed the tube all the way down to where it was taped into Carmilla’s arm.

As Dr. Klaus and her assistant left, Carmilla finally looked at Laura. “Well…” She sighed. “This sucks.”
Laura rolled onto her side. She’d been tossing and turning all night, unable to find a comfortable position. She peeked through the dim lighting at the bed to her left. Even in sleep, Carmilla looked like she was in pain. Laura found herself yearning for the months of comfort they’d had before getting themselves locked up in the Infected ward. She missed the comfortable beds, the hot showers, the good food, the freedom, and, most of all, she missed being around healthy people.

Being surrounded by sickness was horrible. She’d lost count of how many Infected people she’d seen die. Watching them grow weak, watching them seize and convulse, watching them lie still, watching the others carry on like it was just another day, was all too much for her. She’d grown numb to the death, numb to the pain. She was beginning to accept that this was the end of the line for them all.

When morning came, Dr. Klaus made her first appearance of the day. She’d become increasingly more cheerful with each visit to the Infected ward that she made.

“Good morning, dears!” She greeted to the handful of patients that were conscious enough to hear. “We have a very special visitor with us today.”

Laura’s interest was caught. No one ever visited the Infected.

A very tall and very intimidating woman entered through the door behind Dr. Klaus. The visitor’s heels clicked against the floor as she neared Carmilla’s bed.

“Carmilla.” The woman nodded. Everything about her seemed so clean and professional, from the business attire to the pursed lips.

“Mother.” Carmilla coldly greeted back.

“How are you feeling?” The Director glanced to the bag of pink fluid attached to her daughter’s IV drip.

“Fantastic.” Carmilla sneered. Not even battling a deadly infectious disease could keep her sarcasm at bay.

“How wonderful to hear.” The Director pressed on. “I’m sure Dr. Klaus will be taking very good care of you.”

Dr. Klaus eagerly stepped forward. “Oh, yes, Miss Director, of course!”

Ignoring the enthusiastic doctor, the Director stepped even closer to Carmilla’s bed. She hovered over the side and looked down at her daughter with a blank expression. Aside from the fair skin and dark eyes, nothing about the woman resembled Carmilla. Emotionless, she said, “You’ll thank me someday.”

Laura expected Carmilla to throw out a snarky reply, but the girl said nothing. Carmilla silently watched her mother back away and exit the room. Even after the door had shut behind her, the clicking of her heels could still be heard.

Dr. Klaus looked to Carmilla and smiled. “Oh, what fun we will have together, little bird.”

That afternoon, an assistant came to transfer Carmilla from the Infected ward. The space her bed
had occupied remained empty for the rest of the day. When it came time for lights out in the room, Laura’s anxiety had reached new heights. There’d been a few too many visits from Klaus’s assistants for her to open a discussion about Carmilla’s absence during the day, but she made her concern known once the Infected ward was locked up for the night.

“What could be taking so long?” Laura asked, just loud enough for those around her to hear. She stared through the dark at the ceiling tiles while she waited for someone to answer. She’d counted the tiles a million times over. Thirty-six of them showed discolored signs of water damage, four of them had specks of dried blood, and twelve of them held air vents.

Danny was the first to speak. “She’s probably off getting the cure.”

“There is no cure.” Kirsch muttered, defeated.

“Her mother is the Director.” Danny sounded exhausted like the rest of them, but even more than that she sounded angry. The fire to Laura’s rage had burned out long ago, but Danny’s had never faltered. It was almost as if staying angry was the only thing keeping the girl going anymore.

“So what?” Kirsch scoffed. “It’s not like she’s got the cure locked up in her office.”

“She could.” Danny replied. “They could’ve had the cure this whole time.”

From further down the row, LaFontaine said, “I don’t think Perry’s breathing.”

Laura and Danny sat up in their beds. In a frantic rush, Danny ripped the IV drip from her arm and tossed it aside. She threw the thin bed sheet back and moved to her feet. She wobbled down the row until she reached Perry’s bed. Following Danny’s lead, Laura kicked off her sheet and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She tried to wheel her IV bag with her, but it squeaked too much to make the trip. Biting her tongue, she plucked the drip from her arm. She hurried down the row to reach the others.

Danny stood between LaFontaine and Perry’s beds with her ear pressed against Perry’s chest.

“Is she breathing?” LaFontaine asked, hanging halfway out of their bed.

“Shh!” Danny snapped, listening for a few moments longer. “Her heartbeat is weak, but it’s there. I don’t know if she’ll make it through the night if we don’t do something.”

“Let’s get Dr. Klaus.” Laura suggested. “Or one of her assistants.”

“The doors are locked and we don’t even know where to go—” Abruptly, Danny stumbled backward and fell on to her butt. She brought a hand up to her head and winced. “Ouch. Okay, I feel like my head is about to split open.”

“We have to do something.” Laura looked around for ideas but was only met with the depressingly hopeless faces of the Infected.

An old man nearby rolled on to his side and said, “There’s no use getting yourself into trouble trying to save a girl who’s already dead.”

Surprisingly, Laura felt anger bubbling inside of her. “No! We are not giving up. There has to be something that we can do.”

From the ground, Danny pointed to the ceiling. Laura followed her gesture until her eyes landed on an air vent.
LaFontaine shook their head. “I would advise against that plan.”

Laura ignored the warning. “I can’t reach it on my own.”

With shaky arms, Danny pulled herself up to her knees. “Get on my shoulders.”

LaFontaine watched the pair of friends with wide eyes. “Air ducts aren’t built to hold people! This is going to go horribly wrong.”

Laura climbed onto Danny’s shoulders. With a loud grunt, Danny pushed up to her feet. She planted her palms against the wall between Perry and LaFontaine’s beds to steady herself.

“Laura…” She grunted. “I don’t know how long I can stand like this.”

“Got it.” Laura was already reaching for the air vent. She pulled and pushed but the vent refused to budge. “It’s screwed on. I’ll need something to take these screws out.”

“Oh, yeah, let me just grab my handy dandy screwdriver.” Danny grumbled from beneath her.

LaFontaine rolled out of their bed, landing in an awkward half-crouch. “Guys, you’ll have better luck just trying to unlock the door.”

Laura slipped her fingers into the vent and pulled down again. The metal edges cut into her skin, but she blocked out the pain. With gritted teeth, she pulled and pulled until she felt her own weight lifting from Danny’s shoulders. A loud metallic bang echoed throughout the room, followed closely by the thud of bodies hitting the floor. Laura, Danny, and LaFontaine groaned in unison as the pain of their impromptu dogpile hit them. Laura, Danny, and LaFontaine groaned in unison as the pain of their impromptu dogpile hit them. Laura went to rub the sting on her shoulder, which would most definitely be bruised in the morning, but found that her fingers were still lodged into the vent. She held it up with a victorious smile before rushing back up to her feet. dizzy from standing up a tad too fast, she pointed to the open hole in the ceiling. “Get me back up there.”

Danny groaned again. “I think I have a concussion.”

LaFontaine weakly attempted to push Danny off of their legs. “Oh yeah? Next time try having two people fall on you.”

Danny rolled her eyes. “Don’t be such a baby.”

LaFontaine dropped their attempts to move. “Don’t be such an ass.”

“Hey!” Laura snapped her fingers at them before gesturing up to the hole again. “I’m not getting up there on my own. Do you want to save Perry or not?”

“What are you even going to do?” LaFontaine asked, grimacing as Danny rolled off of their legs.

“I don’t know.” Laura admitted before climbing atop Danny’s shoulders again. “But I’m not going to just sit in here and do nothing.”

Danny nearly fell over as she tried to get back to her feet with Laura’s added weight. After a few failed attempts, it was evident that she’d exhausted all of her strength getting Laura up the first time. Luckily, help arrived. Kirsch, whose forearm still had a trickle of blood on it from where he’d removed his IV drip, helped Danny get to her feet. Together, Danny and Kirsch lifted Laura into the open space.

“Can you see anything?” Kirsch asked.
“It’s dark.” Laura’s hand shot up to cover her mouth as the sound of her voice loudly reverberated throughout the metal passageway. Each movement of her knees and hands sent out another metallic clang.

“Stay safe.” Danny pleaded as Laura stuck a quick thumbs-up through the opening.

She travelled slowly in a direction that she assumed would take her away from the Infected ward. Her heart pounded and her hands grew sweaty against the cold metal. It was a tight squeeze, even for someone as small as her.

Every ten or so feet she came across a vent that she carefully crossed over. LaFontaine’s warning about air ducts not being made to hold people was a constant worry in the back of her mind. Considering that she’d already established how her body weight was more than enough to break the vents, she wasn’t taking any chances.

She peeked through the vents as she took her time crossing them. The halls and rooms below were dark, but she could make out certain features. After what felt like hours of crawling, she finally found Dr. Klaus’s operating room. It was hard to see through the slits of the air vent, but the room appeared to be empty. Carefully, she flipped herself over and lowered her body onto the vent. It creaked dangerously loud as the cheap screws failed to endure her weight. It broke off and fell to the floor below with an echoing clang.

With great effort, Laura lowered herself out of the open hole. With a white-knuckled grip and burning forearms, she swung herself down to the operating table. Barely landing on her feet, she stumbled off and sat on the floor to catch her breath. She was sweating from head to toe, her heart was racing, and her muscles were ready to give out on her. She hadn’t exerted so much energy in weeks.

Incoming footsteps from the hall alerted her to the present danger at hand. Grabbing the broken vent, she crawled on sore knees to a dusty corner behind a tall medical cabinet. In the attempt to control her erratic breathing, Laura lifted a shaky palm to cover her mouth and nose. The door to the operating room opened, and Klaus and an assistant walked in. The two Silas employees were out of view, but Laura could hear their conversation perfectly fine.

“It really is exciting.” Klaus gushed. “We are on the brink of true discovery. The history books shall remember us.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Did you transcribe today’s results, dear?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Excellent. Oh, goodness me, look at the time. We must get some rest. Tomorrow is a big day, after all. We shall administer the cleansing antiserum to beds one through ten as planned. Remember, if any of the patients reject the antibodies, I want it recorded immediately.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“We’ll begin trials on Karnstein’s daughter in the morning as well.” She paused, and Laura feared that the open air vent in the ceiling had been noticed. “And darling, do put in that formal request to the board for cleaning supplies. The smell of this place is just horrendous.”

“Yes, Doctor.”
They left, and the room grew eerily quiet. Laura released the breath she’d held and bit back the urge to vomit. Just the sound of Klaus’s voice had been enough to trigger a flood of painful memories. Laura crawled out of her hiding place and stared up at the operating table. She’d been on that table more times than she cared to remember.

“Serum.” Laura muttered as her feet numbly carried her in circles. She searched all over, with no idea of what she was looking for, but only found papers and medical tools. She was so wrapped up in rummaging through drawers and cabinets that she failed to notice the operating room door open.

“What are you doing?”

Laura whipped around to see Klaus’s assistant in the doorway. “I…um…”

“You won’t find it in here.” The assistant checked the hall outside. “It’s locked in a freezer. You can’t get in without the proper security clearance. I can get you there, but only if we hurry.”

Laura couldn’t help but be suspicious. “Why do you want to help me?”

The assistant shook her head. “There’s no time for questions. We either move now or we don’t go at all.”

“Can I at least know your name?” Laura asked before holding up the broken air vent in her hand. “And you wouldn’t happen to have any duct tape, would you?”

“I’ll take care of that later.” The assistant took the vent from her and placed it on the operating table. “And my name is Natalie.”

“Thank you.” Laura released a sigh of relief.

“You won’t be thanking me if Klaus or a guard catches us.”

“What would they do?”

“Let’s hope we never have to find out. Quickly, this way.” Natalie beckoned for Laura to follow her. They traveled out of the room and down a long hallway. The building was impressively larger on the inside than Laura had ever imagined.

As they reached a locked door, Laura asked, “Why are there no security cameras?”

“No cameras, no evidence.” Natalie replied offhandedly as she swiped her ID card. They entered a large walk-in freezer. Dozens of fully stocked shelves lined the walls. Laura wrapped her arms around herself, feeling very inadequately dressed in her thin hospital gown.

Natalie quickly plucked a tube of amber liquid from a container and handed it to Laura. “It has to be ingested. All of it. This much should hold you over until you can get more.”

“It’s not for me.” Laura stared at the vial. “It’s for my friend Perry. She’s barely holding on.”

“Have her drink this.” Natalie instructed, already pushing Laura out of the room.

“Wait, I need more.” Laura begged. “There are others who need help.”

“They’ll have to wait their turn. There isn’t enough to go around yet. Those who have been here the longest will be treated first.”

“So this is the cure?” Laura held up with vial. “I’m holding the cure?”
Natalie shut the door behind them and lowered her voice. “It’s useless on its own. You’ll need multiple doses over a set period of time. Recovery will be different for everyone. Some people reject the antibodies altogether. But, yes, it’s the closest thing to a true cure that we’ve received.”

“Received?” Laura questioned as they walked. “So Klaus didn’t make this?”

Natalie shuddered. “Klaus has other interests.”

Laura swallowed hard. “What has she been doing to us?”

Natalie stopped. “Listen, things are complicated here. Very complicated. In the grand scheme of things, Silas is making incredible progress. We’ve extended the duration that patients are expected to live while Infected. We’ve collected massive amounts of data. Data that researchers all over the world are using. We’ve learned so much through trial and error. We’re so close to a true cure, so close to a world free of The Bite.”

“But?” Laura proposed.

Natalie glanced around the empty hall. “But not everyone at Silas is here for the same reason.”

“It’s Klaus, isn’t it?” Laura guessed. “She’s up to something?”

“You have no idea what she’s capable of.” Natalie pulled at Laura’s elbow to get them moving again.

“Where’s Carmilla?” Laura asked quickly as they neared the hall containing the bathrooms and showers.

Natalie glanced at her apprehensively. “Are you friends with her?”

“Something like that.” Laura answered.

“Don’t let Klaus know that.”

“Why not? Hey, wait, what’s going on?”

Natalie stopped as they reached the door to the Infected ward. “There’s nothing that either of us can do for your friend.”

Laura looked at the vial. “Is she at least getting the cure?”

Natalie unlocked the door and pulled it open for Laura. “Something like that.”

The night was long. After Laura had returned and forced the amber liquid down Perry’s throat, she’d collapsed on the hard floor. Danny and Kirsch had to carry Laura to her bed. They inserted the IV drip into her arm, tied the broken air vent back into place with a few shreds of torn up fabric from Danny’s bed sheet, and made sure that Perry was doing okay before finally returning to their own beds.

Despite her state of physical exhaustion, Laura couldn’t find sleep. Her mind was far too consumed with worry to rest. She stayed awake until the lights came on, until Natalie and another assistant entered with vials for the first ten beds, until whispers of the cure made their way down to her bed. Though several of the Infected had been awake to witness Laura bringing back a vial for Perry, most of them had been asleep. It was a happy day in the ward. Hope filled the air, conversations were lively, and for the first time in ages, people were smiling. Laura found it hard to partake in the
optimism. She worried for Carmilla, and for the dastardly things that Klaus had planned.

By lights out, Perry was awake. She and those occupying the first ten beds were already showing signs of improvement. They were still weak, but undeniably doing much better.

Removing their IV drips, the old gang, minus the still unconscious SJ, grouped around Perry’s bed.

“This is too good to be true.” LaFontaine muttered through a smile as they gripped Perry’s hand.

Kirsch tapped Perry’s foot. “How are you feeling?”

Perry sighed. “Like I’ve been hit by a truck. Other than that, not bad.”

They laughed. It felt strange to laugh. It’d been so long since they’d had anything to be happy about.

Laura quickly lost her humor as the ache in her shoulder reminded her of the air duct above them. She pointed to the vent. “Could I get a lift?”

Kirsch and Danny shared an uneasy glance.

“Really?” Kirsch asked. “Again? You’re lucky you get didn’t busted last night.”

LaFontaine jumped in. “They’re bringing the cure to us. You don’t have to go steal more.”

Perry added, “I appreciate the thought, Laura, but I can wait my turn.”

Laura glanced down the row to the empty space beside her bed. “This isn’t about getting more vials. I have to find Carmilla. Klaus has her. They’re testing on her. I heard her say something about starting new trials. I think they’re looking for a better version of the cure.”

“Is that assistant going to help you?” Danny asked.

“No.” Laura fidgeted with her bruised fingers.

Danny continued. “Then what good would it do to find her? You can’t bring her back here. You can’t escape.” She paused. “Can you? Is there a way out up there?”

“I don’t know.” Laura shrugged. “Maybe. I didn’t really look for an escape route.”

Kirsch scratched his chin. “Were there any vertical air ducts?”

“A few, yeah.” Laura answered. “But you won’t fit up there. I barely made it through.”

“We don’t have to fit.” Kirsch explained. “If you could get to the guard control room, probably down on the first floor, you could get us out.”

“What about the guards?” Laura questioned. “Maybe you forgot, but they kind of have guns.”

“We should wait.” LaFontaine suggested. “We should stick it out in here. They’ll have to release us soon. We’re healthy, remember? They can’t keep us in here forever. We’ll get released.”

“Can someone just give me a boost?” Laura pleaded.

Danny placed a hand on Laura’s shoulder. “Maybe LaF’s right this time. Maybe we should just wait.”
“There’s no ‘we’ here.” Laura’s breath caught in her throat as the words left her mouth.

Danny moved so that she was standing in front of Laura. “Hey, I know you care about her, but crawling around in the air vents isn’t going to save her. She’s the Director’s daughter, she’ll be fine. Klaus probably put her in a private room or something. She could already be cured for all we know. She might not even be in the building anymore.”

“She’s here.” Laura pressed. “Natalie said that Klaus has her.”

“Okay, well…” Danny trailed off as she searched for more excuses.

LaFontaine stepped in. “Laura, you can’t save everyone.”

Laura willed herself not to cry. “I don’t want to lose anyone else.”

The group grew quiet. Danny pulled Laura into a comforting hug, and Kirsch wrapped his long arms around them both. LaFontaine, with their hand still interlaced with Perry’s, joined in on the group hug as well.

From down the row, Betty’s voice loudly called out, “Get a room!”

The group broke apart as Danny sent a middle finger back in response. “New Betty is such a bitch.”

Kirsch teasingly poked her side. “You’re just saying that because you have the hots for her.”

“I do not!” Danny scoffed. “She’s so not my type.”

Kirsch grinned. “Oh, and why’s that? Because she’s under forty?”

Laura laughed along with the others, wiping away a few stray tears in the process. They were right. There was no use in finding where they were hiding Carmilla, just as there was no use in formulating an escape plan. The cure was coming, slowly but surely. Perry’s improvement was proof that there was hope. All they had to do was be patient.

Being patient, as it turned out, was hard. The days went by slowly, and the vials quite literally couldn’t come fast enough. More than a few of the Infected died while waiting for their dose. SJ, the poor girl, was skipped entirely. Around mid-November, she was declared brain dead and removed from the Infected ward. Hearing that SJ was officially gone was hard on the others, but they’d stopped holding out hope for her some time ago.

By the end of the month, people began being transferred out. They were, as Klaus had proudly announced, no longer sick. Slowly, more and more patients were returned to living with the healthy. And on the last day of November, only six people remained in the ward: Perry, LaFontaine, Danny, Laura, Kirsch, and Betty.

Danny, as always, was the first to jump to conclusions. “They should’ve let us go by now. Something’s not right. We were healthy to begin with, why are we still in here?”

Laura scratched at the place where her IV drip had once been. The need for additional fluids had ceased around the same time that the trips to Klaus’s operating room had declined.

Kirsch shrugged. “Maybe this is just the Silas version of jail. We did try to break quarantine, remember?”

Betty crossed her arms. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”
Danny rolled her eyes. “You’re the one who told us how to escape through the kitchens.”

“And one of you ratted me out!” Betty exclaimed.

Kirsch scoffed. “No one had to say shit. You’re a terrible liar, you outed yourself.”

Laura froze as everything fell into place. It was so clear to her, she couldn’t believe she hadn’t realized it all sooner. But before she could voice her epiphany, the door opened. Dr. Klaus and Natalie wheeled in a bed, and Laura was elated to see that it was Carmilla tucked into it. As they checked a few of her vitals, Laura noticed the color of the fluid in Carmilla’s IV bag. It was still pink, still the color of fluid that they gave to the Infected.

Dr. Klaus turned to the rest of them. “Good afternoon, little birds. How are we all feeling today?”

Laura’s eyes never left Carmilla. She was awake, unnaturally thin, and her temples showed marks from where brain monitoring machines had been hooked up to her. Her eyes were glazed over and distant. She looked bored, but more than that she looked completely out of it.

Danny sat up straighter. “Why are you keeping us in here?”

Dr. Klaus chuckled. “Well, isn’t that a silly question. This is a place of research, a place where incredible scientific study is conducted, but most importantly this is a place for the unwell…” She smiled. “And you are all very sick.”

Dr. Klaus and Natalie left the room without another word. The moment the door shut behind them, Laura scrambled to Carmilla’s side.

“Hey.” She cautiously placed her hand over Carmilla’s. “Are you okay?”

Carmilla stared straight ahead, unresponsive.

Danny moved to stand behind Laura. “Did they make her mute? Like they did to SJ?”

LaFontaine brought them back to the bigger issue at hand. “What did Klaus mean when she said we’re sick? Only Perry and Carmilla were Infected, and Perry got cleared as healthy days ago.”

“Klaus is looking for a cure.” Laura sighed.

LaFontaine gestured to the empty beds around them. “There’s already a cure.”

“Not a cure for The Bite.” Laura looked around at her friends. “A cure for being queer.”
Laura sat at the foot of Carmilla’s bed staring at her nails. She’d never let them grow so long before. Their length bothered her, but not nearly as much as the few nails that were unevenly broken did. She remembered breaking the first nail on Klaus’s operating table. She wasn’t as sure about the timing of the second nail’s break.

Carmilla watched her examine her nails with mild interest. The girl hadn’t been the same since returning, but that was no surprise. She’d spent nearly a month locked away as Klaus’s lone test subject. She hadn’t talked much in the days she’d been back in the Infected ward. Most of her words had been whispered to Laura through the dark after waking from a nightmare. Carmilla had suffered from nightmares when she was healthy too, but they were nothing compared to the Infected night terrors she endured now. She would wake in a cold sweat, seizing and convulsing as the Infected so often did. And then she would lie still and Laura would tiptoe over to her bed to check that she was still breathing.

Carmilla was a fighter. She pushed through the pain without complaint. Laura was tempted to ask which was worse, The Bite or being Klaus’s independent study subject, but a part of her wasn’t strong enough to ask.

Laura glanced down the ward at the others. Danny, Perry, LaFontaine, Kirsch, and Betty were gathered at the end of the long room. They’d taken to playing with the monitors lining the walls for entertainment. They were giving Laura and Carmilla some privacy. And though it wasn’t much, it was the most privacy they’d had since the beginning of October.

It was strange to think that the two roommates had known each other for over six months. They’d met when Laura had been admitted to Silas on the last day of May, two weeks after she had graduated from high school. Walking the stage, receiving her diploma, wearing her cap and gown, it all felt like it happened a lifetime ago. At times, it felt like she was imagining someone else’s life entirely.

“We should be taking final exams right now.” Laura picked at her nails while she talked. “We should be talking about our plans for the holiday break. We should be outside, building snowmen and sledding. Or inside by the fire with hot cocoa. We shouldn’t be in here. They have no right to keep us here. This isn’t fair. If the outside world only knew what was going on in here…” Laura trailed.

“So tell them.” Carmilla muttered.

“How?” Laura asked, relieved that Carmilla was feeling up for a little conversation. “This place isn’t exactly filled with pay phones.”

Carmilla’s shoulders lifted in a weak shrug. “There has to be a phone in this building somewhere.”

Laura nodded. “I’ll ask Natalie about it next time I get the chance. Maybe she’d be willing to make a call for us.”

Carmilla shook her head. “She won’t do it. If Silas goes down, she goes with it.”

“She’s not like Klaus. I think she would do it for us. And we could tell the police that Natalie helped us, and that she never did us any harm.”

“Helped us?” Carmilla narrowed her gaze. “She was there for everything that Klaus did to me. She
never helped me, even when I begged her.”

Laura looked up from her nails. “Did you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.”

The days of December went by slowly. Other than a trip to the bathrooms and showers in the morning, a trip at night, and two meals a day brought in by the assistants, they were locked into the Infected ward with nothing to do. Danny and Kirsch, out of boredom and fear, devised an escape plan so weak that no one bothered to humor them on it. LaFontaine and Perry spent most of their time trying to coax Betty out of her new personality, but had little success. And Laura rarely ever left Carmilla’s side.

On a particularly cold night in mid-December, Laura climbed into Carmilla’s bed. She rested her head on Carmilla’s shoulder and laid her arm gently across the girl’s waist. The others were asleep in beds at the end of the ward, giving the two roommates plenty of privacy.

“I missed this.” Laura sighed, content for the moment.

Carmilla nodded. “Me too.”

“I missed you.” Laura admitted. “When you were gone…I didn’t know what to do. All I could think about was what Klaus might be doing to you.”

Carmilla was quiet for a few moments before she replied, “I thought she was going to kill me. I knew she was going to kill me. Every day she’d hook me up to these machines and ask me questions, make me think about specific things…about girls…about you.”

“About me?” Laura tried to remain calm. She didn’t need to break down, she needed to be there for Carmilla. Now was not the time to let her emotions take over.

“Not specifically.” Carmilla answered. “But if someone tells you to think about something, you’re going to think about it whether you want to or not. She would tell me to picture a beautiful girl, and I thought of you every time.”

“What did she do?” Laura wasn’t sure if she was ready to hear the answer, but her curiosity was getting the best of her.

“She did a lot of things. Sometimes it was just the brain monitoring machine. A lot of the time there were injections. On the bad days, there were machines that made it feel like she was sticking needles all over my body. And on the worst days, she would strap me down and have really shitty lesbian porn playing and she would force me to drink this disgusting chunky stuff that made me want to throw up…and she would leave me there…sometimes for hours. Nothing she tried ever worked the way that she wanted it to, at least not the conversation therapy part. I don’t think she knows what she’s doing. Her methods were all over the place, like she was trying everything for the first time to see what worked. Except nothing ever worked. Not with me.”

“I’m glad.” Laura whispered. “I thought I’d lost you.”

Carmilla took in a deep breath. “There were times when I thought I’d lost me too.”

The next morning, they came for Betty. An assistant helped Klaus wheel Betty out, and Natalie hung back alone to pass out breakfast.
“What is she going to do to Betty?” Laura asked as Natalie handed her a tray.

“New trials.” Natalie glanced over her shoulder to the door. “Klaus was discouraged after the first batch of trials with Carmilla, but something’s got her inspired again.”

“Where’s a phone?” Laura wasn’t about to let her opportunity slide by without asking.

Natalie slowed her pace as she handed out the trays. “The only phones are in the guard control room and Klaus’s office.”

“How about a call for us?” Laura hated how desperate she sounded. “To anyone, it doesn’t matter. We just need the outside world to know what Klaus is doing to us. What Silas is letting her do.”

Natalie hesitated. “I can’t make that call. You don’t understand how things are around here. The people working in this building…a lot of us will be deported if the government comes snooping around.”

Danny nearly dropped the tray in her hands. “Deported?”

Carmilla shared a glance with Laura. “My mother told me about how they flew in doctors and research specialists from all over the world. It’s not surprising they did it illegally.”

“All of us, even Klaus, were flown in after they banned international flights. If the government here got involved, half of the people in this building would be forced back to our home countries. Countries that will be very upset we broke the law. Countries that will quarantine us in conditions much worse than this.”

“Get out.” Carmilla suggested, ignoring the tray of food that was placed on her lap. “Make a run for it. All of you. You’re healthy and no one on the outside even knows you’re here.”

LaFontaine scratched their head. “That’s actually a pretty good idea. If you were to break quarantine, Silas wouldn’t be able to tell anyone. You’re not supposed to be here in the first place. I assume they’d get busted with harboring illegal immigrants, and then a full investigation of the facility would probably take place. Klaus would be deported, Silas would be closed, and we’d all get to go home as soon as the quarantine was lifted. Right?”

Natalie shrugged. “We can’t just leave. The guards would never let us through the gates.”

Laura sat up straighter. “You don’t have to escape. You just have to make the right phone call. Get rid of any evidence that you and the others were here, tell the people who come to help that Klaus destroyed everyone’s records, and by the time they figure out who all of you are…you could be anywhere. You could halfway around the world.”

Natalie wheeled the empty cart toward the door. “You don’t realize how much you’re asking us to sacrifice.”

Danny stood, towering over Natalie in height. “You want to talk to us about sacrifice?”

Natalie backed away from her. “I…I can’t do what you’re asking me to do. I can’t flee another country. I have nowhere to go.”

Kirsch pulled Danny back by her elbow before directing his attention to Natalie. “Hey, look, we don’t want to make any trouble for you.” He paused. “But we don’t want to die in here either.”
Natalie looked around to see that everyone was intently watching to see what she would say next. “I can’t make any calls for you—they’ll want to question whoever does—but I can help you get into Klaus’s office. I’ll make sure the other assistants are ready to leave when the time comes.”

“When?” Danny asked.

“Tonight.” Natalie pointed to the ceiling. “You’ll need to use the vents again. Go to the one in Klaus’s office, wait for me to request her assistance, then you can use her phone. You won’t have long, maybe ten minutes. I won’t be able to warn you before she comes back. If she catches you, she’ll know I helped you.”

Natalie reached for the door handle, but Laura jumped out of bed to ask one final question. “Can you get us any more of the cure?”

Natalie looked back at her, then to Carmilla. “I can’t get them for you. Klaus moved the final batch from the freezer. If I had to guess, I’d say they’re in the mini-refrigerator she keeps in her office. You can look tonight.”

When Natalie returned alone that night to collect trays and hand out dinner, she and Laura went over the plan again. The moment she left the ward, Laura beckoned for Danny and Kirsch’s help. Together they lifted Laura up to the vent with ease.

Laura had just begun her long crawl when hushed voices arguing below stalled her. A loud commotion from behind startled her, and for a moment she feared the air duct was going to break through the ceiling. She braced herself for impact.

“Your butt is cute but it’s in my way.”

Laura craned her neck to see that Carmilla was halfway in the air duct with her.

“What are you doing?” Laura whispered as she crawled forward. A loud metallic creak reverberated around them as Carmilla’s full weight entered the air duct.

“Going with you.” She answered nonchalantly.

Laura wanted to protest, she wanted to tell Carmilla that she could handle it on her own and that Carmilla was too sick to go with her, but she knew that there was no use in arguing with the girl now. Laura led the way, hoping that she was going the right direction. Natalie had explained the location of Dr. Klaus’s office the best that she could, but it was easy to lose your sense of direction in such a dark and cramped world. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of crawling through the ceiling, they reached the vent over Klaus’s office. Laura twisted around, painfully struggling to be as quiet as she could. Together, Laura and Carmilla peered through the slits in the vent to the office below.

Dr. Klaus was sitting at a desk, a knife in one hand and jar of vanilla frosting in the other. She hummed to herself as she decorated a gingerbread house. Setting down the knife, she picked up a flask and took a long sip from it.

“Such a lovely house.” She muttered before downing the rest of her flask’s contents. She winced at the aftertaste. “Oh, Mama Klaus is all out of eggnog.” She tapped a framed picture on her desk. “Don’t look at me like that, it’s a holiday after all. It’s a time for celebration.”

A knock on the office door came, and Dr. Klaus frowned as she walked over to it.

“What is it?” She demanded.
Carmilla and Laura shared a glance as they heard Natalie’s voice. “Sorry to bother you so late, Doctor, but your assistance is needed. It’s Betty.”

The door shut as Dr. Klaus and Natalie left the office. Laura and Carmilla wasted no time in breaking the vent and entering the room. Laura rushed to the phone on Klaus’s desk while Carmilla searched through the mini-fridge. While the dial tone played, Laura looked around the office and took a moment to appreciate the scene. There she was, standing in the middle of a nice and professional room wearing a dirty hospital gown. And there Carmilla was, butt raised in the air as she rummaged through a mini-fridge looking for a vial of curing liquid they didn’t even know the name of.

“Hello, this Bobby at—”

“Hi!” Laura leaned against the desk, careful not to disturb the tragically beautiful gingerbread house. “Hello. My name is Laura Hollis, I’m calling from Silas.”

“From Silas?” The voice asked hesitantly. “The quarantine camp?”

“Yes, the quarantine camp. Listen, I don’t have much time. I’m not supposed to be on the phone. The people working here have been doing illegal experiments. There are a group of us being kept in the building for the Infected against our wills. They’re testing on us. Torturing us.” Laura paused as she watched Carmilla drink the amber liquid from a vial she’d found in the fridge. “We’re healthy. They shouldn’t be keeping us in here. There’s a doctor, her last name is Klaus. She’s the one torturing us. Please, you have to send help.”

“Ma’am, this is Little Bobby’s Pizza, we can’t deliver to you that far away.”

Laura pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t want a pizza. I want you to call the local authorities, scratch that, call the national authorities. Call the paper and news stations and whoever, just let people know what they are doing to us in here. Please, I’m begging you.”

“Is this a prank call?”

“No, this is not a prank call! This is life or death. Come on, Little Bobby, help me out here.”

“Little Bobby is my father.”

Laura had to resist the urge to throw the phone at the wall. “Bobby, please. This is not a prank, I swear. I am a real person, who is really in Silas. I need you to call everyone that you can and let them know there are doctors in Silas who are torturing their patients. Can you do that?”

“Next time you prank call, you might want to come up with a more believable story.”

Laura ended the call with a groan. Carmilla watched her with an amused smile. “You called a pizza delivery place to rescue us?”

Laura crossed her arms. “It was the first number that came to mind.”

“Let’s try the actual police this time.” Carmilla reached for the phone but stopped dead in her tracks as the office door creaked open. Klaus stepped into the room, surprised to see them. Her look of shock quickly turned into one of menacing excitement as she locked the door behind herself.

“Two little birds out of bed.” Her words slurried together as she spoke. “Oh what fun we will have tonight.”
Carmilla’s hand changed paths, grabbing the knife instead of the phone. A glob of forsting fell from it to the floor as she wielded it.

Dr. Klaus laughed. “And so the fun begins!”

Carmilla stepped forward but immediately dropped to her knees at the sound of Klaus snapping her fingers. The knife fell from her hand as she writhed on the floor.

“The brain is capable of so much. It’s so powerful.” Dr. Klaus explained as she moved toward Laura. “But even a fully conscious mind cannot escape fear. A little training goes a long way, you see.” Laura tried to back away but bumped into the desk. Klaus’s hand shot out, her fingers wrapping around Laura’s throat in a tight grip. “Sweet girl, you had so much potential. We could have worked together. I could have helped you. I could have cured you of your illness.”

“I’m not sick.” Laura could barely get the words out as Klaus tightened her hold. She desperately gasped for air.

“You are.” Dr. Klaus insisted. “You are very sick. You have a disease of the mind.”

Everything happened in a rushed blur. Carmilla getting to her knees, Carmilla throwing the knife at Klaus, the knife missing, Klaus dropping her hold on Laura, Klaus becoming furious, Carmilla taunting the doctor, Klaus snapping her fingers twice over and smiling as Carmilla’s body twisted on the floor, Laura grabbing the knife in her fist and slamming it into Klaus’s neck. The doctor stumbled backward until she hit a wall. She slid down it, the knife still lodged into her neck, with wide eyes and her jaw hanging open.

Laura couldn’t look away from the blood that spilled from the puncture wound. She couldn’t look away as Klaus grew still. She couldn’t look away from the dead body that stared back at her.

Carmilla’s hand touched Laura’s shoulder, causing her to jump. “Are you okay?”

“I think I might be in shock.” Laura finally pulled her eyes away from Klaus’s body. “I feel fine. Is that normal? I should be freaking out right now. I should be feeling something. I just feel...relieved and...I don’t know, but I should be freaking out, you know? I think I’m starting to freak out over not freaking out. That can’t be normal. And now I’m rambling, which is a sign that I’m freaking out but I don’t know if I’m freaking out over all of this or freaking out over not freaking out in the first place and now I might even be freaking out over how I’m freaking out over not freaking out.”

“Laura.” Carmilla softly cupped her face. “Everything is going to be okay. It was self-defense. You had to do it.”

Laura glanced at the body. “Oh, god, she’s still looking at me.”

“Turn around.” Carmilla instructed.

“Why?”

“Just turn around.”

Laura turned, facing the desk and the gingerbread house. She looked at the little gingerbread people and the jar of icing and the framed picture sitting nearby. “Oh my god.”

Carmilla returned to her side, trying to follow her gaze. “What?”

Laura grabbed the picture frame. She showed it to Carmilla. “This is my picture. Those are my
“I know who they are.” Carmilla replied. “You kept it on your nightstand in our room, remember?”

“That feels like it was years ago.” Laura was tempted to look back at the body again, but she fought the urge. “I want to go home.”

Carmilla pulled her into a hug. “You’ll be home soon. There are just a few things we need to take care of first.”

Together, they climbed through the air ducts back to the Infected ward. After an hour’s worth of debating, the group devised a plan. Carmilla and Laura travelled back through the air ducts to Klaus’s office where they’d left the body. Using the doctor’s ID card, they trekked to the Infected ward on foot to free the others. Perry and LaFontaine remained in the office to clean while Danny, Kirsch, Laura, and Carmilla carried Klaus’s body to the large walk-in freezer a few halls away. They hid her in a corner and left. When they returned to the office, LaFontaine and Perry had discovered a stack of transfer papers.

“They’ve already been filled out. Even Betty’s.” LaFontaine revealed, flipping through them. “We’ll just have to forge Klaus’s signature. Maybe they’ll be processed before anyone finds out what happened here.”

“Carmilla can’t leave.” Laura pointed out. “She’s still sick. I’m sure they’ll double check all of us at Medical before letting us mix back in with the healthy. You guys can go, but I want to stay behind.”

“Laura…” Carmilla was painfully aware that the others were watching them. “You don’t have to stay behind for me.”

“I’m not letting you stay here alone.” Laura said, before turning to LaFontaine. “Sign all the papers, but leave ours behind. If we can, we’ll send them out after Carmilla is healthy again.”

Danny used her finger to scoop a bit of frosting from the roof of the gingerbread house. “Merry Christmas to us.”

A week. That’s how long it took anyone to realize that Dr. Klaus was missing. The others, Danny, Kirsch, Perry, LaFontaine, and Betty, had already been transferred out to rejoin the healthy by the time they found Klaus’s body in the freezer. Natalie and the other medical assistants had managed to flee Silas without knowing of Klaus’s demise, unfortunately making them look like the guilty party.

Laura and Carmilla had swiped the vials from Klaus’s office on Christmas Eve. Though they were supposed to be kept cold, they couldn’t risk venturing into the office every few days to grab the next dose. They kept Carmilla on the same recovery schedule that Laura had watched the others go through.

It was New Year’s Eve when the Director came to visit. They could hear her heels clicking against the floor before she entered the room.

“Good evening.” She greeted them. Her expression was just as emotionless as it had been the first time she’d visited.

“Let us go.” Carmilla demanded from her bed.

“Not before a doctor clears you.” The Director answered. “And not before we have a little chat.”
She glanced between them. “I don’t know which of you murdered that woman, and I don’t want to know.”

“We didn’t do anything.” Carmilla lied.

“Of course not.” Her mother forced an empty smile. “We can put all of this behind us, but a compromise has to be made. You see, the board was unaware of Dr. Klaus’s independent studies. She and her team were acting alone. Which is why everyone on the board, myself included, was so heartbroken that to hear that she’d run back to Austria to escape answering for her crimes.” She paused. “Do you understand?”

“I understand.” Carmilla nodded. “Just let us go home.”

“The quarantine is being lifted.” The Director revealed. “If you’re cleared, you’ll be home by this time next week. I’ll return then to see you through the release process.”

She left without another word.

“What just happened?” Laura asked.

Carmilla sat back in her bed with a sigh of relief. “We’re going home.”

“We’re going home?” Laura paced the floor. “We’re going home.” She stopped. “I don’t even know if I have a home to go back to.”

Carmilla sat up again and looked at her. “Hey. Everything’s going to be okay. We’re getting out of here. And as long as we don’t say anything about Klaus, they won’t say anything about us killing her.”

“I’m the one that killed her.” Laura’s pace increased. “And I don’t particularly want to go to prison for it, but we can’t just pretend that nothing ever happened to us.”

“We can, and we will.” Carmilla shrugged. “We can’t take Silas down without taking ourselves down with it.”

“The quarantine is being lifted.” Laura’s knees grew shaky. “All we had to do was wait two more weeks.”

Carmilla stood and pulled her into a tight embrace. “This is good news, Laura. We’re going home.” Laura let herself relax into the hug. “We’re going home.”
“I can’t believe we broke in.” Laura muttered, watching from her seat on the couch as Carmilla added more broken planks of wood to the fireplace.

“It’s your house.” Carmilla shrugged. “They can’t just take away your home because the government decided to quarantine you. They’ll have to give it back to you.”

Laura shook her head. “I can’t live here.”

Carmilla sat down beside her on the couch. They were close, but she’d made sure to leave a decent amount of space between them. “Why not?”

“This is my family’s house.” She looked around. “I could never live here without them. Besides, I could never afford it on my own either.”

“I could help you.” Carmilla offered. “I know you said I could stay with you until I find my own place, but if you wanted to… I wouldn’t be opposed to the idea of being roommates again.”

Laura stared at the fire. “I can’t even think about the future right now. It feels wrong to even try. Like, how can I start planning what’s next when I still haven’t fully processed what’s already happened? Carn, you were Infected. You were tortured. You almost died. And I killed someone.” Her hands grew shaky as she spoke. “I… I killed someone. I took a human life. She was shitty person, no argument there, but she was a person. I feel like the police are going to show up any minute. I’m going to end up in prison, I can feel it. And it’ll be just like Silas. Sitting inside all day, surrounded by guards with guns, being told when to eat and where to go. I can’t think about what to do with my freedom when I don’t know what will happen to me.”

Carmilla took Laura’s hands into her own. “No one will find out about Klaus. If they do, a lot more people than just you will go down for it. Me, your friends, Klaus’s assistants that took off, any guards that knew about it, my mother. Everyone who knows about you killing Klaus helped cover it up. If someone talks, we all go down. She’s probably paid off everyone that knew anything about it by now.”

“People are going to go after Silas. We’re probably going to end up in a courtroom testifying against your mother. We’re going to have to tell them about Klaus and what she did to us.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to tell them that you killed her.”

Laura avoided looking at her. “They’re going to ask us what happened to her.”

“And we’ll say that we don’t know. Everyone will say that they don’t know. You heard what my mother said. The story is that Klaus took off when they found out what she was doing. We have to stick to that story.”

“What if someone decides to tell the truth? What if someone who worked there says that your mother ordered them to keep it quiet?”

“They still can’t prove that you did it. There weren’t any cameras, and I doubt that my mother would’ve left any evidence sitting around. Laura, I know you’re scared to think about the future. I know that you don’t want to get your hopes up and have them crushed. I completely understand all of that because I feel it too. But look around. We’re out. We’re alive. You’re right, I was sick. I was Klaus’s lab rat. I almost died. And yes, you killed someone. But here we are. After everything that
we’ve been through, we made it out. We survived.”

Laura nodded. “Do you ever feel guilty…that we survived when so many others didn’t?”

Carmilla tucked a stray lock of hair behind Laura’s ear. “Don’t think about it like that. Think about how you’re alive, by some twist of luck or fate…and just appreciate that.”

“I appreciate it, I do. And I know it’s silly of me to be like this but…I don’t know, I just feel like I shouldn’t feel happy right now. There’s so many reasons not to be happy.”

“I know I said that I didn’t want to go, but maybe we should try the support group thing.”

Laura squeezed Carmilla’s hands. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “If it’ll help you, we can go.”

“We.” Laura smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

Carmilla started to reply but a sharp crackle from the fireplace, sounding something like a snap of someone’s fingers, sent her entire body rigid. Her eyes were wide with fear, her jaw was clenched, and her hands held on to Laura’s so tightly that Laura feared the bones in her hand would break. Afraid she might make things worse, Laura said nothing. They sat in silence as Carmilla calmed.

“Sorry.” Carmilla looked away.

“It’s okay.” Laura thought back to the scene of Carmilla writhing on the floor in Dr. Klaus’s office. “It’s not your fault.”

She was quiet for a few moments. “Do you think I’ll always be like this?”

“I don’t know. We could try talking to someone about it. Like a professional. Maybe a therapist or a psychiatrist or a psychologist or…whoever would be able to help.”

“Professionals.” Carmilla scoffed while running a hand through her hair. “The people who hurt us were professionals. Just because someone is supposed to help you…it doesn’t mean that they will.”

“We’ll do whatever you want.” Laura pulled her into a hug on the couch.

Carmilla lightly kissed Laura’s shoulder. “Right now, the only thing I know I want is to be with you. You’re the only thing in my life that makes sense. Every time I try to think of the future, of what I should do next…you’re always by my side in every scenario.”

Laura pulled back just enough to see the other girl’s face. “Is this your way of asking me to be your girlfriend?”

Carmilla smiled. “Don’t act like you don’t want it to be.”

Laura matched her smile. “I would love to be your girlfriend.”

In the soft lighting of the fire, they kissed.

“This feels like the first time all over again.” Carmilla admitted. “Maybe we should pretend like it is.”

“No.” Laura kissed her again. “We can’t forget about what happened to us. It’s a part of who we
are now. We don’t have to live in the past, but we can’t pretend like it never happened. I don’t want to forget. Silas was awful, and so many horrible things happened there…but it’s where we met. It’s where we became best friends, where we had our first kiss. It’s where we were destined to be another failed love story, but survived.”

“You’re right.” Carmilla agreed. “No forgetting.”

“And no regretting.” Laura added.

Carmilla smirked. “Aren’t you the one that said you can’t regret something that you had no control over?”

“Exactly my point.”

“So you don’t regret killing Klaus?”

Laura took a few moments to carefully form her reply. “It was self-defense. There’s no telling what she would have done to us if I hadn’t. She could have killed us. I don’t regret protecting us, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t feel bad about taking a human life.”

Carmilla turned her gaze to the fire. “You were right, it’s hard to be happy when we have a million reasons not to be.”

Laura placed a soft kiss against Carmilla’s cheek. “I’m happy to be here with you. I’m happy to be out of Silas. Happy to be alive. Happy to be back in real clothes. Happy that we’re both healthy. Happy to be yours.”

Draping her arm across Laura’s shoulders and pulling her close, Carmilla sighed. “I used to think about this day all the time. About getting out, and about what I would do. This is better than anything I ever dreamed.”

Two weeks later, in an event room on the second floor of a notoriously sketchy public library, the Silas support group was gathered. A tray of homemade cookies sat on a table beside a water cooler. The door was propped open, and it was already five minutes past starting time, but the co-founders kept glancing toward it hoping that a few more people might show. There was small crowd, sixteen people to be exact, who had actually turned up. Two more than the first meeting, but still nowhere near the eight hundred or so that had been invited. Among those present were Laura, Carmilla, Perry, LaFontaine, Danny, and Kirsch.

Finally accepting that no one else was coming, Betty and a fellow ex-counselor Tyrone started the meeting.

Tyrone scanned the group. “Laura, would you like to introduce yourself first?”

Laura glanced around the circle. “Is that really necessary? We all already know each other.”

Betty, who was remarkably closer to acting like her old self again, put on a fake smile. “No excuses. This is your first time at a Silas support group meeting, so introduce yourself.”

Riddled with a case of déjà vu, Laura relented. “Hi everyone. As all of you know, my name is Laura Hollis. I was never sick, but I was placed in the Infected ward after trying to break out. I’m sure LaFontaine and Perry told you guys all about that last week at your first meeting. I meant to go to that, but I was stuck at the bank trying to get my family’s house back. It’s still an ongoing negotiation at this point, but I’m staying hopeful.”
Betty directed her attention to Carmilla, who was slouched low in her chair. “And you?”

She shrugged. “Carmilla. Cured.”

Not bothering to ask for a more detailed introduction, Betty moved on. “Now that introductions are out of the way, does anyone have an update or news that they would like to share with the group?”

Perry’s hand shot into the air. “As expected, legal action is being taken against Silas. A pair of lawyers who were in the Over Thirties, Jordan and Jon, have been working on getting a case ready for months. They’re predicting that a jury will be very interested in hearing their first-hand accounts. They want to know how many of us would be willing to testify against Silas.” Perry glanced to Carmilla. “They’re not just going after the doctors. They want to bring down the entire board and the Director. They’re optimistic, but prepared to take a financial settlement if it comes down to it.”

“I’m cool with getting a check.” Kirsch announced. “I don’t care if they serve jail time. They’ll rot in Hell for what they did to us either way.”

Danny nodded. “I heard there’s already been an assassination attempt on one of doctors. Vordenburg, I think. They’ll all get what’s coming to them.”

Betty shifted uneasily in her chair. “Did they mention anything about the counselors?”

Perry shook her head. “I can e-mail them and ask, but I don’t know what they plan on doing.”

Betty dropped her gaze to the floor, and said nothing further on the issue.

When the meeting ended, Laura convinced Carmilla to go out for dinner with the group. Though Carmilla made no attempts to socialize with LaFontaine, Perry, Danny, or Kirsch, they had a pleasant outing. Laura was overjoyed to catch up with her friends. It had been strange not seeing them every day, but they fell back into their old routine of jokes and amicable bickering with ease.

LaFontaine and Perry were already planning a trip to Eastern Europe together. The international travel ban was still in effect, but it would certainly be lifted by the summer. Perry had already returned to school, as had LaFontaine. They were determined not to let their time in Silas hinder their future careers. Kirsch and Danny were on the same page as Laura and Carmilla. They weren’t sure what they wanted to do, or where they should go from there, but they certainly weren’t going to let their freedom go to waste. Danny talked about moving away from the city and finding a quiet town surrounded by nature. Kirsch, after discovering that his longtime boyfriend had not been faithful to him while he was gone, said that he would probably go back to his hometown and spend time with his family.

“What about you, Laura?” LaFontaine asked as the waiter began passing out their checks. “Do you know what you’re going to do next?”

“No.” She answered honestly. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot though. If I go to a university, I want to wait until the fall. For now, I just need to get a job so I can try to keep my family’s house. I won’t keep it for long, but I’m not ready to let go of it just yet.”

The group nodded and turned expectantly to Carmilla, who rolled her eyes. “I’ll go wherever she goes.”

Danny grinned. “Aw, that’s so sweet.”

Carmilla scoffed but said nothing. Laura reached for her hand under the table before changing the
subject. “So how about that last election, huh? Can’t believe we missed out on that one.”

That night, once Laura and Carmilla had returned to the Hollis residence, they had a hard time keeping their hands off of each other. Months of pent up frustration had returned to them in full force, it seemed.

Between kisses, Laura said, “We don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to.”

Already pulling her shirt over her head, Carmilla replied, “I want to. Do you?”

“Of course.” Laura smiled into their kiss as Carmilla began unbuttoning her pants. When they were off, she worked on removing Laura’s clothes. She took her time, and kept the pace slow.

There was nothing rushed or sloppy about their movements. Every kiss packed a punch full of desire, each light trace of fingers against skin left a burning trail. Laura had waited a long time for Carmilla to touch her, and she wasn’t about to let her excitement or eagerness ruin the night. She wanted it slow, she wanted to be teased and touched. She wanted Carmilla pressed against her as the firelight danced across their bare skin.

“I love you.” Carmilla muttered the words against Laura’s lips as she dropped the last of her clothing to the floor.

Laura searched the other girl’s eyes, unsure of what she was looking for. “I love you, too.”

Their lips met again as Carmilla backed them up to the couch. Laura found herself on her back with Carmilla straddling her hips. Carmilla kissed down her jaw, her neck, her collar bone, her chest. She stopped to lick around a hard nipple. Taking it into her mouth and lightly sucking, she moved one of her hands down to find Laura’s clit. Going into sensory overload, Laura tried to keep herself in check. She wanted this moment to last, but Carmilla’s fingers were doing incredible things to her. Sliding a finger inside, Carmilla smirked at the sound of Laura’s moan. She kissed further down, until her mouth was between Laura’s thighs. She started with a light kiss to her clit, followed by a swift flick of her tongue. Every movement of her fingers or press of her lips or lick of her tongue caused Laura’s hips to move on their own. Her body was craving release, and Carmilla was doing everything she could to get her there. Laura’s breath caught in her throat, her toes curled, and her mouth fell open. The feeling of coming against Carmilla’s tongue had her seeing stars.

Carmilla kissed her way back up Laura’s body before reaching her lips. Still trying to catch her breath, Laura tried to flip them over so that she would be on top of Carmilla. They tumbled off the couch to the floor, both landing awkwardly on their sides.

“Okay, ouch.” Carmilla chuckled as Laura quickly moved to lay on top of her.

“Sorry.” Laura laughed. “I forgot where we were for a second.”

Carmilla kissed her lips before asking, “Was that good for you?”

Laura smiled. “I’ll show you how good it felt.”

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One Year Later

Laura placed the bouquet of flowers on the grass between the headstones. It was never easy to see her parents’ names etched into the marble, but was always easier to handle with Carmilla by her side.
“I hate to cut this visit short, guys…” Laura interlaced her fingers with Carmilla’s as she spoke to the headstones. “But we have dinner plans with a few friends tonight. We haven’t seen them since the Silas trials, so it’s kind of a big reunion thing. I know last time we came to visit we said that we’d start going to the support group meetings again, but we’ve just been so busy lately. I got into that international journalism class I told you about. It’s going good so far. The first exam is coming up soon, but Carm’s already offered to stay up all night and help me study. You guys are probably tired of hearing me say this by now, but I really think that you’d love her.” Laura looked at her girlfriend. “I know I do.”

Carmilla smiled. “I love you, too.”

Laura took in a deep breath and looked up at the sunset. “We don’t want to keep our friends waiting. We’ll come back to visit soon, I promise.”

Without another word, Laura dropped Carmilla’s hand and began trudging up the hill back to the car. Carmilla started to follow her, but stopped. She turned back to face the headstones. “I don’t really believe that either of you are listening to this…but if you are…I just wanted to say that she’ll be okay.” Carmilla whispered, watching the flowers dance in the wind. “And I know you can’t really give me your blessings, but I’m going to ask her to marry me. Not now, not even this year. I’ll wait until graduation, probably. But I wanted you two to be the first to know.”

“Carm, you coming?” Laura’s voice carried throughout the cemetery.

“My lady awaits.” Carmilla smiled. “You guys don’t have to worry about us.” She glanced up the hill at Laura. “We’re going to be okay.”

End Notes

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