Summary

Laura's had a rough night. She's finally made it home with all her injuries but she doesn't want Carmilla to know so she tries her best to sneak in....surprise, surprise that doesn't go so well. Instead of being mad Carmilla is actually concerned. What the hell does that mean? It also turns out that something is really wrong on campus and Laura has found herself smack dab in the middle of it. But why are students being attacked and who's behind the plan? Could it be an old adversary they thought was dead and gone?...They're gonna have to find out... br />

NB. To clear up any confusion, this is a sort of alternate plot where S1's story went down as we all saw but Carmilla never admitted her feelings at the end and Laura's relationship with Carm remained snarky and antagonistic (I'm a sucker for that.)

Anyways, hope you enjoy.
UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS:

It was the bent screw that gave her away, not that she heard it herself.

It was just past one am when Laura pushed the door to their room open, keeping her right hand as steady as she could on the wood to keep that godawful creak it usually made from erupting. She’d always thought of it as sounding a bit like a mouth yawning in displeasure.

And that idea wasn’t helping any with her mission right now. Hearing nothing but the scuff of carpet, the blonde ducked her head down as she slipped into the gap, pushing the door back into place with a scraping relief.

It was only then that she snuck a quick glance at the far side of the room and saw the misshapen form of Carmilla buried under a thick winter duvet. Curled up in a mass of fabric and mushy limbs. For someone with seventeenth century manners she sure shook them off when it came to sleeping positions

The notion made her want to smile. She didn’t though. Between the deep cut on her bottom lip that had almost stopped bleeding and the throbbing bruise flaring against her left cheek she knew better than to move her face any more than she had to. And with the accompanying tiredness tunnelling through her bones, she just wanted to go to bed and sleep off the nightmare of tonight without any more drama.

That wasn’t too much to ask was it? She hoped not.

Placing her satchel down gingerly on the end of her bed Laura debated whether she should just get in and sort herself out in the morning but she could feel the hard congealed blood still sticking to her face, the matted hair clinging to her temple and she knew sleep wouldn’t be coming any time soon... at least not until she’d sorted all that out.

Besides, Carmilla couldn’t see the state of her. Not looking like this. That would just about put the icing on the cake- another raised eyebrow complete with a lecture on her complete inability to stay safe on campus.

And it wasn’t even my fault this time, she thought wryly. Dramatic irony; table for one please.

Stealing another look across the dim room Laura sucked in a hard painful breath which stung the fingermarks around her throat and grabbed the nearest towel from the heater.

A five minute shower then sleep. That was the plan. No harm, no foul. Rolling out her shoulders with a grimace she started to make her way to the bathroom. But just before she could get there, the spongy sound of movement hit her ears.

“Hot late night date with a weighty tome was it cupcake?”

Laura froze at the mumble that seemed to have emerged from the pit Carmilla called a bed.
Unsure how to answer, she simply swallowed dryly and tried to force a smile.

“I...uh...What can I say? I like my men like I like my books...uh, old and leathery....”

She’d meant to sound airy. Playful. But even she couldn’t fail to notice the tremulous tone in her own voice and cringed inwardly at the obviousness of the sound.

Christ, she should never play poker.

Without turning, she still heard the distinct rustle of cotton behind her and knew then that her roommate was stirring properly this time.

And Laura panicked; blinking hard as she tried to work out what to do.

Abort. Abort.

Her mind though felt like a mass of teeming worms, all curling inwards on each other in their vain attempts to flee any attempts at clear thinking.

“I...I...I’m sorry I woke you,” she offered lamely. “...Thing is... I’m pretty beat so I’ll just grab a quick shower and then I’ll be out of your...”

“Wait!”

She’d only just started to move again but her feet skidded to a halt as an unusually serious voice hit the air.

“Cupcake- is there something you want to tell me?”

The room fell into silence for a moment and a hundred lies swam through the blonde girl’s brain but somehow her jaw wouldn’t work when she told it to.

And the truth was- she didn’t want to lie to Carmilla. Not really. Hide things sure, but not lie to her face; they were... friends after all.

On instinct Laura bit her lip and whimpered at the hot-wet pain the action caused but she still managed to hold her muscles rigid willing herself not to be such a wuss and give herself away.

She was a Hollis for crying out loud!

“No..I...nope, everything’s peachy. I guess I’m just a little tired from....”

“I can smell blood on you.”

“Oh.”

“Oxygenated blood- the kind that’s supposed to be inside...” Carmilla paused, her voice grave. “Spilled blood.”

“Oh well, I.”

“Plus you seem to have developed a lisp, as if your lip’s twice as big as it should be...”

In the dark room, Laura’s head drooped as she realised she’d been well and truly busted. She should have known better than to try and play a creature of the night; that much was obvious. But she still refused to turn around and face the other girl. To look at those dark, critical eyes she knew waited for her.

So, fighting back the tears building behind her own, she stared miserably down at the floor. At the worn carpeting and the stains she could see even in the dim glow from the street.
“It’s nothing.”
...

“Nothing doesn’t tend to make you bleed.” Said Carmilla quietly. Almost tenderly. “That’s generally the hallmark of Something.”

As if she knew what she was talking about. As if she was...even a little worried?

Or that could be the potential concussion talking.

“Ok not nothing then but...it’s stupid and certainly not something we really need to talk about,” threw back the shorter girl weakly.

Laura hugged her towel closer to her chest as she prepared herself for the onslaught when her roommate ignored her completely and launched into her usual tirade of ‘told you so’s’ and those accompanying theatrical sighs she knew so well.

But just as she was tensing her muscles to deal with the imminent assault, a hand seemed to appear out of nowhere resting gently on the small of her back.
She almost squeaked in surprise, sending a wave of pain through her jaw but a second hand appeared a moment later and wrapped itself around her wrist, steadying her with five warm fingertips before she could jerk away. And then she was being twirled around, unable to stop herself from turning until there was nothing but darkness in front of her.

Deep brown waves of mussed up hair. Charcoal eyes that seemed to burn with some intangible emotion Laura couldn’t quite decipher when she was this close to her.
And a black long sleeved tee shirt that seemed to fall endlessly to the floor.

Strangely the only light she could see came from those small patches of pale skin on display; a wrist here, the long sweep of Carmilla’s neck. The white’s of her eyes. Brief glimpses of her human face...the one Laura had so desperately wanted to hide from a few minutes ago.
The thought made the younger girl feel a little ashamed of herself.

The monochrome scene in front of her wasn’t helping either.
Her head was pounding.
And she screwed her eyes closed for a moment.

“Are you hurt?”

The blonde began to shake her head from side to side but as soon as she reopened her eyes and locked gazes with the other girl her neck muscles seemed to stop responding to her. Refusing the lie she wanted to tell just to save face.

Sniffing a little, she finally gave a half nod instead.

Even that was enough to throw her equilibrium off though. Everything about the entire situation was weird and unsettling and the change of motion caused her to stumble a half step to her right, her left leg turning in on itself. Strong arms caught her in an instant however; at the elbows and waist, then guided her trembling limbs towards her bed.

Almost like they were her arms to begin with.
Matching perfectly.
The fingers on her wrist eased up a little.
“Let’s just sit down for a minute ok?” offered Carmilla helping her onto the bed.

So they did. Wordlessly, barely an inch between them- so close that they could feel each other’s breath in the frigid night air.

A slight hitch in rhythm although neither seemed to be aware of it.

A hush finally fell upon the pair then.

... 

... 

Neither one willing to break the silence until...

“...Laura?”

A small broken laugh flew from the blonde’s mouth and Carmilla looked at her quizzically.

“...You used my actual name.”

The brunette half-smiled in response, reaching a tentative hand out to brush a stray hair from Laura’s forehead.

“Seemed like the appropriate time. No witnesses around and all that.”

Unfortunately though it was just then that she brushed against the small gash over the shaking girl’s eyebrow and Laura flinched at the shards of pain it sent tumbling through her spine. Almost immediately her roommate’s demeanour changed into a concerned frown and she leant backwards behind them for the pullstring on the lamp to get a better look at the blonde’s condition.

At least that was her intention until she felt a warm palm clutch at her wrist. Pleading and earnest.

“Carmilla?” Laura asked in a whisper.

“Hmm?”

“Could we leave the lights off? Just for a bit?”

Laura waited with held breath for the answer but then Carmilla was back next to her, her body strong and implacable allowing Laura to relax a tiny bit again.

“Do I get to ask why?” said the brunette.

“I don’t want you to see me like this.”

Carmilla froze unsure what to do with the statement and Laura recoiled at how that might have sounded.

“I didn’t...that’s not what I...”

“...I’ve seen a lot worse over the years, let me tell you.”

“What I mean is...I don’t want you to think this is my fault. I don’t want you to be angry with me.”

“Angry with you? For what?” said her roommate with a tinge of perplexity turning her head.

Laura tilted her own down. “For being what you always think I am. Idiotic. And weak. And...and just...pathetically mortal I guess.”
Carmilla didn’t say anything at first and then as the silence stretched out between them, and Laura felt her eyes start to moisten for the second time at how stupid she must have sounded and how she probably just proved her own point she felt movement next to her. Subtle, fluid movement so different to the clumsy haphazard ways she’d always gotten by with.

The next thing she knew there were fingertips gripping her chin with a delicacy she’d never experienced and her face was being guided upwards; those warm points somehow avoiding the cuts Carmilla couldn’t even have known were there.

“Laura. You need to listen to me now.”

“You said my name again,” mumbled the blonde but the sombre expression that greeted her told her not to say any more.

Dark eyes pinned her down. “I have never...will never...think of you as any of those things. Curiosity doesn’t equate to idiocy; I know that better than most. And it’s your passion that makes you who you are in this life.” She blinked a little as Laura stared openly at her. “This age likes to tell us that if we become prey to something else, something bigger than ourselves then it’s our fault. We were wearing the wrong clothes. Walking along the wrong street. That we deserved what we got. Well it’s all bullshit. And if you say this isn’t your fault then I believe you. Ok?”

Laura nodded again, this time without the accompanying dizziness and running on pure instinct brought her hand up to cover the one still holding her chin.

“Ok.”

“And just for the record... I could never be angry with you. It’s like a law of the universe or something. You’re just too damn cute- my brain would probably implode the moment it happened.”

Laura laughed at that, ignoring the spiny twinge that shot through her cheek and finally allowed herself to lean into the other girl, letting the other side of her injured forehead come to rest against Carmilla’s.

“Thanks Carm,” she murmured.

The older girl smirked at the slight blush she could see on Laura’s cheek. “You’re welcome muffin... So are you going to tell me what happened?”

Laura sighed then and took a deep cleansing breath in. “Well, it all started in the library...”

TBC?...
Revelations for one, please

Chapter Summary

So sneaking in was a bust.
Nothing tonight seemed to be going her way.
But then did anything really, when her roommate was involved?

Chapter Notes

A/N: coz you guys were so awesome and lovely, here’s a second part to the tale and there will be actual plot coming don't worry. Let me know what you think, if it’s worth continuing, if you hate every word...all opinions appreciated (ps. I don’t have a beta right now so all mistakes are mine and I apologise for each and every one) Also just so you know all likes/retweets on Tumblr are basically crack to me and lead to more of these kind of shenanigans (which I pretty much sneak in during work but don’t judge me).... Anyways Rock on you amazing creampuff army...hope you like.

PREVIOUSLY:
The older girl smirked at the slight blush she could see on Laura’s cheek. “You’re welcome muffin... So are you going to tell me what happened?”
Laura sighed then and took a deep cleansing breath in. “Well, it all started in the library...”

CHAPTER TWO:
....
Laura shifted awkwardly as her mind travelled back through the tortuous last few hours.
It was the last thing she wanted to do truth be told, everything inside screamed at her just to block the whole thing out but Carmilla had asked outright; hell, had cared at least enough that they’d ended up here, sitting close together on her bed and she couldn’t quite bring herself to deny the request for some reason.

Sighing a little, an undignified kind of fatigue surging through her nerves next to the growing pain in her joints... not to mention something bizarre and indefinable that seemed to flare every time Carmilla leant a millimetre nearer, Laura found herself biting her lip.

“Well, I was doing a research paper in the library, in the Gladstone section you know with all the old original newspapers in the tall stacks...”

“This already sounds exhausting...” muttered Carmilla and Laura offered her a small smile though her stomach was starting to squirm again.

“It is when you’re half a person and they only have one stepladder for the whole floor.”
...
Strange.
She could have sworn she’d felt a shuffling beside her and Laura was getting the oddest impression that Carmilla wanted to say something about that...

But even though she waited for a moment or two nothing came out of the mouth next to her, the room was as still as ever and the blanket of quiet around the pair of them didn’t waver. So she forced herself to shrug it off.

Forced her mind to return to what had happened earlier though it was doing its best to tiptoe away onto other subjects.

“...Anyways I’d been working pretty solidly for like forty minutes on this really hard extract from Blake. On Another’s Sorrow, do you know it?”

Carmilla shook her head in the dim light. “Not really, I think we studied The Clod and the Pebble once.”

Laura’s tongue flicked out to wet her lips for a moment. “I was just looking up a word from the first stanza when there was this weird sound that echoed downstairs in the foyer. It wasn’t a scream exactly,” she frowned, her brows knitting together...”more like a horrible mixture of a... a roar and a hiss.”

“Not human?” said Carmilla apprehensively.

Her companion stared at the dark carpeting for a moment with its randomly scuffed imprints.

“No, it was definitely human. A girl.... A girl who was clearly terrified and in pain.”

“Oh.”

Carmilla nodded sombrely to herself.

“Well, doesn’t matter what century you’re in, you rarely find one without the other.”

It was such a small observation. Nothing that hadn’t been discussed multiple times by poets and philosophers over the years in all probability. But it still took Laura by surprise. She’d never thought about it before, the connection between fear and pain but now...hearing it from Carmilla’s lips, the longer she sat there listening to her breathe in and out with that unchanging rhythm the less she found that she could argue with it.

With the darkness behind that particular truth.

Twisting her head around to peer at the other girl, allowing herself just a moment to stare into the dark combative eyes that looked back almost hesitantly, her neck muscles started to scream as they tightened.

And Laura winced outwardly at the jagged twinge that roared through her spine. At least until her stupid brain decided to go all out and remind her in a sober tone that everything she’d been through tonight, the hell of it...was absolutely nothing compared to all the horrors her roommate must have seen in her hundreds of years on earth. All the horrors she’d heard. Felt.

Carmilla never spoke about it beyond the odd oblique reference of course; some throwaway line accompanied by an equally annoying sardonic grin but late at night when the other girl was out Laura had wondered endlessly... hideously on the subject. What nightmares the other girl must have witnessed. Or perpetuated.
Borne.

Oh God.

Laura couldn’t help it; she knew she must have major issues. Because her brain jumped straight to an image of the brunette trapped inside of a rotten old coffin, the wood around her knees and elbows decaying as the years went by but never quite enough to break. The rancid odour of rot and mould and flesh sitting on top of the blood like scum on its surface. Shrieking for someone, anyone to let her out so she could smell something other than her own reeking immortality.

Shame flooded through her without warning. At her own weakness. Her own inability to deal with one single night that threw a few cuts and bruises her way.

Lame-ass Laura.

And suddenly she wondered if those awful kids in fourth grade had known something she didn’t when they’d chanted that at her a week before spring break. Known something she’d chosen to ignore until right this second.

A familiar heat flushed through her system, slip sliding around her fingertips and in her embarrassment she turned away so that Carmilla couldn’t see the burning behind her cheeks even in the muted light.

...If her roommate noticed anything though she kept it to herself. In fact she barely moved except to tap a long pale finger on the duvet between them.

“I’m sorry you had to hear a sound like that.”

She sounded almost apologetic.

But even as she faced the far wall, the blonde wrinkled up her nose with a grim laugh.

“That was the problem though.”

The drumming paused and Laura mentally kicked herself.

God damn it. Now she was going to have to explain that verbal slip up too.

“It’s just… I have heard it before. It was a lifetime ago but still. Not the kind of thing you forget, you know.”

She felt caramel eyes slide onto the left side of her cheek; dark and curious, full of questions but she kept facing forward unwilling to go any further back than the few hours she had to. It was too much to ask, a path too laden with thorns and muck so she pushed the dark thoughts away as best she could, breathing the complicated silence into her lungs instead.

“...What do you...?”

No.

She couldn’t face the question that was coming, Laura’s thoughts were jumbled enough as it was and she panicked, opening her mouth before she’d even given thought to what she was going to say....and then...

“...When you were in the coffin... did you ever try and scream like that?...”
The younger girl clenched her muscles with liquid regret as the words fell out of her mouth. At her own ridiculousness. And bad taste.

Jesus, what was she, insane?!

But it was too late now. All she could do was sit there on the edge of the bed waiting for the brunette to throw her some caustic put-down. Or slap her hard in the face. Push her away. Anything.

... But there was no response.

Nothing.

Just breath and the thumping of the heating duct pulsing above them; tense and monotone. Nothing at all.

At least until she felt the bed raise slightly underneath her thighs and she had to watch with a sinking heart as the other girl padded silently away into their shared bathroom, her silhouette mingling with the shadows in the room.

Then Laura found herself alone; felt the air around her drop in temperature almost immediately from the loss of contact.

Stifled by the fact that this whole thing was down to her and her stupid stupid mouth.

Christ, this really was turning out to be the worst night of her life.

It was the next second that she caught movement again out of the corner of her eye.

And watched mutely as her dark haired companion crept back into the bedroom, a glinting metallic bowl resting in her cupped hands.

Tracking her with wide confused eyes Laura felt the mattress dip once more as Carmilla rested gently on the lip of her bed and placing the bowl next to her dipped something indiscernible into it.

“Carmilla I...”

Laura stopped talking in shock as a hand rose up from the bowl and the heel of it ever so carefully pushed a lock of hair behind her ear.

Stopped breathing too.

Then she felt the first sting as a washcloth curled in Carmilla’s palm dabbed at the cut above her eyebrow, smoothing the hard crusted blood away from her skin.

If she’d been speechless before now she was doubly so.

In fact she wasn’t entirely sure she wasn’t having some kind of stroke.

It seemed just as plausible as what was happening right now.

Maybe even slightly less terrifying.

Laura blinked nervously as she waited for the other girl to catch her eye but somehow her dark haired roommate remained impassive focusing on her temple, her gaze never wavering as she ran the cotton cloth towards her hairline.

Waited right up until she couldn’t take it any more.
And she felt the words backing up on her tongue again.

“And Carmilla...I’m so sorry. I had no right to ask I just...it’s just sometimes my mouth isn’t connected to my brain and I blurt out all these things I shouldn’t,” said Laura in a rush.

Carmilla still didn’t look directly at her but the pale face seemed to soften a little as she pushed the cloth upwards gently.

Then suddenly, out of nowhere charcoal eyes hooked onto hers, the hand stilling and Laura’s lungs emptying in response.

“I didn’t.”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t scream,” she explained patiently. “Not until...a lot later. It’s kind of hard to with a mouth full of blood. I had to wait for the level to drop after I’d... you know, drunk enough of it.”

Laura swallowed hard.

“It really would have been more of a gurgle anyway.”

A small ironic smile played about Carmilla’s lips and despite everything that had happened Laura couldn’t help the tiny chuckle that escaped her mouth.

“I am sorry,” she mumbled again although exactly what she meant by that not even she was entirely sure. Carmilla however simply brought the cloth down to graze her cheek with the same tenderness as before and Laura for some unfathomable reason almost found herself leaning into the touch despite the sting.

“Anyway this isn’t about me cutie,” said the vampire in a steady voice looking down at the bowl.

Laura glanced at her.

“When does it get to be about you then?” she asked in a whisper and Carmilla tilted to stare openly at her with a questioning gaze.

“Next lifetime I guess. Maybe the one after that. Karma’s a complicated lady.”

It was said with the usual drollness but the undertone of sorrow ribboning her words hit Laura like a brick to the chest and she baulked for a moment as her ribs violently protested the movement. She thought she might have gotten away with it since she straightened up almost immediately but unfortunately Carmilla seemed to be as eagle eyed as ever and frowning, put down the washcloth to carefully place her left hand flat against the younger girl’s side. It sent gunfire right through her.

“Someone really did a number on you didn’t they?” Carmilla said with concern.

The odd thing was that her hand felt warm even through the thin t-shirt Laura was wearing. And in some strange way the humid pressure of those fingertips splayed out against her muscles echoed the flutters and throbs moving through her ribcage. Which was entirely disconcerting.

And not a hundred per cent unpleasurable...

“I know what you’re doing,” she murmured though, shutting down the sensation.
“Laura...” said Carmilla in a voice that contained a low warning.

“If you want to talk about...” The blonde tried to motion with her hands which was more difficult than it should have been for multiple reasons, “you know...this can wait, it’s not like it compares to what you went through.”

“Laura.”

Carmilla was all seriousness now and she flicked her companion’s side lightly for emphasis, although not enough to cause any real pain.

“Just because I was...hurt once doesn’t mean its ok that you are now. It’s not a competition.”

Frustration etched itself into her temple and her hand shook next to her as if it was fighting some kind of urge to stray. Letting the washcloth fall onto the duvet, the brunette pulled her hand away from Laura’s side and brought it up to rest softly at her shoulder. “I don’t want to hear that this doesn’t matter. It does. You...matter.”

Laura’s skin was on fire. Not just at the point where it touched Carmilla’s, under those five little dots but everywhere even at the spots where russet eyes flickered over it and she had to fight to stop a large smile breaking out right across her face.

All pain somehow forgotten for a brief moment.

Then she narrowed her eyes a little as her brain caught up with her body.

“All right.” She said airily. “But while I may be injured I still know a distraction technique when I see one.” She tried to match Carmilla’s stern expression. “We’re coming back to this conversation.”

A shadowy shrug greeted her.

Not good enough, she thought.

“...And just for the record, you matter too. Despite what anyone might have told you in the past,” she added, her tone warm but still brooking no argument.

Her brown eyes dared Carmilla to dispute what she had just said, almost begged her to but Carmilla simply stared at her with a neutral expression. Laura could see through it though; could see by the slight twitch in that beautiful jaw that her roommate was a little taken aback by her words.

The girl had a good poker face no doubt but Laura was starting to see the chinks in her armour and she smiled inwardly when Carmilla finally caved; tilted her head and yawned.

“Whatever you say twinkie. You’re the boss.”

The older girl cocked her head. “Today at least.”

And Laura nodded definitively.

Grateful for the small victory. Barely noticeable to anyone but the two of them. But hard won and a little bit wonderful.

“So...”

Laura looked puzzled as she felt the hand on her shoulder blade softly drag down the material to her upper arm. “So?”
“There was a scream and then what happened?”

She smiled. “Oh right. Well, after I heard the scream, I couldn’t see anything from where I was in the stacks and there’s no signal in the whole of the library so I decided to sneak down the back stairs to see if I could work out what was happening. See if I could do anything to help but just as I went down the first few the overhead lights went out…”

“Also are you gonna strip now or later?”

Laura’s mouth dropped open as Carmilla grinned louchely at her.

“Excuse me?!” she squeaked, heart pounding again.

“So I can get a look at your ribs? I need to see the bruising to tell if it’s a muscle injury or a fracture.”

Laura gaped at her before her gaze flitted around the room. “And when did you spend seven years in medical school, huh?”

“1896, University of Vienna. And let me tell you- that shit was no joke when you looked like an underfed teenage girl and dressed little better than wench from the Donaustadt district.”

Laura didn’t know what to say, her head was throbbing again, her mind reeling at the idea of taking her shirt off with Carmilla sitting so incredibly close to her. Logically she knew it was ridiculous- they shared a room for Christ’s sake. They both changed in front of each other every day. As if it were nothing. But now...

Everything felt different. Exposed.

Her whole body felt like a bunch of wires that had been stripped back to reveal their insides to the elements and just the thought of Carmilla touching her even in an analytical, totally platonic way....

“Hey.”

Just as her mind was starting to spin out of control, Laura felt Carmilla slide her hand into hers and she glimpsed into dark patient eyes.

“I promise I just want to make sure you’re ok cupcake. Trust me?”

Laura’s brain was wheeling on it’s axis but somehow against all the odds her head seemed to be nodding of it’s own accord and just as suddenly she felt calm warm fingers brush against the hem of her t-shirt. Taking a deep breath in fighting all her instincts Laura slowly raised her arms, pushing down the jarring twinges that accompanied the movement and allowed her roommate to ever so slowly push the material upwards over her bra.

“Keep going…” she heard Carmilla whisper through her momentary blindfold and Laura bit down on her lip, grateful for the distraction.

“...So...so... right, the lights went out and it’s basically just pure luck that I didn’t fall on my ass all the way down...”

She heard a hiss of shock as Carmilla threw her t-shirt down onto the floor and must have finally seen the extent of the injuries criss crossing her ribcage and lower back but Laura forged onwards unwilling to stop now.

“And as I grabbed the handrail to steady myself, that’s when I saw them. And I guess they saw me
too...”

TBC...

NB. Author’s Fun Fact of the day: The poem Laura mentions at the beginning of her story was from Blake’s The Songs of Innocence and the one Carmilla studied comes from his Songs of Experience. Seemed fitting for their characters somehow. And thus ends this nerdy literary note!
You should see the other guy

Chapter Summary

It's time to girl the hell up and show Carmilla her injuries. Tell her what happened. She doesn't have to like it though. And why on earth would she?! It's not like she hasn't changed clothes in front of her before...imaging her eyes on her while she did...

Chapter Notes

So instead of doing my work I did this. Cool? Cool.
NB: I don’t own characters, settings, or anything else from the fabulous world of Carmilla. Not even a sassy leather jacket. Boo. Oh and come find me on Tumblr or Twitter if you wanna hang or ask me any questions about the fic.

RECAP:
Laura’s brain was wheeling on its axis but somehow against all the odds her head seemed to be nodding of its own accord and just as suddenly she felt calm warm fingers brush against the hem of her t-shirt. Taking a deep breath in fighting all her instincts Laura slowly raised her arms, pushing down the jarring twinges that accompanied the movement and allowed her roommate to ever so slowly push the material upwards over her bra.

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“And as I grabbed the handrail to steady myself, that’s when I saw them. And I guess they saw me too...”

CHAPTER 3:

“Jesus Christ.”

Laura’s nose did that involuntary scrunching thing as she took in the horrified expression on the usually stoic face in front of her. But before she could say anything, before her mouth came up with something even more damning than usual she forced herself to glimpse down at her own stomach.

She hadn’t actually had a chance to assess the damage before now but even in the dim light she could see her pale skin was mottled with large patches of purple and yellow; the edges petering out into hazy grey. One particularly insidious inkblot ran from her naval round to cover almost her entire
hip and that was the one she knew had taken the brunt of the fall earlier. She could feel it pulsing as she sat there; throbbing thickly as if all the blood in her body was pooling in that one spot for some kind of show. A freakshow, she thought miserably. Not for the first time.

“How’s the pain?”

Carmilla asked it quietly—unusually quietly for her but what could Laura really say.

Totally devastating? Somehow hot but square at the same time as if there was a burning screwdriver punching a hole in her gut? Like nothing she’d ever felt before.

Her eyes slid over to the brunette again.

“...I thought vampires didn’t like taking the Lord’s name in vain.”

Carmilla caught her gaze and idly sniffed, though she also made it quite clear she knew her roommate had dodged the question.

“I’m pretty sure he has bigger things to worry about than the occasional outburst from one of the ants in the ant-pile, sweetheart.” Dropping her eye-line again, she frowned. “Besides it’s not like he’s done a whole lot for me lately.”

The dark blonde couldn’t argue with that... not when her mind kept wheeling back to images of coffins and blood.

“Or you...apparently.”

All her muscles tightened as a soft palm suddenly rested gingerly against her throbbing side.

“Laura, who did this to you?”

And there it was. The question she’d been dreading was coming all evening; the one she’d hoped to avoid all together when she’d finally made it home and snuck into their room. Out in the open finally and brimming with accusations, she was sure.

Except... Carmilla’s tone wasn’t cold like she’d expected it to be. Not biting either. In fact the growl behind her words that set off a mass of electric skitters rumbling through Laura’s chest sounded a lot like... protectiveness?

Nope. It couldn’t be though. She must be reading too much into things, right? Carmilla was just being considerate, making sure she didn’t have a walking liability on her hands.

It was the only thing that made sense right now so Laura tried to ignore the sensation; tried to downplay the other warm hand resting on her knee and concentrated instead on hiding the flush building behind her cheeks.

Concentrated on something that was uncomplicated and uncluttered; something she could deal with.

She shrugged, “It wasn’t a person...exactly. And to be fair they weren’t...you know, totally responsible for what this might look...which is probably like aesthetically worse than it is...”
Two soft fingers were suddenly on her lips, cutting the sentence off at its root and her brain froze.

“As cute as the babbling thing is, I need a straight answer. This...” Coffee eyes trailed gravely across her abdomen then flicked up again. “This is serious. You’re hurt.”

Laura winced again.

Couldn’t help it when a thousand foggy memories of a woman’s voice saying the same thing hovered across the bedspread under her knees. Of a slightly exasperated expression (with no face attached as far as she could see) and the resigned soft sigh that always inevitably followed. The sigh that told her she should be more careful. Should behave more like a girl.

Out of the blue the hand at her hip changed position drawing her out the memory and Laura’s nerve endings fired of their own accord. But then the feeling of that warm, flat palm against her skin was replaced by something infinitely more delicate- five small pressure points pressing there instead. In a way that was almost more gentle than anyone had ever touched her.

“Hey hey, stay with me,” said a different voice, just as intangible but somehow firm as well.

Nope; not even the well-respected heroine of the local council Mrs Mary Hollis had touched her like that.

“Relax, muffin you’re safe here.”

And there it was again... the other voice. The one tinged with reassurance more than anything else.

And it was Carmilla, she realised as the room came swinging back into focus. Keeping her grounded.

With five fingertips that tapped her hipbone softly to emphasize the point.

Laura’s eyes blew wide. “Do you promise?”

... Crap...

Her own voice sounded small and pathetic as the phrase slipped out without Laura meaning it to and she couldn’t help smacking herself internally

No wonder everyone she met felt like they had to protect her.

Sometimes she’d used to wonder if she’d been one of this sickly women in her past life, back in the Victorian era maybe; one who’d been prone to fainting spells when the weather turned. All petticoat and laudanum.

But then the set of small lily pads coasting her skin began circling gently near to her hipbone, drawing a soft comforting spiral pattern against the curve, surfing goose bumps that followed them.

She forced herself to look up anxiously.

Carmilla for her part was still staring down at the bruise blotted against her side but there was a small quirk to her lips that seemed to match their rhythm in some odd way.

She even seemed to be humming under her breath.

“So they saw you on the stairs...” she prompted.

Laura’s body relaxed a little then and she blinked.

“Uh yeah. I was looking through the banister and the lights were still out, which I thought was weird
coz how could they see me in almost pitch black, right?”

One of Carmilla’s eyebrows raised and Laura wrinkled up her face.

“They weren’t vampires.”

“So you’re an expert on our kind now? You know us inside and out?”

“No not at all!” Laura exclaimed, her skin still singing interrupting all thought processes. “I just...they didn’t have any of the...the signs, you know.”

“I knew it,” drawled Carmilla though her fingers never once broke their dance. “It’s the cape, right? The silk-lined cape always gives it away...”

And Laura let out an irritated giggle.

“Do you want to hear my story or not?”

That was when Carmilla held up a hand, a more serious look firmly back in place. “Sorry. Carry on.”

Her roommate narrowed her eyes for a moment, assessing the sincerity of the other girl’s apology in the shadowy dorm then nodded as if at least partly satisfied.

“There were no capes, ok. No grabbing, no biting. Nothing like that at all. There was just the girl, the one whose face I couldn’t see and these two guys standing in front of her. And...and nothing about it seemed right. I don’t just mean the scream. I mean the way they just stood there- it was nothing like Will or his band of kidnapping ass-holes. The pair of them, it’s like they were frozen in place staring at her. As if nothing else in the world existed except for her face.”

The pads surveying her skin stopped for a moment. “They were stood there looking at her? In the middle of the library?”

“Except for when they clocked me. But even after that they pretty much ignored me and went back to her.”

“What did you do?”

Laura swallowed and set her mouth in a thin line. “What I usually do. Something really stupid.”

She peered over and catching a glimpse of Carmilla’s furrowed brow, bit the inside of her cheek before she could say anything else to make the brunette mad.

“I got my phone out of my pocket and slid it through the bars to see if I could get a picture of the one closest to me,” she explained.

“And did you?”

Laura nodded woozily, a little of the old adrenaline buzzing through her system as she began reliving the situation. “I thought the backlight might at least get their attention off her if nothing else but it didn’t seem to register at all. I did get a picture though. And since they weren’t bothered, I decided to try and get a shot of her too. In case...” She hesitated as her own past logic reconnected with the nerve endings in her brain, “In case I couldn’t... save her...then at least we’d have a leg up on finding out who she was.”

Carmilla’s hand dropped away from Laura’s skin for a moment at that. The blonde almost whimpered internally at the loss of warmth though she didn’t show it of course. Instead she fixed the
older girl with an implacable stare.

“So I snuck back up to the balcony and ran round to the other side, to the ledge underneath the stained-glass window so I could get her and Psycho number two in the one frame.”

Intrigue was written on the brunette’s face. “How did you know...”

“It’s where I took that photo of the campus choir from for the newsletter last year? Perfect lighting from the streetlamp outside, expansive angle- one size fits all,” she replied with a small grin. “Best A I ever got for a photojournalism module.”

“So you got all three of them on camera?”

Laura nodded again and enjoyed a brief flare of pride. “Yep. Almost stupidly broke my neck hanging off the window frame but I got the shot.”

“That’s not stupid. It’s pretty impressive I’d say.”

Laura grinned at the unexpected compliment though it made the side of her mouth flare. “And I probably would have agreed with you...right up until one of the loose bits of tile came off under my foot.”

Concern quickly burned its way back into charcoal eyes.

“That got their attention all right when it hit the floor. I tried to get my footing back so I could get out of there but I guess they’d had about as many interruptions as they could stand at that point.” Laura shifted anxiously at the memory but then fingers were sliding between hers; warm and comforting to keep her on track. Almost the perfect fit.

“What happened then?”

“Before I could pull myself back onto the main bit of the ledge, the two of them came running down the main hall towards me. At least that’s what I figured at the time. I mean I heard footsteps echoing on the marble but I had my back to them because I was trying to drag myself up on the brickwork. Then something hit the wall right next to my ear.”

Her companion went deathly silent and all of a sudden Laura found that she was the one massaging Carmilla’s fingers in an attempt to reassure her. She wasn’t sure when that had happened. Not that it mattered of course.

“It was a book. I think it might have been a guide to Zen Meditation which is... kind of ironic I guess but then there were more of them hitting the window around me. I was trying to be as careful as I could I swear but at one point I had to look round to see where they were and that’s when one hit me here...” Laura pointed to the corner of her mouth with a sad smile. “And the next thing I know was something heavy slamming into my forehead...and...and I fell.”

Carmilla’s mouth dropped open. “Laura, that’s a twenty foot drop.”

The blonde girl gave a crooked grimace. “You don’t need to tell me... or my spine. Luckily I landed on the clerking desk which took some of the impact but my hip landed on the edge of the returns shelf and it still knocked the wind out of me. And when I managed to roll off after a minute or two and everything started to come back into focus those two...things were standing over me.”

An angry snarl erupted from the white throat next to her suddenly and she knew she’d gone too far. Said too much. Just like always.
And juiced up with adrenaline, going on pure instinct Laura leant backwards, steeled herself for the insults and yelling that was surely about to come. All the accusations and disappointment she’d been waiting for since this whole sorry nightmare began because, well, that was always the way things went in the Hollis household. Concern followed by frustration and usually some grounding too. Holding her stomach muscles tight though it hurt like a bitch, she tried to hold her head up for the onslaught she knew was imminent.

But then... Carmilla shattered all her expectations in one fell swoop when she closed the gap that Laura had made, wrapped her arms tightly around the younger girl’s shoulders and pulled her into an enveloping hug, one almost too big, too unrestrained for someone of her size.

For someone everyone on campus thought to be cool and uninviting.

Perhaps it was the fact that it was so completely unexpected. Or that it beat the hell out of a lecture and a bunch of finger-pointing which was what she had been anticipating. But it was... just the most amazing thing she’d ever felt.

Carmilla’s dark brown hair tickled Laura’s nose as she gave herself up to the embrace and smelled wonderfully of pampas grass and orange groves. Even more distracting were the fingers scritching the small of her back in gentle, pulsing waves. Similar to the motions she’d felt on her hip but just as tender. Avoiding any other bruises she might have lurking there that they hadn’t examined yet.

It was kind. And compassionate. Hell, almost...loving.

“So you’re not angry?” she whispered hopefully, her breathing still erratic. Carmilla burrowed into the side of her neck then, her lips a millimetre from pale skin which was definitely not helping Laura’s breathing problems.

“Well it is true you could have been killed or worse....”

Laura froze for a second, “I...I know it was dangerous but...Carmilla, I didn’t really have time to think up a strategy and I couldn’t just...”

The brunette pulled back abruptly before she could finish her sentence and holding Laura’s startled gaze pushed a lock of hair behind her ear with warm eyes.

“I’m not going to argue that it wasn’t dangerous cupcake. But...” Leaning in again ever so slightly she positioned her mouth next to the humid shell of Laura’s ear. “But...it was also brave and incredibly selfless too. So going on overall statistics, I’d say you’re doing pretty well so far today ok?”

A laugh burst out of the blonde’s mouth; a weird mixture of relief combined with something not quite so easily defined and the pair of them simply sat there smiling at each other a little bashfully.

At least before Carmilla reluctantly repositioned herself a couple of inches away again and Laura’s eyes decided to ruin the moment by wandering down to those thin lips in front of her. Glimpsing at how soft and inviting they looked in the shadowy room.

It took Laura a few seconds to realise what she was doing before she glanced away.

Double crap.

“See something you like Sundance?”

Damn.
Her face flushed for what felt like the hundredth time that day. “Must be the concussion I guess. My focus is all off at the moment.”

Carmilla grinned back at her knowingly. “Uh huh. Must be, right?”

She had no idea what she was going to say to that. But before she even tried to formulate a response though Laura’s contented expression suddenly dropped causing Carmilla frowned in response.

“Oh my God. Their faces.”

She stared at Carmilla.

“What about their faces?”

Laura scrambled away from her for a moment, ignoring the cloud of confusion from her roommate and dug through her pocket for something.

“I thought it was the concussion but their faces were…”

Pulling out her phone with a triumphant ha, Laura slid back onto the bed and opened up the screen in front of the pair of them. Scrolling through the menu to her photos she selected the last few that had been taken. And then there they were.

The figures from earlier.

The two guys; one with shaggy unkempt hair and an earring in his left ear giving him a piratesque vibe. And the other with a thinner frame, a longer neck and an undercut which made his face look far too slender for his body next to the mysterious girl. Choppy blonde hair for her. Slightly rounded nose. Not unattractive but obviously scared from the O her mouth was making.

All three so different to each other...and yet...

“What the hell?”

Laura looked over at Carmilla with trepidation as she realised she hadn’t been mistaken earlier. That it hadn’t been the head trauma.

“They all have the same face!”

Both of them looked at the pictures again for confirmation but the truth was right there in front of them.

The two guys and the girl from the library.

They all shared an identical face...

TBC...
The girl of a thousand faces

Chapter Summary

Laura has a mini freak out.
What happens next may be the weirdest thing to happen to Laura so far that evening.
Which is saying a lot.

Chapter Notes

Yay and huzzah for all the kudos and comments.
Thank you all- I'd get every one of your names printed on a t-shirt if they'd all fit.
Legitimately.
More actual plot will be coming in next chapter I promise.

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS CHAPTER 4:

For a moment they both stared down at the brightness of the screen and the glowing pale faces looking back at them. A set of rounded, undefined jaws with the hint of a dimple in the chin. Or what might have become a dimple if a smile had actually been present. That would have implied some kind of emotion though and it was precisely the lack of such a thing that made the two visages so completely eerie.
As if they were unfinished. Works of art stuck in the opening stages without the necessary detail to make them real. Without the talent that turned a portrait into an actual work of art.

“Well Hell.”

Laura nodded in sombre agreement before her gaze flicked back to the phone in her hand. Studying it brow furrowed as she remembered looking up at those awful vacant expressions.

Before her head snapped upwards as something dawned on her.

“Oh my God!”

Carmilla didn’t have time to question what that meant before she was moving.

“My face...”

Leaping to her feet, Laura practically sprinted over to the oval mirror hanging above the dresser on the far wall and stuck her face as close to the glass as she could.

“Uh...What’s happening?”

Laura barely heard the question as she gawked at her dim reflection, ignoring how wide her eyes were as she focused on the contours of her own face. The slight flush in her cheeks made them seem wider than usual somehow and she sucked in a breath as she brought her hands up to measure their breadth. It wasn’t right. It didn’t look right. Pulling her skin downwards next to her nose, she
counted the smattering of freckles covering the area.

Five.
Was that right? Hadn’t there been more before?

Her breath was starting to come in shallow bursts like bullets from her lungs but she fought the urge
to put her head between her knees and tallied them up again with a fingertip touching each one
gingerly. One, two three four...Five.
Definitely five.

Maybe that was ok.
It had always been five, right?

She worried somewhere in the back of her brain that she was probably just overreacting but...but the
memory of lying on the cold library floor with those towering figures standing over her shunted to
the front of her brain obscuring everything else. The way they had looked down at her so blankly. So
completely incuriously like she was nothing more than a design on one of the tiles.

The same way they had stared at that girl... as if she wasn’t a person at all.

Laura felt a wave of anxiety surf through her veins and then her hands were back on her face of their
own accord again, running over its mass of planes and imperfections. Over the almost invisible scar
on her forehead where she had run square into a lamppost on Lambert Street and as a result the arch
of her eyebrow didn’t grow quite right.
Over the slight bump on the bridge of her nose.
All the stupid little things she’d hated so much growing up that now proved she was...still her.
Right?

As her dread built itself up into a burgeoning panic attack she was just contemplating the merits of
chucking up in the bin next to her when she was shocked out of her reverie by a ghostly pair of
hands sliding around her waist, the fingertips holding her securely in place.

Breathing hard Laura’s eyes darted back to the smoky mirror in front of her and widened further as
another reflection joined hers quietly.

“Hey hey cupcake, relax. You’ve had quite the night.” Carmilla whispered.

And it helped. A little.

More than a little actually.
Carmilla didn’t say anything more as she moved to cross her arms softly across Laura’s torso
anchoring the pair of them together, her warm body pressed up against the smaller girls back. Her
chin almost resting on the crook of her left shoulder blade. As if they were made to slot together this
way.

They both stood there then, peering at their shared mirror image in the glass in front; the dark blonde
entranced by the calm exhalations that tickled the back of her neck and her companion focused on
the way her wrists moved against the shallow breaths her roommate was still taking.

“You wanna explain?” she asked evenly.

They caught each other’s eye and though she didn’t really want to move from the calming embrace
she was being held in Laura slowly dragged herself round to face her roommate, any new
embarrassment drowned out by the coastal surge of terror mingling with it. Carmilla’s arms still
locked securely around her back.

“My face...”

Carmilla blinked at her, clearly unsure as to what she was getting at.

“It’s still...my face right? Like, my face. I mean, the same one I had this morning?”

She wasn’t sure she’d ever asked such a bizarre question in her whole entire life but Laura’s eyes still flicked between the dark ones in front of her for confirmation. And everything suddenly clicked into place for Carmilla. Laura’s freak out. What she’d just said about those weirdos standing over her in the library.

She might have laughed at the absurdity of the whole thing once upon a time. Might have scoffed as she usually did, if the fear hadn’t been so genuine and so present in those large eyes looking back at her. And actually, the more she thought about it, the more she pictured the younger girl lying there in agony in the foyer alone, with no-one aware of where she was, unable to defend herself even, the less ludicrous Laura’s panic seemed. In fact, it was kind of justified. More than.

The anger coiling in her gut was proof enough of that. Acidic and more than a little biting. Carmilla kept the growl at the back of her throat. That wasn’t what Laura needed right now. The brunette had witnessed enough terrified people in her life, people at their lowest ebb to know that rage was the thing that usually pushed them over the edge into complete madness. Even when the anger was totally justified and came from those trying to protect them.

So she swallowed her own emotions as best she could and released one of her palms so that it could reach up to cup the right side of Laura’s trembling face. Fingertips at the edge of her forehead, palm cradling her chin.

“It’s totally your face. One hundred per cent Hollis charm. Or what passes for charm these days...”

Laura didn’t respond, though she at least seemed to be listening as her heart hammered against Carmilla’s chest. So the older girl went all in and let her thumb caress the edge of the blonde’s cheek.

“Laura, trust me you’re fine. This face...” Her other hand slid upwards to rest against her neck, “is as infuriatingly cute and irrepressible as always. Downright adorable some might say. You know how I know?”

The other girl gave an imperceptible shake of the head and Carmilla’s lips tilted upwards.

“Because you’re doing that scrunchy nose thing you always do when you’re trying to get a handle on something. The one that’s kind of endearing and ridiculous at the same time.” She gave a full grin then. “Like a baby piglet learning to snort for the first time.”

Laura looked at her properly then in the gloom, the comment bringing her out of her reverie.

“Gee. Thanks.”

“It’s the answer you were looking for right?”

Laura glared at her an inch away with a deadpan expression. “Not exactly.”
And Carmilla could barely contain the second grin fighting to break out on her face. “Not spinning out anymore are you though?”

Laura went to say something in response to that, something probably a little more uncouth than usual then stopped as she realised the brunette was right; her heart-rate was nowhere near as loud as it had been though her nerves were still sending jolts of electricity up and down her arm. Recognising that she had no comeback at all, Laura closed her mouth with a sheepish bite of the lip.

“...I guess, you might have some semblance of a point there,” she grumbled.

And low moonlight suddenly rippled across the pair of them as if it agreed.

Given the abrupt change in tone, Laura expected Carmilla to loosen her grip on her hip as her breathing began to even out but to her surprise, for some reason she didn’t. The other girl simply stood there, her one hand remaining in place against her side as the other held her face moving only to brush a rogue hair away from her eye line. Causing Laura’s stomach to jump into her throat again. Brown eyes met charcoal with a jolt.

“...Guess it was quite the night, huh?” Laura said shakily as Carmilla looked directly at her, the words that usually came so easily falling into the dark recesses of her brain all of a sudden. Carmilla simply tilted her head.

“Yup.”

She pursed her lips at the end of the word and the small motion caught the whole of Laura’s attention for a moment. So much so that the blonde’s tongue snuck out to lick her own lips surreptitiously as the pair of them remained motionless but she still refused to drop her gaze this time preferring to hold her ground instead. Almost daring her roommate to move closer. To do something else new and unexpected.

Which she did.

Ever the rebel. Ever the insurgent.

As Carmilla’s taller frame leant in slightly, Laura felt the tips of dark hair tickle her throat before anything else registered in her frazzled brain and her breath caught in her throat as pale skin filled her vision the next moment. She could smell the apple and cinnamon fragrance of Carmilla’s shampoo now and it ignited the pool of warmth lolling around in her stomach though the brunette hadn’t seemed to notice. If anything she seemed to be in some kind of trance as she breathed close to Laura’s slightly open mouth, her shoulders held rigid with a new kind of tension that hadn’t been there a minute ago. Sharp collarbones visible under her black t-shirt. A counterpart to the delicate wrists already a centimetre from Laura’s skin. So feminine and defiant at the same time. And strangely comforting too.

Then, just as Laura’s eyes began to close of their own accord, her senses overwhelmed by the hum of the flesh in front of her she felt Carmilla stall for a second. Eyes snapping open again, she watched confusedly as Carmilla stared back at her with a tinge of sadness.
“I think you...you need to get some rest cupcake.”

“I...what...no...” stuttered the blonde but her roommate was already taking a step back to relieve the space between them and cold air flooded Laura’s chest.

Shrugging with a heavy smile she threw her hands up. “I’m fine. I’m all good, see. There’s no more crazy I swear.”

The brunette however was rubbing the back of her neck as she raised her chin, almost as if she were weighing something up in her brain.

“While it’s good to know your usually inexhaustible supply of mental-ness is on the wane, you know I’m right. You need to sleep. Heal a little.”

Laura could have laughed. Or screamed. Because as if on cue, the aching whinging cacophony of pains from her hip and face took the opportunity to come screaming back as the sentence fell from Carmilla’s mouth causing Laura to rock back on her heel and wince visibly. Whether it was at her roommate’s ridiculousness or her own body’s betrayal she wasn’t quite sure though. And not that it didn’t stop her from trying to push through the onslaught by shaking her shoulders out without the inevitable grimace that followed.

“I’m not an invalid Carm. And those things are still out there.” She frowned, trying to bury the hurt tone in her voice. “How am I supposed to sleep knowing they could be going after someone else right now?”

It was a fair question but one that didn’t seem to surprise the brunette. In answer Carmilla reached down and slid her fingers in between Laura’s, gripping them as the blonde tried limply to extricate hers.

“Those things chose the middle of the night to make their move. Which suggests either they’re nocturnal or they have an aversion to crowds of people being around when they’re doing...whatever the hell they’re doing. Either way I’d say it’s a pretty safe bet that campus is safe for the next twelve hours or so.”

Nodding towards the window, Laura followed her gaze and saw a set of faint pink streaks painting the night sky. Dawn was coming.

She so desperately wanted to argue though. That they couldn’t know that for sure, that that was nothing more than conjecture. But now that her adrenaline was burning low, her spine was grumbling with pain alongside the rest of her and as much as she wanted to deny it, just holding herself up was becoming a bit of an issue. Had she been swaying on her feet?

Was that what had tipped Carmilla off? God, she hoped not. That would just be too embarrassing to contemplate so she turned back to her roommate and narrowed her eyes.

“So assuming you’re not a hundred per cent wrong about that...which is not impossible I suppose...what are you suggesting?” she asked quietly.

Carmilla shrugged then, as if she hadn’t thought that far ahead. “We get some sleep. Then I guess research mode this afternoon. See if we can identify these things. Give them a name at least.”

Huh.

Laura had read once in an old mediaeval text that people used to believe that naming something gave
you power over them. Demons. Enemies. Even lovers.

It had seemed like a ridiculous notion—cheap and unlikely but one the lower classes had clung to with everything they’d had from what the book had said. At least that’s what she’d thought at the time. But now, considering what little she knew of Carmilla’s past—the hundreds of rural superstitions she must have been brought up to believe in, the horrors she’d seen with her own eyes over the last century... and bearing up under the weight of her own criss-crossing aches and pains, the idea that they might soon be able to give those creatures a name filled Laura with a weary kind of relief. And it was a plan of sorts. Vague but doable.

More than she’d come up with.
You had to do these things one step at a time, right?

Debating with herself in her own head, Laura finally realised that she’d zoned out and stared down at their still linked hands as she settled back in the shared room. “Ok, fine. We’ll do things your way.”

Carmilla smiled, “Good stuff.”

Softly untangling their fingers, she winked at Laura as she started to make her way over to the messier side of the room, pulling back her covers in one rough movement.

Laura for her part could only stare miserably at her own neatly made bed, the bowl of water still sitting primly on the duvet. Now that she was allowed to relax a little and tiredness was seeping through her bones, the thought of crawling into the cold sheets on her bed kind of filled her with a new anxiety she wasn’t quite sure she could put a finger on. All she knew was that she didn’t want to be alone right now. That it wasn’t cotton she needed next to her skin.

“She…Carm?” she said hesitantly, her brain screaming at her to shut up before she made a complete fool of herself.

“Mmmm?”

She watched the other girl pull off one boot with impressive force, managing somehow to stay upright with the kind of grace Laura could only wish for. Her resolve began to crumble. Even as her body started to lose the energy to hold itself up.

“Um, nothing. Never mind.”

There was a thud then as the second boot hit the floor and Laura coughed awkwardly as she tried not to stare. When the brunette turned to glance at her she looked away towards the window and the growing dawn again.

“Creampuff... you’re already shirtless whatever it is you can just ask.”

Laura looked wearily down at herself and blushed as she realised she was indeed only wearing her bra. Crossing her arms over herself, she couldn’t help hopping from one foot to the other as she fought her two warring instincts about whether to ask Carmilla to sleep in her bed with her. Whether she needed another excuse to make herself look like a total idiot this evening. She was already batting a hell of an average after all.

Just as she made up her mind to girl the hell up and go slink under her duvet for the night, she caught a glimpse of Carmilla standing next to the bed she’d just gotten ready for the night.
“So are you gonna stand there all night or are you getting in?” she asked neutrally holding up the corner of the duvet.

A strange catch in her voice.

Her mouth dropped open. “I...uh...”

Carmilla shook her head as she realised Laura was still fighting some kind of mental battle with herself, even with the offer right there hanging between them like uncut rope.

Breathing out, she swallowed and tried to appear nonchalant; though truth be told it was getting harder the longer the evening was going on.

“Look, I don’t think those things are going to be a threat tonight but just in case I’m wrong...which I never am...but just in case, it’d make more sense for the both of us to sleep this side of the room where we have a clear view of the door.”

That was smart.
Laura offered up a grateful smile which Carmilla nodded at.

“And you’ll warm up quicker if there’s two of us,” she added.

Logical.

“...And... my mattress is softer than yours, it’ll be easier on your bruises.”

Ok, that one was a little less convincing. They both knew the university had bought a bulk load of mattresses from the Mattress King warehouse across town, each one exactly the same as every other. Hell they’d had to unwrap them themselves at the start of term before they could put the sheets on. The hallway had turned into a boiling sea of plastic wrap which had taken days to clear.
All of this crossed the blonde’s mind as she smiled over at her fidgeting bunkmate and her chest couldn’t help expanding as she noticed the barest blush on the cheeks across the room from her.

Carmilla wanted her to sleep in her bed.
The thought made her feel dizzy and euphoric all at the same time but she didn’t want to prolong the brunettes awkwardness anymore so she stopped her brain from descending into why Carmilla might be making such an offer, nodded back in the same offhand manner and wandered across to her bed to grab the wrinkled Sunnydale t-shirt she usually slept in.

Delicately pulling it over her head with as small a whimper as she could manage, determined not to need any help with at least one damn thing this evening, she pulled her hair free then padded over to Carmilla’s side of the room.

Coming to a halt, she blinked looking down at the grey sheets.

“Um, do you have a side you prefer?”

“Whichever side means I don’t have to stand here freezing my ass off any longer than is actually necessary.”

Laura giggled at the barely disguised grouchiness as she crawled underneath the duvet Carmilla was still holding then lay down gingerly on her back feeling the surge of grey static pain worm its way up each vertebrae.

She felt the mattress dip as the older girl slid in next to her and did her best to keep the scowl off her face at the movement.
“Sorry,” said a small voice next to her and despite the wave of lethargy that was abruptly rolling over her skin Laura let the fingers of her right hand skirt the flat plane of the bed sheet underneath them until they found another set.

Linking pinkies with Carmilla she dragged her bottom lip underneath her front teeth.
“Please don’t apologise. You’ve been...”

She searched for the right word as patterns of light started to circle the ceiling overhead making her eyelids flutter of their own accord. Slow tired flicks she didn’t seem to have any control over. Amazing? Kind? Wonderful?

“...Everything,” she said drowsily too tired to even worry about how stupid that sounded.

If Carmilla noticed she didn’t comment but Laura could have sworn the brunette was grinning up at the whitewash ceiling above to her right for some reason.
As it was she could barely keep herself awake anymore, not now that she was warm and comfortably wrapped in the thick bedding around her.
In fact she didn’t think she’d ever felt anything quite so wonderful in her whole life.

Lurching over onto her good hip in an effort to take the weight off her back, she cracked an eye open briefly to make sure she wasn’t close enough to headbutt the wall then slumped down gratefully.
Breathing in the soft scent of Carmilla’s surprisingly clean sheets.
Listening to familiar hum of the air conditioning unit.
Falling into that colourless space behind her eyes.

Barely aware as a warm arm snuck across to lay over her stomach; an inch or two above the contusions on the only place that wasn’t sore.
As if it knew exactly where it was supposed to be.

“Carmilla?” Laura whispered then hazily, as she felt warm breath burrowing into the back of her neck offering her a rhythm to match her own.

Carmilla groaned with exhaustion. “What is it this time, Creampuff?”

“Do you think maybe they were just a bunch of weird looking triplets?” came the mumble as Laura buried her face into the pillow.

The brunette rolled her eyes, though in the lessening darkness in the room the gesture had no discernible point.
Laura couldn’t see it but she could tell by the sound of eyelashes flicking against fabric that Carmilla was mocking her.

“What?”

“Nothing. Do you ever think you might be spending a little too much time with that Perry girl though?” said Carmilla with a yawn.

It had been a stretch. To be fair triplets wasn’t the first thing that had popped into her brain lying there in agony on the cold marble tiles of the library foyer. Holy fucking hell I landed in the Overlook Hotel had been. Technically.

But right now all that seemed to have happened about a hundred years ago as Laura fell asleep almost immediately, enjoying the comforting weight of her roommates arm resting over her and the foot hooked neatly underneath her own.
As if everything was in its place.
As if everything might just be ok...

TBC....
Silent People have the loudest minds

Chapter Summary

It's time for Laura and Carmilla to wake up together...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Five:
By Heligena

The darkness was long gone by the time Carmilla rose to consciousness.

Actually rose was probably too pretty a word for the rumbling dragging sensation that began in the pit of her stomach whenever she started to wake up in the mornings. And it always happened the same way. First there was an uncomfortable weight sitting over her hips like a demon straddling them while she lay there. Then the pressure migrated and started to snake down her legs making the muscles twitch as it moved; first in her thighs, then her knees and calves until it pooled in her toes, filling them with queasy squirts of lactic acid.

It still wasn’t usually enough to wake her. Most times her face remained buried in the creases of her pillow as her legs stretched out their discomfort without her even being aware of it; as if they wanted to shake off the droplets of poison trilling through them, t-shirt pushed up to reveal a band of chilly flesh across her stomach.

It had become so routinely infuriating however, happening day after day, month after month that she had tried on a couple of different occasions to work out whether waking up had always been like that. The problem was that her memories of mortal life were hazy at best and the recollections of her first century clothed in darkness had barely fared much better. Though tastes and sounds had buzzed with a new insane kind of clarity the moment she’d woken from death, physical sensations seemed to have ended up being the price for that. Blows taken. Blows doled out by her own knuckles had hardly registered against the salty-sweet tang of bloodlust. Even the pleasure that had been found in dark alleys with willing girls had felt muted, watered down into little more than a tremble of a muscle or two that she couldn’t prolong no matter how she tried.

Her body had ended up becoming a weight to carry around, to use as a lure more than anything else. More of baggage then a boon. A weapon for her mind to use and nothing more. And she’d been so laughably proud of it when she had finally become a woman in her human life. Spending hours preening and perfuming herself for the attentions of others...

Of course at first she’d been able to distract herself with her new life. Her new gifts. But after the first fifty or so years had passed the loss of sensation turned out to be almost impossible to bear. That was when she began to try everything she could think of. To prove she was as alive as ever; more alive even, because that was the legend, right? Longevity and lucidity hand in hand. In muscle and mind.
Those were the vampire’s spoils; everyone knew that.

And yet when she’d figured out the massive lie buried in the myth she had railed against it, still convinced that she could provoke some kind of real physical sensation even after death. Treading so many paths in her efforts to prove that she was the exception. Paths that led to opium dens with dirty razor blades to cut herself with. Ones that swung through underpasses with abandoned fires to burn on.

Hell, she’d even instigated fights with humans and vampires alike just to invite the chip of broken bone that inevitably followed. But though the dull ache whispered to her of the damage she had done, of the grievance under her skin it never bloomed fully into the kind of pain she wanted so desperately. Exquisite, singing pain she dreamt of so often.

She’d had to admit that in the end. The misery of the realisation had been cloying and adolescent but she’d given in eventually. Making the most of the dull ache that came from the occasional fistfight. And the one that accompanied waking up. The only remnant left from her old rage.

But today was different though.

Her stomach depressed. Her calves trembled the same. But this time as her legs arched out, they smacked into something warm curled up next to them and retreated again in an instant. Jerked out of her reverie by the unexpected movement the brunette gave a groggy frown and peered down at the lump in the duvet below her.

A lump that seemed bigger than normal. And oddly alive. Glimpsing to her left she saw a sea of dark blonde hair fanning out on the pillow next to where her head had lain, the curve of a small nose poking through the wheatfield. Laura. In her bed. She froze in place.

What the...

And just like that the events of last night leapt back into her mind and Carmilla’s eyes were drawn to the dark bruise she could just about make out on the cheek next to her. The rest of its kin hovering painfully below the sheets on Laura’s small frame waiting to make their presence known when she finally came to. Waiting to sneer and remind her of exactly what she had gone through in the dark of the library. Staring at the purpling stain and the pink untainted skin surrounding it Carmilla swallowed hard for a second as her emotions spun out of her control. Oh God.

Was it wrong for her to feel nothing but envy for a moment? Just for a brief second that no-one else would ever know about?

She wasn’t sure in her bleary heavy-eyed state but she couldn’t deny the flash of jealousy sparking to life in her veins. For those bone deep injuries and the pain they dragged with them that waited to sledge-hammer its way into reality. That was after all what she had chased all those years ago. Desired like nothing else. And yet...
This was Laura.

As she watched the small girl’s rhythmic breathing make the ends of the pillowcase flutter every few seconds or so, the thought that such a dark imp might be waiting for the blonde when she finally woke almost immediately doused that pathetic kind of covetousness she’d been feeling. Replaced it with a rushing concern for the student next to her. Someone innocent of anything except being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Attacked for trying to help a girl she’d never seen before.

Not caring about the throbbing cuts and bruises that came with throwing herself headlong into the fray. Doing something despite that fact rather than being motivated by it.

The exact opposite of you, she thought worrying a lip between her teeth as a thought bloomed inexplicable. Was that why she was so drawn to the little ball of angst face-planting in her pillow? Because she got to experience everything Carmilla had been searching for without even asking for it.

And what did that mean? Was she living vicariously through the blonde without even knowing it? Drawing on her light the way all the monsters in fairytales did so well? If it was true it might just be the most selfish thing she’d ever done… And yet...

Stomach roiling and filling up with an unsettling gas Carmilla tried to convince her tired brain to look away, to get out of the bed and away from the cloud of disturbing thoughts tangling around each other. But her body wouldn’t respond. Of course. It was puffed up with the usual sense of rebellion and kept drawing her eyes downwards. To the sleeping companion next to her.

As a rogue strand of hair caught on Laura’s lips and that small nose huffed unconsciously to try and blow it free Carmilla’s own lips curled upwards in amusement. The motion was both ridiculous and adorable at the same time and though her emotions were in turmoil over the reasons she felt so taken with the tiny, scrappy human, the brunette sensed her resolve weakening even as she fought to tear her eyes away. It was no use. She knew that better than anyone. Could feel the capitulation coming. And that was how she ended up lying back down rolling onto her side so that she could look directly at her roommate’s face; the brunette letting each calm breath brush against her cheek. Washing over her.

Suddenly, an unintelligible mumble skittered into the morning air from her bedmate. Some strange burble that escaped her mouth. But as attentive as Carmilla was and even with her finely tuned hearing it was still too low to catch so the brunette leant in a little further. Breath held in her throat as the closeness of Laura’s face played with the invisible hairs on hers another murmur came out.

“Buuuuurges...”

Huh? Tamping down a smile Carmilla couldn’t help herself. So she whispered back, “What was that cupcake?”
The semi-conscious girl didn’t respond for a second except to slowly scratch her toes on the divan below. Then her nose wrinkled.

“No...it wasn’t me...you need to find the badgers...” she murmured with a pout that suggested she wasn’t entirely happy with being questioned on this.

“Find who?”

Lips pursed in response. It was all Carmilla could do not to snicker. Instead she reached outwards and ran a delicate unsteady finger across Laura’s temple.

“What did the mean old Badgers do, Laura?”

The blonde groaned insensibly. “Sssshh, they hear you...have big ears...”

At that nonsensical reply Carmilla allowed herself to cup a warm cheek, ignoring the landfall of sensations that caused in her lungs and chest. Laura apparently wasn’t done though.

“No, they were the ones...I was out... walking...” she moaned. “Just...bystander...”

Carmilla brushed her skin in response.

“It’s ok, no-ones blaming you, Laura...we all know it wasn’t you.”

She really didn’t know where those words came from except to say that the balmy skin under her palm seemed to draw them out of some deep part of her. Carmilla didn’t have the time to ponder on that any further though because all of a sudden there was a pained whimper and a pair of bleary hazel eyes were staring across at her, gauzy with sleep. She sucked in a breath and smiled as confidently as she could at her perplexed bedmate.

“Hi.”

“Uh...Hi there.” A fist snuck out from under the bedclothes and rubbed one of those blinking eyes even as a slow blush rose to Laura’s cheeks.

“How...how did you sleep?” the blonde stuttered.

The brief moment of hesitation made them both aware that it wasn’t the real question she wanted to ask but Carmilla let that go preferring to grin and pull her hand back so that it could rest it next to her on the pillow; unwilling to add to the younger girl’s barely-concealed awkwardness.

“Oh I slept great sugar-pie. Thanks for asking.”

“Ok. Well. That’s good, right?”

Carmilla gave a nod. “How did you sleep?”

Laura shrugged and stretched her shoulders out. “Pretty well.”

“Any...interesting dreams?”

“I...” Laura took note of the keenness of the gaze tracking her then and overwhelmed all of a sudden chose to bury her face in the pillow. “...don’t remember?”

“Uh-huh.”
The sly expression the brunette was wearing intensified into a fully blown smirk in the morning light. A smirk that dropped just as quickly as Laura’s embarrassed response triggered something in her brain.

She had to be quick though—time was key, if she remembered rightly. Moving her hand to cradle the back of Laura’s head, absolutely paying no attention to the insane softness of her mussed-up hair she gently tried to tilt it back towards her.

“Hey Laura?”

The blonde eyed her nervously and Carmilla took a deep breath.

“You don’t have to feel awkward right now, ok? We already established that your face is 100% your face so that’s a big thumbs up.”

Laura smiled weakly at that.

“And this...” She motioned to the bed and the two of them, “...was something you needed. Rest. A few hours to recuperate and get yourself together after everything that happened. To feel safe. It’s not a big deal, yeah?”

She peered at the petite girl trying to get a read on how she might be feeling about that. The anxiety in her pupils had swiftly disappeared which calmed the brunette’s nerves somewhat but there was something else flashing across Laura’s face that threw her off too. Something unreadable like a quicksand mix of disappointment and clarity.

A strange sensation something akin to guilt punched its way through Carmilla although she couldn’t pinpoint exactly why. But she pushed through the confusing miasma of emotions as the original purpose behind the speech slammed back into her brain. Sitting up, she drew her knees up to her dragging the duvet with them and glanced down carefully at her roommate.

“This is going to sound a little hokey but I need to ask you some quick questions all right? And you have to answer them as fast as possible, no thinking...just say the first thing that comes into your head”

Laura frowned leaning up on her elbows with obvious discomfort but didn’t argue. “Ok?”

Carmilla nodded. “The library—how many books did you have on your table?”

“Three.”

“Good. What time did you sign in?”

Laura said smoothly, “Seven twenty.”

“Ok. What was the first thing you thought when you heard the scream?”

“...Run,” said the blonde just before she looked away for a moment.

Carmilla said nothing but she let her hand come up to brush the other girl’s shoulder. They both knew it was the most likely response, the one any decent person would have had given the circumstances but it still seemed to induce a deep seated shame in the small student who’d admitted it and the thought of that pricked at Carmilla’s skin. She had to keep going though. Had to resist the urge to pull her into some kind of sloppy, reassuring hug and undo everything she was trying to do.
It was hard though.

Clearing her throat awkwardly, hoping to cover up her own confusion Carmilla forced herself to carry on.

“Have you ever seen them before; either the guys or the girl?”

“No.”

“Did they have anything with them- books or bags?”

“No.”

“After you fell, did they say anything?”

“Yes.”

Shock registered quickly on Laura’s pinched face as if she wasn’t expecting the answer that had come out of her mouth but before her conscious mind began to kick in and wipe the memory again, Carmilla leant forward with a new eagerness.

“What did they say?”

“I... I have seen the acorn before the oak, but I never saw the likes of this.”

The small girl clamped her mouth shut again as soon as the words spilled out and her palms clenched further down on the bedsheets. She clearly hadn’t remembered that piece of information before, the glazed expression on her face was proof of that and silence fell between the pair as they both tried to absorb the new puzzle piece that had surfaced. Each trying to tease a meaning out of something that seemed so meaningless.

But no matter which way she turned it, angling it this way and that, Carmilla couldn’t make head nor tail of the phrase. She was distracted however when Laura began dragging herself up, moving away from the brunette so that she could lean crossways against the bed letting the wall support her back.

Laura grimaced as her aches protested.

Then she caught Carmilla’s gaze with questioning eyes.

“How did you do that? I didn’t...remember any of that last night.”

The brunette shrugged though her mind was spinning a mile a minute. “Human memory’s a complicated thing. They say short term memory only lasts for a minute at the most. Only remembers six, seven things. But when you add trauma to the mix....” She paused, “It stretches. Like an elastic band. And the more it stretches, the more information gets recorded. The downside is that the info gets filed in a place that’s harder to recall any of it but it’s there nonetheless.”

“I still don’t see how...”

Carmilla licked her lips. “When the conscious mind doesn’t want to remember something it puts it behind a locked door. And no amount of trying will get it open because this...” She pointed to her own temple with a muted grin, “...is a stubborn ass. But sleep relieves the conscious mind of its control... however temporarily. And we stay in that state for ten-fifteen minutes after waking; the mind hasn’t had a chance to wrestle back control yet. So the door just sitting there waiting to be opened...with the right question.”
Laura rubbed her eyes for the second time as she tried to take in what her roommate had just said with the spitfire pains and fatigue circulating through her system in the background. It made sense. There was a beautiful kind of logic to it truth be told, in the knotty recesses of a brain she usually took for granted, filling it with tv shows and comics- a parade of endless nonsense for the organ to assimilate.
And yet.

The bristling shamefaced part of her that hadn’t stopped burning at the pit of her stomach since last night wondered for a second if maybe... somehow... she was being played in some way. Tricked. Those words coming out of her mouth a moment ago had felt so alien, so foreign; as if she were being used as...as a puppet. A mouthpiece for someone or something else. And she didn’t like the sensation one bit.
It made her feel childish and dumb. Something she’d told herself that she’d never let anyone make her feel again.

That couldn’t be true though. She knew that, really. Those were just old wounds tearing open a little.

Because as she focused back on Carmilla, on the worried young face sitting just over from her, she knew that wasn’t what was happening here. Carmilla was just trying to help; one look at her taut and drawn features told her that. It couldn’t have been more clear.

And with that realisation fresh in her mind, it was easier than Laura might have imagined to offer up a small smile as brown eyes anxiously tracked hers.

“You’re freaking out, aren’t you?” said Carmilla sadly.

Laura bit her lip. “Maybe a little."

Her roommate nodded as she rested a chin on her knees but didn’t break her gaze. “I did too. The first time someone tried it on me."

The dark blonde hesitated, the wall cold against her back even through her thin t-shirt. “Were you...were you human?"

Carmilla’s spine bowed even more if that was possible. “No, it was after...my transformation.”

Laura opened her mouth to ask something else but Carmilla cut her off, as if the coming question didn’t even need to be spoken. “The circulation stops creampuff, but even with no blood pumping through it the mind keeps its elasticity. In fact it gets to stretch even further because, well, it doesn’t have to worry about ruptures or bleeds.” She gave a mirthless laugh. “It’s liberating for it. Freedom borne of violence."

That was it.

All tiredness flew from Laura’s bones almost instantly.

The tinge of loathing wrapped around those words cut through the younger girl’s roiling thoughts as if it had been made of some kind of airborne acid. And despite everything, despite the gripping headache, the throbbing ribs pulsating underneath her and the emotional hurricane blowing at the edges of her consciousness her entire body was suddenly taken over by a wave of gratitude and empathy for the vampire. All consuming. Unstoppable as anything she’d ever experienced.

Launching herself away from the wall, Laura didn’t even waver as she moved across the bed and wrapped her arms around the drawn up body of her roommate, pulling her into her; all elbows and
knees. Burying her face into the back of Carmilla’s neck, she breathed in that familiar soft smell as she wrapped her up tightly. Completely.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Not elucidating any further on what she was thanking her for. Not even sure she could put such a thing into words at this point.

Carmilla’s body was tense at first in her embrace; rigid and awkward. Her neck was held tightly in place under Laura’s cheek resisting her for some unspoken reason; the plane of skin soft and yet unyielding at the same time. But as the seconds passed a subtle change seemed to trickle through her muscles, watering them down, loosening them up and her entire frame seemed to soften against the blonde’s until they were intertwined so closely that it was hard to tell where one began and the other ended.

Laura wasn’t even sure she cared to know.

All she cared about was keeping her bedmate safe in her arms, away from the dark musings she so easily seemed to fall prey to. Away from thoughts of anything except for what she’d done for Laura last night and today.

The selflessness she’d shown.

Clasping her even tighter, Laura allowed herself a slightly smug grin as she felt Carmilla turn a little in her arms, and two hands slide carefully against the small space on her lower back that was unmarked by her recent experiences.

Locking into place. As if they were made to be there.

And that was how they remained. For minutes.

Or days.

Neither could be sure. Neither cared.

Both content to live in a world of skin, heat and consolation.

However cramped.

... In fact it was only when pins and needles began to set in that the small human student finally broke the hush with a comfortable sigh. “So what do we do now Obi-Wan?”

Carmilla hmmed against her neck though she didn’t say anything about the nickname.

“Now we take the library back as our place,” she said firmly. “And go find out who it is that’s seen the acorn before the oak?”

Laura nodded in her arms, not moving an inch.

“Sounds like a plan.”

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Is it weird that I'm fangirling as I write this fic?
Coz if it is then I don't want to be normal.

Come find me on Twitter or Tumblr if you have any questions or comments, I'd love to
say hello!
It's time to do some good old fashioned research.
Even if the library's the last place Laura wants to be right now...

PREVIOUSLY:

In fact it was only when pins and needles began to set in that the small human student finally broke the hush with a comfortable sigh. “So what do we do now Obi-Wan?”
Carmilla hmmmed against her neck though she didn’t say anything about the nickname.
“Now we take the library back as our place,” she said firmly. “And go find out who it is that’s seen the acorn before the oak?”
Laura nodded in her arms, not moving an inch.
“Sounds like a plan.”

CHAPTER SIX:

“You know, it’s ok to be nervous cupcake...”

The closer they had got to the library, the more knotted energy fizzled through Laura’s limbs, though she had tried her best to keep it in check. Carmilla had sensed it of course. Apparently as well as being undead, the girl was part bloodhound part Sherlock Holmes. Laura could feel those dark eyes on her the whole way there, guarded and guarding at the same time, taking note of all the stupid little signs she couldn’t seem to contain and yet was so horribly horribly aware of.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Carmilla smiled crookedly. “Tell that to the half-step you keep taking.”

“And what are you- the catwalk police?”

Laura didn’t need to look over to know that Carmilla had just added a little extra sashay to her own walk.
God she was infuriating.

“Also, if you keep doing that with your fingers you’ll get cramp.”

Uncurling the digits from the palm where they were rigidly pressed Laura’s lips formed a flat line but she bit back the retort that was building up on her tongue. At least until a new unfamiliar set of fingers slid between her own, squeezing them gently, massaging the knuckles at the point they were most taut.

“No judgement buttercup. You’re doing fine.”
Laura blinked.

How did she do that?
Swing from being the most maddening ball of exasperation this side of the Atlantic to being one of the most supportive in the space of a second? The small blonde had no answer for it; couldn’t even begin to untangle that particular cosmic riddle because the overbearing shadow of the library building was soon looming over them; ancient and obdurate.
Sending sparks of anxiety spurt through her spine.

She strode on resolutely nonetheless, preferring not to look over at her roommate. Not to be quite that weak if she could possibly help it.
Because she was a Hollis, right? And a journalist. Not some corny damsel in distress.
And this was child’s play....

Ascending the thick stone steps the pair of them made their way through the cracking archway and into the grand foyer with purpose. That was... until Laura’s feet chose the best possible opportunity to throw a minor coup and suddenly refused to go any further into the vestibule.
Carmilla came to rest next to her silently.

“You can just talk me through it step by step if you want?”

Laura swallowed not really trusting her mouth at this particular moment. Wrinkling up her nose with the effort of dragging her mind back to the previous night, she started talking.

“So I guess I got here about ten past seven. I said hi to Amy, the clerk on the desk—she’s always really sweet and asks how my studies are going so I probably talked to her for about five minutes. Then I went up to the stacks.”

“So there was someone on the desk when you came in?”

Laura nodded.

“But not later?”

“I....”

Her eyes went wide for a moment. “Oh my God, you don’t think they did something to her too, do you?! She’s so nice...they wouldn’t have done anything violent to get her out of the way would they?”

Carmilla tilted her chin. “I’m sure she’s fine creampuff, they probably just created some kind of distraction to get her out of their hair for a bit.”

The blonde stared straight ahead at the white stone. “That’s what we’re relying on? Probably?”

“Probably is all we ever have to rely on Laura. The world’s run on an intricate framework of probablies,” she said quietly. “Certainty is a fairy tale.”

If that was supposed to be reassuring, it wasn’t enough.
If Laura had considered the idea more carefully she may well have found some truth in those words but the new knot of worries for her friend that had coalesced in her stomach was spiking her adrenaline and suddenly her feet were moving of their own accord, her shoes tapping the marble tiles as she sprinted inside.

Turning the corner into the main hall, her eyes desperately scanned the main desk for any signs of the
familiar bleach blonde ponytail and unflattering work shirt that never quite cinched in at any of the right points. But there was no sign of Amy; in her place was a slender long haired student lounging behind the counter, heels resting on the lip of it as he read some dog-eared graphic novel. Though she at least had the decency to flinch as the loud ding echoed around the entire building. The boy was glowering at her.

“Sorry...I... was just wondering where Amy was?” she said breathlessly.

“And I would totally answer you but it’s kind of hard to speak when you’re bleeding from the ears.”

Putting his hand on the pewter bell to blanket its vibrations, the boy gave her a sarcastic smile as he returned to his comic.

“Please I need to know. It’s important.”

He sighed and sitting up a little took the chance to give her a once over, looking her up and down. “So...how much is it worth, tiny ball of crazy?”

“How about the joy of not bleeding from every other orifice in your cocaine-addled body?” snarled Carmilla joining them.

That seemed to get his attention all right. Bringing his feet down the kid gawked at the pair of them then pointed to a side door. “She’s in the back cataloguing stock, ok? Jeez. Way to harsh on my mellow, ladies.”

“You’ve seen her?”

“I do have human eyes yep.”

Carmilla tapped her nails on the counter and offered him an icy grin. “Today. You’ve seen her today? And you might want to think carefully before you answer...”

“She’s in there right now- go and check if you don’t believe me!”

His indignation would have been comical if Laura hadn’t been so overcome with relief that she almost doubled over as she released a breath she hadn’t even been aware she’d been holding.

“You wanna go verify Kurt Cobain here’s telling the truth?”

Laura smiled softly at her roommate as she straightened her spine. “No, he seems trustworthy.”

Carmilla raised an eyebrow and she shrugged. “Fear’s a great motivator. And... you really are kinda scary when you’re mad.”

At that the brunette looked taken aback for a second but then clearly decided to take it as a compliment as she grinned; giving a brief curtsy that looked wholly ridiculous with the leather pants she was wearing. Laura however laughed openly at her and watched as Carmilla’s grin turned into a genuine smile at the sound.

“I’ve missed that you know.”

Somehow she knew exactly what the brunette was talking about and offered up another laugh as she took a step closer to the taller girl.

“You have huh?”
Carmilla looked at her nonchalantly, “Maybe a little...”

Laura tilted her chin upwards. “Interesting.”

“When someone sounds like a baby seal having their belly tickled, you kind of get used to it you know...”

Her expression dropped. “That’s rude.”

“In vampire veritas, sweetheart.”

Carmilla pointed to the stairs with a smirk as Laura scowled at her. “So shall we M’Lady?”

--------------------------------------------

AN HOUR LATER....

“Anything?”

Laura groaned and rubbed her neck leaning back in her chair as she took a break from the giant tome laid out in front of her.
Carmilla’s gaze however didn’t lift from the book she was engrossed in.

“Not much. Gotta give the library props for the scale of their section on the supernatural but study was never my forte Creampuff, I was always more of a fist-in-your-face kind of gal when it came to getting information.”

“What a shocking admission!”

Chocolate eyes snapped up then; searching and intense.
Almost... anxious underneath everything? That couldn’t be right, though, could it?
But all they found was a warm grin staring back at them and a look of something almost approaching fondness radiating from the blonde across the table despite the weariness she was trying so hard to conceal.

It helped to dampen down the electric screech in Carmilla’s belly at least. Even through the frustration borne of hitting one dead end after another.

“Cute.”

“Obviously!” replied Laura sounding offended. “You’re talking to A grade beastie bait here... Hey try looking under human looking monsters whose superpower is excellent taste...maybe you’ll find something there.”

Laura was looking so ridiculously proud of herself for that, her long hair pushed behind one ear that Carmilla couldn’t help herself and let out a loud guffaw offering her a wry handclap as she pushed her book to one side.

“Hate to break it to you sweetheart, but you weren’t actually the bait remember? You were the bystander that tried to take the bad guys out by going all WWF and landing on them...”

“Potato potarto,” mumbled the other girl going back to her book. “I could be baity if I wanted...I could be the baitiest girl you ever met...”
Carmilla grinned once more as she sneaked a glance at her roommate, her amusement tinged with something more than a little sour at the recollection of her original reasons for being at Silas. At her reasons for even coming into the sphere of Laura’s previously ‘normal’ existence.

Well, her Mother’s reasons. But her actions nonetheless. A distinction that blurred more often in her memories then it probably should have. Than was fair to either of them.

But then something else replayed in her mind; something Laura had said just prior to that. Triggering an idea at the back of all that unpleasantness; something she hadn’t even considered.

Getting up from her seat spurred on by her whirling thoughts, Carmilla wandered quickly into the stacks to their left and out of Laura’s eyeline.

It was only after a good two or three minutes that the smaller girl started to notice the absence of her study-buddy and began glancing up from the page to see if she was returning. But nope. No sign.

Which was...concerning.

Another two minutes passed and a strange anxious roiling began to circle in the pit of her stomach, Laura’s gaze barely returning to the page now before popping up again to scan the shelves across from her.

Just as she was about to leave her seat and go find the brunette, Carmilla rounded the corner holding an armful of dusty books close to her chest, carrying them so effortlessly that they could just as easily have been paper pamphlets.

Laura’s shoulders relaxed instantly and as if picking up on her tension the brunette rubbed her shoulder as she deposited the manuscripts on the corner of the oak table.

“Everything ok?”

Her companion nodded softly covering the hand with her own. “All good.”

Carmilla frowned a little at the motion but slumped down in her chair without comment.

“You got something?”

Carmilla shrugged. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

She motioned for Laura to return to her own reading with a quirked eyebrow.

The dark blonde couldn’t help rolling her eyes at Carmilla’s ludicrous sense of mystery but dropped her gaze to the book in front of her as requested.

The pair of them then worked in silence for a while, the only sound coming from the turning of pages as they worked their way through what was in front of them. Pages and words on repeat. Extended sentences containing far too many long words. The hands of the clock slowly moving around as the light dancing across the desk began to fade.

“Damn it.”

It was only the sound of that exclamation that encouraged Laura to look up again.

Sneaking a glance at the hardback in front of Carmilla, the pages looking to be crammed with snapshots and smiling awkward poses she tapped the desk.
“Dead end?”

The brunette pressed her lips together almost a little sheepishly. “No triplets have ever been recorded as going to Silas according to the student yearbooks. Not now. Not ever...”

Laura’s jaw dropped open. “Wait. You were looking to see if they were triplets?”

Those lips pressed even harder into a thin line.

“I’m sorry, you were investigating a theory that you totally mocked me for even considering just last night?”
There was a pause.

“Once you eliminate the impossible, Cutie...” she said grumpily.

Laura crossed her arms in response.

“Oh come on...wouldn’t it be better for everyone if there was a... ‘normal’ explanation for all this?”

The blonde considered that for a moment, then nodded her head a little. “I suppose.”

“And I didn’t mock you, exactly. I just...”

“...pooh-poohed my idea? Without considering its merits?”

Carmilla groaned before sneaking a glance to see if anyone was listening to them. “I have never ‘pooh-poohed’ anything in my very long and ridiculous life, sweetheart. Let’s not go ruining my reputation over nothing.”

Laura muttered something unintelligible in reply but let her arms drop to her side. “So, ruling out my perfectly reasonable idea that you may or may not have pooh-poohed...what now?”

“Well that effectively throws humans out of the mix. So we’re left with the paranormal; creatures that can assume a human guise.”

“There can’t be that many though, right?” offered Laura hopefully.

Carmilla cricked her neck, “No. Well not if you don’t count aliens, angels, demons, gods, monsters, robots or shapeshifters.”

Jeez.

Laura deflated instantly; her body hunching down in her seat as she thought about all the variations of awful beings the brunette had just mentioned. Demons. Gods.

All the things she’d hoped could maybe just stay fixed in the pages of the storybooks she’d read as a little girl.

Old folk tales you could put away on a shelf and forget about.

Trapped by nothing more than bindings.

Carmilla wasn’t as oblivious to her dejection as she might have wished though.

Reaching out the brunette gently lay her palm open on the table. “Hey it’s not so bad. We can rule out vampires. And evil pod-peopleing light monsters. So at least you know I’m clean.”

Laura suddenly snapped back to attention.

And she clutched Carmilla’s hand firmly. “I didn’t need these books to know that Carm.” She smiled softly in the darkening light. “I trust you. Completely. You get that right?”
The older girl nodded back, seemingly satisfied but tore her gaze away for a moment, focusing on the microfiche stack against the far wall. And Laura didn’t push. Not this time.

She simply intertwined their fingers together, allowing her companion to regroup from whatever wave of complicated emotion was washing over her. Using her other hand however, she dragged one of the books from Carmilla’s pile over to her and began flicking through the pages.

Remaining straight faced as the brunette did the same, both of their cheeks burning a little, but their hands staying in place against the skin of the others. As if they were meant to be there.

Silent until Carmilla cleared her throat awkwardly.

“Hey did you see their feet?”

Laura blinked, “Yeah I guess? They had sandals on I think.”

“Were they...you know, feet-like?”

“Yeah.”

Carmilla sniffed as she stared intently at the page underneath her.

“They weren’t Djinn then.”

Laura looked a little repulsed. “Do I want to know?”

“Probably not.”

Biting the inside of her cheek the smaller girl motioned to her page. “Not Doppelgangers either. They apparently mirror the memories and feelings of their counterpart. And...it definitely wasn’t fear in their eyes.”

She felt fingers squeeze her own and offered a reassuring smile to let Carmilla know that she was holding up.

“What about something called the Noppera-Bo?”

Sliding the book across to the brunette Laura watched as dark eyes scanned the paragraph at the bottom of the page. Doubtful pupils then looked back.

“Unlikely. Says here they take on a recognisable human form to scare the victim’s family but then make their features disappear leaving a smooth, blank sheet of skin where the face should be....”

Laura nodded. “Pretty much the opposite of what happened. Crap.”

“But another culprit eliminated from the investigation so worth checking.”

Laura was just about to agree.

Maybe even to thank Carmilla for being so... Reassuring?..So considerate? Thoughtful?

Hell she had no idea what she was about to thank her roommate for after the nightmare of the last
few days when the hackles on the back of her neck suddenly rose of their own accord.

Within a second the hairs on her arms had joined them, an army of goose bumps coming up to meet
the prickles skirting her skin.

And she froze. Her fingers tightening unconsciously.
Carmilla glanced up as she felt that tautness against her own digits.

“Cupcake?”

Laura didn’t reply. She simply stared at the wall behind Carmilla’s head and the vampire’s chest
constricted at the sight; the urge to leap from her chair to shake the blonde out of her reverie all but
overwhelming.

“Laura? What is it?”

“...that...that’s her...”

The whisper that fell from Laura’s mouth was so low her roommate only caught it due to her
improved levels of hearing. But it was enough to make her whip her head around, to see what was
holding Laura’s unmoving gaze.

And at first she didn’t see anyone. There was just the usual bank of photocopiers pushed up against
the wall underneath the window arch, the occasional blinking green light showing that they were still
turned on. Then she caught movement. A glimpse of someone loitering around the furthest machine,
their back to them but a head of shaggy blonde hair clearly visible in the strip lights in that section.

“We should go and make sure she’s ok...” whispered Laura an edge of panic building in her voice.

Carmilla turned back. “We have no idea what they did to her, what they even are. It’s too
dangerous.”

Wearing a torn expression Laura watched the girl stare at the copier in front of her, every muscle in
her body held rigid.

Then she gasped.

“Oh my God.”

She was out of her chair before the vampire even had a chance to stop her. Carmilla cursed as she
leapt up and sprinted after the blonde who apparently had quite the acceleration when she wanted to.
That figured.

Catching up to her just as she reached the far wall, Carmilla grabbed Laura’s arm to keep her from
touching the other girl. Holding her back though she struggled manfully against her, Carmilla
wrapped an arm around the shorter girl’s midriff apologising inwardly as she felt her flinch from the
last night’s injuries.

“She’s all right. I’ve got you.” She whispered anxiously. “You have to think this through, ok?”

Peering over a head of dark rebellious blonde hair, she stopped short when she finally noticed what
was happening.

The girl that had been standing so inconspicuously a moment ago had at some point opened up one
of the machines and pressed her face down sideways against the cold glass plate underneath. Pushing
it onto the thick pane without even seeming to feel anything she stared with open unfocused eyes, her right hand repeatedly pressing the copy button on the side of the housing, the eerie green glow of the laser inside casting shadows as it hummed underneath her cheek.

Copy after copy spurting from the thing into the plastic catch tray at the far end. The same image of an ear and the corner of a wide eye dropping on top of the last. On repeat; like some kind of malevolent unstoppable creature reproducing itself. Like some biological imperative mixing with technology.

“Please stop....”

Laura’s urgent tone broke through Carmilla’s shock at what she was witnessing though her grip remained steady.

“Please...we can help you....”

Can we? Thought Carmilla through her horror. Trying her best not to imagine that it was the blonde girl in her arms pushing her face into the glass without even seeming to realise what she was doing. It could have been her. She wanted to be sick. The girl however didn’t stop. Not even at Laura’s urging. She continued pressing the button, the metallic sound of the contraption innards almost drowning out the only thing she kept saying.

“Who am I...who am I...”
On a loop.
Like the words meant nothing to her at all

TBC...

Chapter End Notes

Hoping some of you are still following the story.
All the comments and kudos so far make my tiny human heart fly more than just a little.
Love is whatever you can still betray

Chapter Summary

Buckle up peeps, there be angst afoot as Laura & Carmilla try to work out what to do...

Chapter Notes

Somehow this fic keeps rollin' on.
Let me know if you're still interested and would like more...

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS
By Heligena

PREVIOUSLY:
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CHAPTER 7:

“Carmilla look at her. We can’t just do nothing!”

The brunette had heard those words so many times in her long, convoluted life that at some point they’d come to sound like some kind of joke. Sometimes directed at her. Sometimes spat out by the humans standing underneath her gaze. Not that it made any kind of difference really, the outcome was always the same.
Misery and rage.
Hers. Theirs.
The universe never seemed to care much for details.
On moonlit streets no-one ever seemed to stop and count the cracks.
...
But then...
Nothing about the broken girl in front of them was even remotely funny. And neither were the frustrated groans emanating from the blonde in her arms. Still fighting, still struggling against her hold despite knowing somewhere deep down that it was being done for her own good. Offering up the most wonderful human part of her for everyone to see.

Carmilla shook her head in an attempt to clear it.
Because outside of the nothing Laura had just ruled out, the truth was that she had no idea what to do. It was a new sensation. Thrilling even in some strange way. And disconcerting at the same time.
Perhaps the two would always come hand in hand, she thought despondently.

“Please...”
The whisper that broke from Laura’s lips somehow managed to snap her out of her thoughts and the ache behind it began biting into her skin.
Laura was right. They couldn’t just do nothing. As tempting as it might be. She’d proven that too many times already.

So against all her instincts Carmilla relaxed her arms and felt the body contained within them go still. She didn’t remove them completely though- it was too much to ask. Instead she leant down and slid her mouth next to a small ear.

“We do this carefully, ok? No sudden movements.”
An imperceptible nod was all the response that she got.

It was enough though. She unwound one of her arms and let her fingers rest against Laura’s spine then walking them forward a step, Carmilla faced the blonde girl with her roommate’s body still held against her.

“Hey there.”
No answer came.
But the fingers hesitated a fraction against the machine’s button.

“Can you tell us your name?”

“Give a thing a name and you have power over it.”
She felt Laura suck in a breath at the tonelessness of the reply.

“...Is that what happened...Did you give someone your name?” asked Carmilla softly.

The staring eyes still clamped under the machine’s hood blinked. Mutely. Inanely.

“All gone now...” the girl said then and before her captor could argue Laura had reached out a shaking hand and brushed her fingers against the girl’s immobile face. It was warm and pliant but she didn’t flinch as expected. She barely even registered the movement.

“Why don’t we get you out of that thing, all right?”

Stepping forward, lifting the cover, Laura glanced up at Carmilla who stared at her edgily but made no attempts to stop her. The smaller girl carried on and carefully cupped the chin in front of her pulling it upwards until she was in a standing position then reached down and switched the power off to the copier.
Smiling gently Laura held her hands up in front of her.

“That’s better isn’t it?”

The blonde stared back at the pair of them, her breathing noticeably jagged but she didn’t seem to understand the question put to her.

“Do you remember what happened to you?”
There was a pause.

“....Nothing happens to nothing,” came the reply.
Laura grimaced though she tried not to show it.

“You’re not nothing.”

“Vacuum. Latin meaning vacant or void.”

Staring at the empty orbs in front of her, at the way the mouth hung open just that little bit too wide Carmilla’s chest squeezed tight as she slowly began to recognise something in the expression. Madness.
The true kind. Not wild and chaotic as everyone in this day and age seemed to think but a numb kind of indistinguishable hopelessness. The total loss of the self.
The one illness that never seemed to diminish no matter what century you found yourself in.

“...Cupcake, I...I... don’t think she’s going to be able to tell us much.”
Laura frowned. “I thought that too before you asked me those questions this morning.”

“...I don’t think it’s the same.”

The blonde ignored her and focused her gaze back on the other girl. Not even noticing that Carmilla took a few steps away, moving to the corner of the stacks as she pulled something from her pocket.

“What’s your major?” she asked.

“Major. Military rank of a commissioned officer.”
Blowing out a hot sigh, she tried again.

“Which dorm are you in?”
There was no answer.

“Do you remember the way there?”
Silence. Blankness.

“Radcliffe? Otranto? Are you in a sorority? Is there someone there we can call for you?”

Nothing was forthcoming. The short haired blonde seemed to have shut down again. At least, the weird dictionary part that had shown itself so far. Now there was nothing but that blank stare focusing on the wall behind them, perhaps searching the whitewash for some sort of meaning. Or not even seeing it at all.
Laura couldn’t work out which as she watched the girl breathe in and out. Her own inability to help was burning like acid in her stomach though. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. They’d found her, hadn’t they?
There had to be a reason. Some design that had brought them to this place other than pure unadulterated chance.
The universe couldn’t be that cruel.
Could it?

“Maybe…maybe we could sneak her back to our room. Look after her until… we’ve fixed all this.”

Turning about, she looked up at the vampire standing behind her.

Her question had clearly caught the brunette’s attention because there was a strange turbulent expression behind her features that she didn’t recognise.

“So you think?”

The clear hope on Laura’s face sent a crack running through Carmilla’s spine as she tried to untangle her tongue to offer an answer. Because she wanted to say yes. So much.
That they could do that. Keep another secret, another thing the world wasn’t supposed to know about and carry it just between them, pretending it wasn’t another nightmare they couldn’t outrun. More than anything.
More than she would ever have expected.

But deep down, in the oldest part of her bones, she also knew...
Knew that hiding, restraining someone in that state- empty, grasping at anyone and anything around them, without all their mental faculties to restrain the darker parts was impossible. More than impossible- it was a disaster waiting to happen. Overwhelmingly dangerous. For all of them.
For her roommate more than most.

“Laura, I know you want to help her…” she began tentatively.

“Look at her! She’s already lost almost everything and we’re going to what? Abandon her here, leave her wandering around the stacks like a ghost for everyone else to laugh at and spread rumours about?”
Laura was struggling to keep herself together and to be honest she didn’t blame her.
But for her part, Carmilla was tearing in two. Between wanting to scoop the girl up in a hug for being so ridiculously compassionate and at the same time despairing of Laura’s ability to ignore the slew of problems that would follow a reckless decision like that.
It was a complicated and confusing feeling; draining too.

The brunette however fought through the mass of emotions to train a serious gaze on her.

“Don’t get me wrong cupcake. It’s sweet and kind-hearted…and so inherently you. And I get that you feel like this is somehow your fault. But it’s not.”

“I…But isn’t that why we’re here? To stop this…to make it right?”

Carmilla breathed out slowly.

“There’s no guarantee even if we take out the creatures that did this to her that she’ll go back to the way she was. What if she doesn’t? What are you going to do? Devote the rest of your time to a
stranger- keeping her hidden away while you feed and shower her behind closed doors?”

Laura hesitated.

“Muffin, there’s a big difference between something being your fault and it being your responsibility. Neither of us caused this, the fact that we’re trying to do something about it just makes us optimistic fools. Nothing more.”

Taking a step back, the shorter girl threw her hands up.

“We could have help- Perry, Lafontaine…if we asked, they’d…”

“No!”

Her own voice echoed around them causing Carmilla to cringe but she had to get Laura to understand.

“We take her with us and that’s it, one of us will be on babysitting duty 24-7, leaving the other to go get themselves hurt, killed or worse out investigating by themselves. We take her home and we lose any chance of stopping this happening to someone else. We help one just to damn how many others. It’s…it’s simple maths.”

Crossed arms greeted her.

“So the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few?”

Carmilla did her best to look stoic though her ribs were creaking at the disappointed gleam in those brown eyes.

“Sometimes they do.”

Sometimes they do when it comes to those you care about.

The stand off came to a head and both girls stared at each other wordlessly. Waiting for the other to break. Or find some kind of words that would make sense to the other. Some mystical solution to the problem that seemed to hover above them in a dirty grey fog.

“You’re not being fair,” Laura replied finally with an injured expression.

And Carmilla forgot herself for the briefest second. She laughed.

Snickered quietly.

Just for a moment.

... Because fair wasn’t a concept she’d had much time for since her own demise and right now, with this never-ending nightmare unfolding in front of them, it seemed like more of a shaggy dog story than anything.

The oldest fable ever told.

Before the thought bloomed any further though, she glanced down and saw Laura’s expression. No longer frustrated but hurt. Betrayed.

Fighting back tears.

And her heart plummeted the thousand metres to her feet.

Shit.

“Laura...I didn’t mean...”

Didn’t mean what though? To show her your true colours? Her brain added through the building
panic.

She took a step forward. “...You have to understand...”

A sudden commotion in the foyer below interrupted whatever else she was going to say and she lost the chance to formulate the rest of her response. A pair of women in olive coloured university polo shirts after talking quietly with the boy at the main desk were now making their way up the stairs, bringing them level with the two of them.

The chubby middle aged females then spotted Carmilla and Laura standing there, and as if that was their cue started walking over.

Within a moment they were sharing the same space. But then they moved swiftly past the brunette and her roommate, and came to a stop in front of the other girl.

She didn’t acknowledge them at all.

“Matches the description,” the darker haired woman whispered waiting for a nod from her companion as answer. Slowly they moved next to the blonde with hands held in front of them.

“Miss, we’re going to need you to come with us ok?”

“We’re here to help.”

As if coming out of a trance Laura suddenly jerked towards them.

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?”

“Don’t worry Ma’am, we’re here to look after your friend,” the older woman said without moving her gaze from their target.

“She’ll be in good hands.” Offered the other.

Laura wasn’t having any of it however.

“Your hands aren’t going anywhere near her,” she spluttered attempting to grab onto the shoulder in front of her but suddenly Carmilla’s arms were around her again, pulling her backwards against a taut frame.

“Let them do what they need to,” was all she said, a crack hiding somewhere deep inside her voice. The blonde didn’t notice it.

Laura fought against her grip hysterically. Her arms trying to lash out, pinned as they were. Her sneakers scraping against the linoleum with little effect.

“Carmilla, please....don’t let them take her.”

The brunette closed her eyes as she held back tears at that familiar pleading tone, willing all her remaining strength to root itself in her arm muscles. Hoping she wasn’t severing the connection they’d somehow managed to cultivate between the two of them with each second that passed.

Focusing on the frenzied pattering of Laura’s heart next to her chest, she clamped her muscles down as the sounds of soft murmuring wafted in front of them.

“That’s it sweetheart. Just a small walk and then we’ll take you somewhere safe. You’d like that wouldn’t you?

There was a pause.
“Safe. Secure from injury or harm.”

Carmilla kept her eyes fastened ignoring the emotionless reply. Trying to ignore the frantic girl jerking against her chest.

“That’s right. Good girl. One foot in front of the other now...”

Laura let out a pained cry as she obviously watched the three of them begin to move away. The sounds of those encouraging words tapering off with them.

“No, you don’t understand what you’re dealing with...” Laura whimpered, fading into nothing as Carmilla remained motionless.

Then a different voice hit the air from further away.

“Thank you for the call Ma’am. You did the right thing.”

Cracking her eyes open the vampire watched as Laura went slack in her arms, the realisation of what she had done a few moments ago. That the vampire had betrayed her even before that stupid laugh had escaped her mouth. Except it wasn’t betrayal. Not really.

Not when it kept Laura safe. Kept everyone safe while they did...whatever the hell they were going to do with that poor girl.

“This...this was you?”

Unsure whether to release her arms so that she’d at least have the chance to explain or keeping them wrapped around the smaller girl for what could very well be the last time, Carmilla froze. Uncertain and catatonic.

Like that girl she thinks you just sold out...

The unbidden thought made the decision for her. Carefully releasing the dark blonde, taking a step away she swallowed hard as she lifted her eyes to the red-rimmed hawthorne ones staring at her with such disbelief.

“You called them?”

Her tongue felt bulky in her mouth again, alien somehow. But she did her best to get some words out.

“Laura...they...”

“I’m not talking about them Carm, I want to know what you did.”

“I called the campus psychiatric service.” She offered weakly.

“When did you even...” Carmilla’s hands scratched at her hips. “You were asking her those questions and I...”

“...Decided that all your cold accumulated wisdom trumps basic human compassion,” she spat out. “Do you even remember what empathy feels like or is that just so last century?”

With blazing eyes, Laura looked at her with such unbridled rage that even the brunette felt a little
Cowed. But she had to make her understand.

“They... have compassion Laura. And training. Facilities. With all the crazy stuff breaking out on campus, they’re the best people to deal with her. To keep her safe.”

“Safe? What more could anyone do to her?”

Carmilla reached out a shaking hand but Laura flinched away, holding her arms to her stomach.

“I’m sorry I went behind your back but you have to look at this with a clear mind. We couldn’t have taken care of her. We couldn’t.”

“A clear mind? So I’m just the big ball of crazy that guy thought I was?”

“No. Of course not...”

“I thought I could trust you.”

“Laura, you...”

Laura shook her head wretchedly cutting her off and turned away from her.

Carmilla couldn’t even suck in a breath before the dark blonde was sprinting away from her, her shoes barely making a sound until they hit the uncarpeted staircase. Then she was flying down them, two at a time breathing hard as she broke into a full run through the foyer and out of the atrium. Her hair shining for a moment in the rays of sun from the stained glass window. Then gone.

Leaving the vampire standing there struggling to breathe as the only person that cared about her ran off into the daylight.

TBC...
Laura ran.

Her lungs burned with the effort of bruised muscles pulling against them but her cheeks were already flaring with something else. Anger pure and white pricked against their underside mixing with something she couldn’t put a name too. Or refused to in the heat of her fury. All she could see were hands circling that girl’s wrists, whispering words that were supposed in some twisted way to comfort as they cajoled her to God know’s where. To some circle of hell on earth, she was sure.

And Carmilla had done it. Called in those lackeys as if she were just ringing up a pizza place to put in an order. It was the ease in the way she’d done it that really made Laura’s blood run hot. The thoughtless simplicity - something she’d just never associated with her roommate. Her Mother, sure. The Dean had treated everyone like pawns in some giant kind of game, placing them on the board wherever she wanted like the director of a grand ballet. But Carmilla for all that casual manner and hostility had always been so considered. So gauged.

Never callous.

Wiping an embarrassing trickle of moisture from her eye the small blonde finally made her way across the lawns onto the edge of the campus woodland and slowed her pace, making sure to check no-one was watching as she finally stopped. Resting a palm against a large oak, she heaved wildly trying to corral those spiralling thoughts into some kind of coherence before the pain in her side forced her to cramp up and she found herself sliding down against the trunk as her eyes clamped shut.

Left alone with the sounds of leaves rustling and birds trilling.

What an idiot.

She had thought that being away from her roommate would make her feel safe; that some space might get rid of the trapped, claustrophobic sensation descending over her like a bedspread but now that she had stopped moving, she was stunned to find that the exact opposite was actually true. She felt bereft. Alone. Unable to catch her breath although the cuts and bruises marring her skin probably
had more to do with that than anything.

She siphoned air through her nose as her chest began to quake.
Now what, Hollis?

She was by herself again.
A state she always seemed to be dragged back to in the end. Or maybe she searched it out.
It was one or the other. After a while, she’d given up trying to work out which of those things was true.
Fingers playing idly with a small bunch of pale lilac flowers growing in the shade near her feet, Laura rubbed their tips against the soft skin of the petals not caring that they coated them with a fine sweet smelling powder.

“How does a small girl with so little skin on display manage to cover every inch of her with this muck?”
Wait, muck. Was that the word she had used? Mess?
Grime?
The exact term guttered at the edges of her consciousness; faint and elusive. She remembered her mother saying something like that when she was little. That usually soft face had contorted into a grimace at the sight of her daughter in shirt and shorts that made her feel worse than any of the words that came out of her mouth.
Expression is everything after all. Her mother had that one right.

And it wasn’t like she’d been swimming in any mudholes.
Laura had only been playing in the park near their house, whiling away a few hours with Greg and Sandy the neighbours kids by playing their own version of catch that they’d cunningly named Styrian ‘Scaping. The play-area was pretty much tarmac and artificial grass underneath the swing set and slide- painful on the knees and ugly to look at. So when Greg had suggested moving the game to the trees nearby she had thought it was a great idea; felt it added something, made the sport feel much more real. Alive. Primal somehow.

“You know mud like this never comes off, don’t you?”
When she’d gotten home (well before curfew mind you) there had been hard fingers pulling through her hair afterwards in the bath, nails that caught against her scalp as scrubbing sponges were dragged against skin making it raw and red.
To be waved off as sunburn if anyone asked... though no-one ever did.

“It worms its way under the skin into your bloodstream leaving deposits there like fat.”
She hadn’t understood what a deposit was back then, said as it was in that sing song way, but she sure knew about fat. The no-sugar, coeliac diet her mother made sure she followed was responsible for that; policing all four corners of her room and lunchbox when she could.
Fat was the enemy. Insidious. Obscene.
Dirt a close second.
Embarrassing the family the trinity’s godhead.

“You can’t see it. Not until later. But what happens when you start to wonder why you feel so heavy when you get up? Or why your backpack cuts into your shoulder? Why your skin doesn’t shine like it used to? The boys will notice before you do. And by then it’s too late.”
A cascade of warm water poured over her hair and face making her choke and screw her face up before a flannel was scouring under her eyes scratching the skin across the bridge of her nose.
As if it could wipe away the freckles there along with the dirt.

“There now. Much better.”
She remembered trying to offer a watery smile as her mother pottered around the room, looking for the bath towel that matched the one hanging on the handrail. But it dropped when she caught sight of the round hairbrush her mother was holding to her chest, its tines sticking out like spikes on a mace. Waiting to snag every stray hair. Any that didn’t sit right.
The ones Laura so desperately wanted to keep, though she wasn’t sure why.

Jerking her eyes open with alarm, the dark blonde tried to shake her head to clear the strange memory as bark and sunlight came back into focus. The campus around her seemed weirdly empty as she scanned the area nearby. Most people were probably in lectures right now, but there was still an eerie quality to the air and the smattering of pollen in the shafts of daylight didn’t help.

And Carmilla’s probably running around somewhere looking for you too.

The thought filled her chest with both satisfaction and guilt. A crazy turbulent mixture of sensations that definitely didn’t help with the whole focusing thing.

Laura breathed out slowly. Acclimatizing herself a little to the solitude around her. Trying to work out exactly what she was supposed to do now. After all, the researching at the library hadn’t given them anything but a crib sheet on what those things last night weren’t which was about as helpful as a handbrake on a canoe. They needed to know what they were. What they wanted.

Because that was always the key, right? Figure out someone’s desires and you had the chance to thwart them. Or at least control them so that they couldn’t hurt anyone. Declaw the beast.
The thought made her uncomfortable; was way too Dean-like for her taste but she was beginning to think there was a kernel of truth in there somewhere. When they had been trying to decipher what had happened to Betty, it was only when they figured out what the Dean was after that they had the leverage to do something about it.

There was no reason to think any differently about those things in the library was there? Predators were predators. Completely ruthless in their need to exploit someone else; focused on self preservation over everything else.

Carmilla isn’t like that though.

She almost growled at her own stupid brain. She knew that. Of course, she knew that. But she was finally getting somewhere here- the last thing she needed when she was onto something was a big pulsing hit to the guilt burbling around in her belly.

She was just trying to protect you.

Damnit!

So...predators, Laura thought intently. They hadn’t killed that girl or left any marks as far as she’d been able to see. So they didn’t need her blood. Or skin. Or organs.

Bile rose up in her throat but she kept going. They took her face though and copied it. Or...maybe they took their own faces and changed hers to match. So was that like, theft or assault? Were they stealing people’s identities or making their own personal army of clones?

As she puzzled over the questions buzzing around her mind, turning them this way and that the small blonde looked up for a brief moment. And it was then that in the empty grounds she finally noticed movement by the edge of the small manmade lake to her right. A figure was standing there staring out at the water. Throwing up a hand to shade her eyes as she watched them, it was only as she
squeezed that Laura realised that the person with their back to her was actually in the water. Only up to their ankles to be fair but far enough in to make her frown.

What the hell were they doing?

She was up on her feet before she even knew what she was doing. All questions forgotten. Taking a step forward, the brief urge to jog back to the library to get Carmilla to come see this with her washed across the tiny student’s spine but then a surge of resentment blotted it out before it could take hold. She sure as heck didn’t need to witness any more displays of heroism today. The very thought made her want to barf.

So instead she straightened out her shoulders and began tiptoeing closer to the lake, letting the long grass flatten under her sneakers and mask their footsteps.

As she made her way closer Laura watched curiously as the figure waded further into the frigid water, their back never turning round once. Then she noticed a burbling in the water a metre in front of the stranger. Ripples on the water’s surface. A gasp broke from her throat as a head suddenly emerged from underneath the pond’s surface choking and spluttering for air. Her legs froze.

It was a boy. Hair flattened by dirty water he heaved up mouthfuls of the stuff uncomfortably then seemed to peer up at the shape standing over him. She couldn’t see his expression from this far away, couldn’t see much of his face at all but a hand snaking out from the water towards the person in front of them was visible. As if he was asking for their help.

Oh thank God, thought Laura.

There was no help forthcoming though.

The outline remained where they were for a moment obviously staring at the student in front of them. But then they pushed forward letting the mini waves they were causing lap against their thighs as the person reached out with both hands and placed them on the boy’s sodden scalp. And they pressed downwards. Using all their strength to push him back under the water. Holding him there as he struggled viciously against the pressure fighting with everything in his body. Struggling not to drown.

Crap!

Laura broke out of her stupor. Ignoring all of the warning bells ringing in her mind she started to run towards the pair of them. Gaining some traction as her shoes hit the paved walkway she looked around desperately for anyone to help her, anyone who might have noticed what was going on but the few pockets of students that might have been milling about usually were nowhere to be seen. There was no-one anywhere around.

So she steeled herself and increased her pace, ignoring the burning from earlier as she sprinted across the campus grounds, jumping over the small ornate patches of shrubbery.

It only took ten seconds before she was there and her feet skidded on the slick algaed stone at the edge of the lake. She didn’t care about falling over though. Wading into the water, Laura paid no attention to the way her jeans clung to her legs as she reached the pair. She simply threw her arms round the standing figure’s shoulders and pulled them backwards using their own surprise and momentum against them.
It took all of her strength to keep both of them from falling backwards but she breathed with relief as the boy’s head broke through the water again sputtering and bringing up another load of water with each mouthful of air he took in.

“What the hell are you doing? You’re going to kill him!”

She shoved her captive away from her then, not wanting to be touching them any longer and stared angrily into their face. But what she was met with only brought confusion. It was a girl—another student not that much older than herself and she had been crying. No. Not just crying. Sobbing; her eyeliner was running in black streaks down her cheeks, her long wavy hair pushed back behind her ears.

“I’m sorry.” She wept as Laura glared at her, hands on her hips. “I didn’t know what else to do. I...I couldn’t....”

“What is this?! Are you trying to kill your boyfriend because you guys had a fight or something?! Are you kidding me with this crap?”

The girl’s eyes widened. “He’s not my boyfriend. We’re friends. Best friends. I love him. But he’s...it’s not...something’s wrong with him.”

Laura threw her hands up. “Murder is not a solution! Did you try talking about it?! There’s a whole bunch of books on Freud in the library for this exact thing!”

The boy was still sitting in the water in front of them as his ‘friend’ glanced over at him.

“You don’t get it. I tried everything...but something happened on his way home from the club.”

She stopped as if sizing Laura up for a moment but then her lip trembled and words just began spilling out.

“I thought it was a hangover at first. Like maybe someone had spiked his beer because a couple of days later he started forgetting stuff. Little things at first. Quotes from books he used to love. Lectures he was supposed to go to. Nothings.” She paused. “It started slow but it just got worse and worse the longer it went on until he didn’t recognise people that we hung out with everyday. Alan and Ryan and Claire. Last week... he didn’t know who his own roommate was.” The girl ran a wet hand through her hair as she fought to keep her breathing from spiralling out of control. “I thought...I thought if I kept him with me...that I could remind him of things. Jog his memory. Bring him back, you know?”

Laura flinched but said nothing as she kept staring at her willing her to go on while simultaneously not wanting to hear anything more.

“His brother always had mental health issues; spent the whole of his childhood moving in and out of government facilities and he’d already told me about what kind of dark things went on in those white rooms. Even he knew something wasn’t right after a while though. So he begged me. Like actually got down on his knees and made me promise I wouldn’t send him to one of those places. Made me promise to take care of him myself.” She sniffed and rubbed a fist against her eye. “I didn’t know what I was doing. I told him that but he...he...cried and Lloyd, I’d never seen him cry before. I didn’t know how to... what to.. I had to say yes. Didn’t I?”

Laura’s mouth opened to say something but nothing came out. All she could do was look miserably at the girl who gave a shaky shrug.

“I tried everything I could think of. Reading his essays back to him. Showing him old movies. But it
didn’t work. I couldn’t get through to him. He was just fading away more and more every day and his face...this sounds crazy but his face it started to change somehow. Flattened out or something. I looked all this stuff up in medical textbooks but nothing explained what was happening to him. Then...after a while I had to lock him in my dorm room when he started getting aggressive. Hitting his head against stuff. The walls. The furniture. My roommate moved out not long after. I don’t blame her though. Who’d want to deal with this?”

“I...How long has this been going on?” said Laura quietly.

“Since it started? I stopped keeping track of time but I guess maybe...a month?”

The small blonde swallowed hard as she took that in unable to ignore the pleading, hopeless look on the other girl’s face. Flicking her gaze across to Lloyd her chest stuttered at the blank expression he was wearing. At the familiar features that were branded into her mind from last night.

He had their face. Or they had his. She was looking at another victim and the realisation made her feel instantly nauseous. That they were no nearer finding out what those things were. What they wanted. Or how to stop them.

For his part though he simply stared back at her. Not curious at all, not wanting anything from her but showing a complete lack of interest. It came as a shock then when he blinked once and threw himself backwards under the water, letting the stagnant water cover his head. And Laura realised suddenly that he must have asked his friend to let him out from his prison to come here and push him under. Even buried under all that loss and panic he’d remembered enough to want her to set him free. Had probably begged again and again until she’d broken and agreed to do it.

Her hands were shaking as she ran further into the water and dragged his shoulders upwards even as he fought against her. Cupping his chin and pulling it into the warm afternoon air Laura panted with momentary relief as he took air in through his nose. Wishing more than ever that Carmilla was with her to tell her what the hell she was supposed to do now.

TBC...
Chapter 9: Roleplay ain't always for fun

Chapter Summary

Ok so we need to catch up with Carmilla and what she's up to. And contrary to what y'all might think it turns out she's a pretty good detective too when she wants to be,

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in posting, life love and the universe have been ninja kicking me in the lady parts lately. Never mind- onwards good people.

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS CHAPTER 9:

If her breathing hadn’t been so wild she might have entertained the thought that finally after all these years her muscles had atrophied underneath her. As Carmilla watched Laura’s back turn away and head out through the main entrance the swirling war zone inside her seemed to grow into a maelstrom. Half of it wanting to run after her; she had the speed to catch up with the tiny blonde within less than a minute after all. And then she could explain. Try and make her roommate understand why she’d done what had to be done. That there weren’t any other options open to them, at least none that didn’t lead to... something much worse than this.

But the other part; the aging sanguine half of her soul knew the other girl was in no place to listen. That what Laura needed right now was space to be alone with her thoughts; without the pressure of someone else’s pressing at their edges. God, how she hated that smug piece of herself though. She could almost hear it crowing underneath her skin.

She had to do something though. Inaction is as bad as indifference. So they said. Licking her lips, ignoring the hammering inside her own chest Carmilla turned her head to watch the two university employees walking the girl from earlier along the wall of the main foyer below. Taking her to a safe place...or at least a safer one than here.

A frown bloomed on her face as something hit her as she watched. They hadn’t been surprised at the state that that girl had been in when they’d arrived before. Of course it was possible that that was just professionalism on display. A calm demeanour had to be some kind of prerequisite for working in the pysch department right? The ability to face down any kind of situation without showing signs of alarm, at least on the surface. And yet. They’d barely slowed their step before they’d taken the girl’s arm.

As if...
As if they’d seen this before?
Was that possible?

Carmilla screwed up her nose as she considered that for a moment.
If some of the other students on campus had been confronted with a friend in trouble did that mean they’d done the same thing and that there were more victims holed up in the mental health unit? How many could there be?
And were all of them so far gone? Or could one of them remember something from their assault, something that might be of use in finding these bastards?

Her mind wheeled as the thoughts blew against each other.

So what now you’re a superhero? Protecting the innocent from the thing that hides in the dark?

She rolled her eyes at the voice inside her head. Hardly.
But if she could find something, some piece of information then maybe after everything she could at least keep Laura safe. Whether the tiny human she couldn’t seem to stay away from chose to forgive her or not.

It was a plan if nothing else.

And that was how she found herself moving; sneaking down the staircase and maintaining a discreet distance following behind the three figures up ahead, two bland polo shirts to guide her way with an arm on each of their captive’s. Doing her best not to imagine how Laura’s thin forearms might have fit just as neatly in their grasp.

Skirting the edge of the history block and making her way across the south lawn planting her feet silently on the soft grass, Carmilla marvelled as she went that she’d never actually been to the Psychology building before in all her time at Silas.

Of course outside of her mother’s tasks, her lectures had primarily been Philosophy based and thus had been housed in the social sciences wing of the humanities building in the other quadrant. But she had been forced to attend one or two on Language and cognition in ETA Hoffman’s The Sandman. Truth be told they’d bored her out of her skull and she hadn’t paid much attention to the Language Centre’s lecture theatre that sat so inconspicuously next to Psychology. One theatre looked much the same as another. Hell, she’d put her headphones in after the first fifteen minutes to listen to a collection of Bach’s early cantatas. Baroque melodies always seemed to speak straight to her mind when it was becoming sluggish and she remembered the swoop of the orchestral set much more clearly than the professor’s speech that day.

Carmilla smiled at the memory for a moment before she realised with a plummeting stomach that she’d lost sight of her targets causing her to growl inwardly at herself.

Damn it Karnstein get your head in the game.

Not that this was a game.
She knew sport and nothing about this situation was remotely entertaining.
The liquid nothingness in that girl’s gaze had been proof of that and Laura... the idea that Laura might not have made it back last night and could have been one of them...

Nope.
Not helping.

She had to make a guess as to which entrance they’d gone in.
Taking in the clump of chattering students hanging around the ground floor doorway with cigarette in hand, she jogged past them and took the steps two at a time up to the first floor entryway. Purposefully ignoring the whoops that followed her activity from the girls below.

Then she slid inside the glass doors before they closed. There. The three targets were just stepping into the battered old elevator down a hallway littered with flyers and balled up posters. As soon as the doors shut she sped down there and pressing the call button watched the floor displays light up one by one scanning a health guidelines poster impatiently as she did so.

The symbol for the third floor display hesitated and she caught the red rim of the call button she’d just pressed go dim. It was coming back down.

Floor three then.

Jogging across to the stairway she sprinted up six flights without even feeling it until she was standing on the concrete of the third floor stairwell. Opening the door silently, she snuck her head into the corridor; a whitewashed nondescript version of the one from downstairs albeit without the student paraphernalia.

Something about the antisceptic glazed air circulating around made her nostrils burn but she quelled the unease crawling around inside her gut and moved her whole body inside.

Making her way to the double doors at the end, Carmilla peered inside the latticed circle of glass. It didn’t reveal much except more white walls and a scrubbed tiled floor. White on cream on white. And without a better plan, buoyed by adrenaline plus a strange pervasive kind of exhilaration she straightened out her spine and walked straight in as confidently as she could.

The quiet atmosphere hit her first. A kind of hushed oppression that rankled at her nose but taking another few steps she stopped when someone cleared their throat to her right. Peering over Carmilla saw a pony-tailed middle aged man sat behind a reception desk glaring at her.

“Can I help you?”

And now all those undercover lessons from Mother start to pay dividends, she thought dryly before her mind flashed back to the poster she’d seen earlier.

Blinking momentarily she offered him an uninviting smile. “Hi. I’ve been sent by NICE to do an impromptu check on the ward.”

“This isn’t Walmart, we don’t do mystery shoppers darling.”

Her smile dropped and the man raised an eyebrow. “Besides aren’t you a little young sweetheart?”

Asshat.

Carmilla crossed her arms, “This is a student facility isn’t it? We choose our representatives to best appreciate the experience of particular patients receiving treatment. That’s why they’re letting a student liaison officer take a preliminary report before my boss shows up. And I’m older than I look.”

The man sat back in his chair but he didn’t budge.

“Where’s your badge?”

“In the same place as your tie and the ironed version of that uniform?”
That got his attention.

Just before she could say anything else though a young shaky-legged youth suddenly wandered out of a room to their right interrupting their glaring match. He had a small growth of hair bristling on his chin and a deer in the headlights gaze as he took in the sight of the two of them.

And despite her reluctance to use someone who looked so vulnerable Carmilla knew this was just what she needed.
An awful kind of knowledge she wished she didn’t have.

Betraying none of her thoughts, she walked softly up to him, ignoring the man who was disentangling himself from his swivel chair and smiled gently at those wide eyes.

“Hey.”

“Uh...I...hey.”

Putting her hands out in front of her an inch or so from touching the boy making sure not to make unwanted contact, the vampire raised her voice a little.

“I’m a friend ok.” Sneaking a glance back at the ward receptionist she thanked God for her photographic memory and flicked her mind back to the guidelines she’d scanned on her way in.

“I just need to ask you some questions ok? No pressure. Nothing difficult. Is that all right?”

The boy blew out a shaky breath. “Um...I guess.”

She threw out a real smile this time.

“When you were admitted to the ward were you told the name of the person who would be looking after your care?

“I...No?”

“Ok. Were you detained under the mental health act?”

He nodded, the shame emblazoned on his face. “I...I tried to cut my roommate, I didn’t mean to everything got confused and loud and I just...”

She nodded stopping him before the memory had a chance to solidify. As if that made up for what she was doing.

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed by that, all right? But did the staff here tell you what was happening and what legal power they were using to keep you here?”

Putting out a hand to steady himself against the wall, the boy pulled at his pyjamas collar. “I don’t...don’t think so but there was a lot of stuff going on and then they gave me this injection which tasted funny...”

“That’s enough young lady. Our patients are not lab rats.”

Clearly incensed the receptionist was on them now and went to grab her elbow but she jerked it out of his grip and held the boys wild gaze as she pushed him away.

“Did they give you any idea of how long they planned to detain you? What about your right to appeal the decision; was there any mention of that or your rights to complain about the care you’re
receiving?”

The student nodded emphatically and though she knew her cover was finally paying off Carmilla’s heart sank at the way he was looking at her; his large brown pupils practically begging for her help. Because he thought she was who she said she was.

Not just a liar using him for her own ends.

She hated herself in that second and it was that overwhelming sense of loathing that gave the receptionist the opportunity to finally drag her a few feet backwards.

“Look you little busybody. We’re all up to code here. Our patients feel safe. They’re given privacy and space with separate toilets, washing facilities and sleeping accommodation. Right, son?”

The boy nodded at the man this time almost as vigorously as he had at Carmilla.

“You see? There’s no mixed sex wards. Patients have plenty of chances to exercise and take part in group activities and therapies if they want. And the food here’s been rated five stars in terms of health and variety.”

Planting her hand on the edge of a trolley resting next to her the brunette turned to face him. And threw the dice.

“And your occupancy rate?” she said, as she scrabbled to try and recall the bullet points she’d glanced at earlier.

That blue collar grin fell away, those grey eyes taking on an angry sheen. “No real world unit runs at eight five per cent or less. You know that.”

Eighty five, that was it!

Damn, she was losing her touch.

Pulling herself up to her full height, bolstering herself with the knowledge that this idiot really believed she was affiliated with NICE at this point, Carmilla patted her hair down.

“We’ve had reports that your occupancy has spiked recently though, is that true?”

Staring at him she caught the twitch of the muscle in his right cheek.

“Turnover fluctuates; it’s a natural phenomenon.”

“But it’s gone up recently?”

He shrugged defensively. “Maybe a little.”

The vampire cocked her head. “Then I need to see your latest guests to make sure everything has been dealt with...sufficiently.”

“Out of the question.”

She sneered. “We’ll decide what the question is, sir. You know the sanctions we can put into place if we’re not satisfied in cases like this.”

“I’m getting my Manager, this is completely outrageous.”

Carmilla motioned with her hand airily. “Go on then. I’ve spent more than enough time with the
worker ants as it is.”

His entire face flushed red at that leaving a crimson line underneath his right ear and she wondered for a moment if she had overplayed her hand. But a brief image of Laura’s bruised face from last night blew into her vision and she used it to stand her ground, watching carefully as he sped off down the corridor and turned into a doorway at the far end.

She was in the clear. At least for a small amount of time.

Beaming at the boy in his striped pyjamas she knelt down in front of him quickly.

“So you seem like a pretty smart guy.” She said softly. “You know where the new recruits would be housed?”

A little taken aback probably by the compliment more than anything else, the boy nervously grinned back and pointed a thumb to the right. “They’d go to Lyssa wing after processing. Kinda busy down there so everyone’s saying.”

She nodded gratefully.

“Thank you...uh...”

“Ryan.”

Carmilla stood up and rested a hand on his forearm next to his wrist band.

“Thank you Ryan. You’ve been a big help.”

Turning away, she tried not to flinch as she heard a quiet murmur from behind her.

“Thanks for checking up on me.”

Then she was walking, trying to remind herself that she wasn’t here to save everyone. Trying to get the taste of all the lies she’d told in the last few minutes out of her mouth. As if they were collecting behind her teeth.

Quickening her pace, as if such a simple act might allow her to outrun the indignity coating her skin Carmilla attempted to distract herself peering into a few rooms as she went but they seemed to be nothing more than equipment storage rooms filled haphazardly with plastic cups, trolleys and linen in large sloppily tied bags.

Coming to the edge of the corridor another set of imposing double doors rose up in front of her, these ones conspicuous for the lack of glass in their heavy wooden frame.

A strange musky smell seemed to be slipping through the hinges sending goose bumps across her skin and she found herself hesitating before she reached out to push against the left one.

It was heavy but the door pushed inward an inch.

So she pushed her weight against it and slid inside before coming to a complete stop. Unable to process the horror of what she saw when she was finally inside the so called Lyssa Ward.
If you can't help people then at least don't hurt them

Chapter Summary

Laura's a little out of her depth and comes to some realisations.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I know, this has been a while coming but I’ve had mad writer’s block so sorry guys but here’s the next instalment. Thanks for all the people staying with the story- you get me up in the mornings. x

She didn’t know what to do.  
Things had seemed so simple just a moment ago. Everything had fit neatly into boxes, all edges and elbows the way they should; the way they were supposed to.  
The way her mother had always promised that they would.  
But now...  
Now Carmilla was god knows where and probably never going to speak to her again.  
Now the water was seeping through Laura’s jeans plastering them onto the frigid flesh of her shins and it was sending the most unpleasant sensation through her. As if a hundred tentacles were sucking their way up her body, one tiny leeching mouth at a time all with the same goal in mind though she couldn’t quite work out what that might be.  
It made her feel sick to her stomach though.  
And the goosebumps standing to attention on her arms and stomach weren’t helping either.  
“He asked me. Begged me. What was I supposed to do?”

The girl a foot away was staring wildly at her friend still submerged in the slightly stagnating water and Laura followed her gaze immediately sucking in a shivering breath.  
He didn’t look good.  
The pallid puckering skin on his neck proved that he was in a much worse position than either of them, already heading towards hypothermia in all probability. The stream of water that trickled down from his sodden hair into his eyes seemed to be unstoppable though he barely even bothered to blink the drops away. The sight was unnerving enough to make Laura fight against her urge to drag him up and out of the cold lake for a moment. All she could seem to do was stare at him instead.  
Because behind that waterlogged curling spine he was actually kind of cute. Not exactly Joseph Gordon Levitt cute and he was a little underweight maybe but behind his thin frame there was a warmth and sturdiness that made her wonder if he had been some kind of athlete. Maybe even come to Silas on a scholarship. Hoping to make a real future for himself like so many of the others here. Danny’s circle of friends. The ones she saw hanging around campus that ran track longer than everyone else, that had to replace their sneakers more often because they pushed themselves to the limit for the vain hope that they could hit that PB. Outrun everyone else.

All the expectations the world threw at them including their own.
Laura could definitely relate to that. At least in some way.

His face though. His face was lax - a polar opposite of the students she’d watched from the bleachers at lunchtime as they sprinted past; all concentration lines and siphoned breathing. In front of her was their exact reverse. The faraway look in the boy’s glazed eyes was as unswerving as theirs for sure. But it was also...just...horrible to see. Unattached somehow. Distant. Bovine and completely uninterested in anything.

Even the strange girl staring right at him, trying to work out what she should do.

“Harry?...”

The other girl’s voice broke a little when she spoke next.

So that’s his name thought Laura uneasily as she peered at him, trying to work out if there was any small flicker of recognition in those smooth features.

Her chest puttered as he stayed where he was. Motionless with the water lapping at his chest.

“Harry, please? Just say something. Anything.”

He didn’t though. And Laura’s mind couldn’t help flashing back to the terrible stageplay her and Laf had gone to see at the arts centre a few weeks ago. Not so much for the cheesy shambling and rotting makeup that had been paraded around on the stage but more for the dead eyed look on the actor’s faces- the muscles in them forced to hang loose as if they’d lost even the motor function to hold their jaw shut.

That was what he reminded her most of. Those things from the last production in the theatre departments summer festival.

Not human any more. Though she knew logically that he was of course. But a stripped back version. As if a layer of something he hadn’t even known he’d possessed had been stripped away from him. Not just speech and language but something that swum about in the deeper levels of human consciousness- things he’d always taken for granted, not even spared a single thought for; things that kept him safe at night when he collapsed into bed. That kept them all safe at night. With the circulation still pumping and the night time horrors banished to the other side of the bedroom door.

Laura struggled to keep her sense of calm as the fight with Carmilla replayed in her brain for a moment; the unveiled hurt in those brown eyes and it was in response to the image that her body apparently made the decision for her.

Staring hollowly at the boy’s emotionless face Laura’s legs finally moved underneath her, pushing themselves through the ripples of water towards him as the suckling wet patch on her clothes grew higher and higher. Just as it reached her waistband, she stopped in front of his sagging form and bent down a little.

Of course, the warning bells in the back of her mind (the ones that sounded a lot like her roommate when she was building up to a full blown rant) started singing. That unbearably familiar smooth face made her stomach muscles jerk at the sight of it, and the memory of that thing standing over her last night, staring into her eyes with the same ones she was looking at right now was enough to make her want to back the hell away from the student in front of her.
But she was Laura Hollis damnit. And turning a blind eye wasn’t an option. No matter how adept her mother was at that. Forcing all of her warring instincts out of the equation Laura told herself that he wasn’t the perpetrator here though. That Harry was the victim. Blameless. And it was time to girl the hell up. So she did.

Reaching out a watery hand, the first thing she did was run her fingers gently down his cheek. And she could have sworn that he seemed to lean a little into the touch, though his expression didn’t change. Maybe that was just wishful thinking though.

“Hi,” she said then, evenly.

“Greeting in common parlance.”

“Quite right.”

Brushing a pile of lank hair off his forehead he blinked as she stared into those dark unflinching pupils. They bore into her without seeing or so it seemed. But there was nothing inside them that told her anything new. She had no idea what she’d been hoping for. A burst blood vessel. Some dark spot that revealed the poison inside. Some biological sign of attack for Laf to pinpoint and analyse. Some goddamn clue to what the heck was going on here. And there was nothing. Just the absence of a person. The absence of all the desires and jokes that somehow had made him distinctly Harry.

“What...what should we do?”

Laura turned towards the other girl whose body was beginning to shake and let out a reassuring breath.

“What’s your name?”

“Anne.”

Laura nodded. “Ok well Anne? Honestly, I don’t really know. But keeping this thing secret doesn’t seem to be doing Harry any good so I think...I think maybe we need outside help.”

“You’re outside help.”

“This might be a little outside my expertise,” she replied miserably.

And as soon as the words came out of her mouth, she realised what they had to do. What Carmilla had understood from the outset. And the very reason she’d shot her down without a second thought.

“Do you have your cell with you?”

The other student nodded definitively.

Laura’s voice faltered. “Ring switchboard and ask for psych services. They’ll need to come and get
him. Take him somewhere safe so that he can’t hurt himself. Or you.”

“Isn’t that...I mean I don’t want him to think I’m giving up on him?”

Uh huh. The way you did? Her brain supplied.

Laura offered up a half smile ignoring it. “He won’t. He’d understand. He’d do the same for you I’m sure.”

There was a brief pause as Anne clearly fought through her own tangled sense of right and wrong, wavering between the spider web strands of relief and guilt. Then Laura watched as the other girl burst into motion; grateful probably for something tangible she could do after the last few weeks. Grateful that the decision had been taken out of her hands finally and shouldered by someone else; someone who knew what to do.

If only she knew....

Laura did her best to tamp down the warm pool of shame slopping around inside her gut as she pictured her roommate’s face when she’d turned on her back in the library. That look of helpless shock Carmilla had worn when she’d said all those awful things. All the childish, mean spirited accusations she’d thrown at her without a second thought.

God I’m an idiot.

She knew one thing though. She had to find her and apologise. Like right now.

It was a forlorn hope but as she rested a soft hand on Harry’s shoulder Laura scanned the grounds quickly around them seeing no sign of that familiar dark hair and proud posture. She wouldn’t let her heart sink in response.

It wasn’t really likely that her vampire roommate would be found anywhere nearby wallowing in her own misfortunes. It wasn’t her style- preferring instead to seek out somewhere away from the bustle of campus life, somewhere older with a real sense of solitude. Laura did however spot the recognisable turquoise shirts of the psychological team exiting from the double doors of the main hall in the far distance. A man and a woman heading their way with a determined gait.

Huh.
That didn’t take long.

She wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing. The speed of their arrival suggested an urgency on the university’s part that set her on edge even though a large part of her was glad of their presence.

And it also sent another question reverberating around inside her skull...

Was this even bigger than they had thought?

She didn’t have time to process the thought however because she felt something clammy grab at her wrist and looked down in panic to find the boy had wrapped his hand around her. Offering him a comforting smile Laura gently tried to extricate her arm but almost lost her feet as he pulled her insistently towards him.

She was actually forced to dig her feet into the pebbles and mud then to keep from toppling over.

“Hey, it’s ok. They’re going to help you feel better,” she said hoping that he didn’t hear the catch in
her voice.

He looked at her intensely.

“How?” said a voice behind her. “How are they going to do that?”

Laura couldn’t bring herself to turn and face the other girl this time because the truth was that she had no answer to the question. She had no idea if her interference so far was saving the student in front of her or damning them.

“The action of hurting or harming someone in return for an injury suffered at their hands.”

Laura froze as the boy suddenly spoke for the first time what seemed forever. She looked down at him.

“What did you say?”

“Punishment inflicted or retribution exacted for a wrong.”

Laura’s gaze flicked from his impassive face to his friend’s.

“What does he mean?”

Anne gave an empty shrug, the phone still clutched in her grip. “I don’t know. He says it sometimes along with the other nonsense that comes out.” Sniffing slightly, the girl lowered her eyes. “I stopped listening after a while. .. I couldn’t take it anymore. I guess a better friend might be able to tell you but...”

A crackle ran through the dark blonde’s chest at the self loathing in the girl’s face, looking at it from the other side for once and the urge to wrap her arms around her burned fiercely. Looking down at the large hand still clamped around her wrist she didn’t move though.

“Hi, did someone ask for a student consult?”

Anne glanced at Laura as a stocky man and sallow woman approached them then nodded slowly. “My friend...Harry...I think he needs help.”

The pair turned their gaze to her friend still half sunk in the water and shared an unreadable look that only Laura seemed to pick up on. Remaining silent for the moment she held her breath as they waded into the water towards her.

“You’re his friend too?”

The woman took in the hand still wrapped around Laura’s wrist and peered at her curiously as she shrugged.

“I was just trying to...you know, help.”

“A prevalent force on campus at the moment it seems.”

Before Laura could ask what that innocuous comment might mean the woman was bending down next to her knees and she smiled quietly at the unmoving boy. “So Harry? How do you feel about coming with us for a really quick chat? Somewhere warm and dry? You’d like that wouldn’t you, to get out of those wet things?”
“Like- having similar qualities or characteristics to another person or thing,” he replied benignly.

The bulky man in the polo shirt took a step forward this time. “Very good son. Exactly right.” Reaching down the pair of adults placed their hands underneath his armpits and carefully pulled him up onto his feet as he offered little resistance. His hand though remained clamped around Laura’s forearm and she found herself dragged with them as they coaxed him forwards up onto the bank.

“Harry, you can let go now. You’ll be safe with us,” the woman cooed.

He didn’t seem to agree however as he remained attached to Laura despite the fingers prying at his grip. She flinched as the two adults spun around and pierced her with their gaze.

“Perhaps you’d consider coming with us Miss, at least to the ward. It seems Harry here would appreciate it. You wouldn’t mind, would you since you want to help and all?”

The way the request was put forward seemed a little facetious truth be told but it tore Laura in two nonetheless. Her desperate need to find her roommate was growing by the second, although whether it was the urge to apologise or simply bask in the strange kind of security only Carmilla could offer she couldn’t be sure. Both reasons were as selfish as the other when all was said and done. She knew that. Both were also undeniably true.

On the other hand though Anne’s beseeching expression cut through her like a knife and the sensation of the cloying grip on her wrist bones was powerful enough to remind her that she wasn’t the one with the most pressing need right now. No matter what her roiling stomach told her.

And that was how she found herself agreeing silently. Walking slowly away from the lake with her sneakers squelching uncomfortable and two Silas employees huddled around her and Harry like a shield as they steered them along the paved pathways.

The same walk she’d taken a hundred times before. Never like this though.

The Psych building took an age to veer up before them. Its faded facade was impressively haphazard but she couldn’t deny that the sight of it flooded her system with a liquid kind of relief as they made their way through the glass doors. Harry wasn’t the only one looking forward to some respite. Some warm barely-circulated air and the chance to go back to the dorm for a shower and some clean clothes sounded like heaven right now.

As they made their way up in the elevator, crushed as she was against Anne in the tiny space Laura brushed the knuckles of her free hand against the other girl’s and smiled as reassuringly as she could. Both of them sharing a muted sense of elation as they made their way out on the third floor and through a set of double doors that banged together behind them.

A pony tailed man came out from behind a counter.

“Another...guest?”

The two staff members nodded quickly at him and Laura had the distinct impression that he was about to say something else but censored himself when he saw her and Anne standing there. He didn’t comment on the wet trousers they all wore however but hooked a thumb behind him instead.

“Cubicle eight has just become vacant. It’s all set up.”

“Right you are Harry, not far to go now and we’ll get you something to change into and a coffee or something. How does that sound?”
As the greying woman wrapped an arm around his back the hand that had been clutching onto her for so long suddenly fell from her wrist and Laura tried to contain the mixture of gratitude and sadness left in its wake as she massaged the skin a little.

Inclining her head at Harry’s fleeting glance as he was guided down the corridor to her right, she breathed out through her nose before turning to Anne who was hovering nearby her left foot tapping against the lino.

“Can I go with him?”

“I’m afraid not,” said the overweight staff member in the polo shirt. “He needs a solitary assessment before we do anything. Without outside influence. But you can wait here in the reception area if you’d like so we can talk to you afterwards and explain what the plan is?”

Anne ran a hand through her messy hair mumbling a disappointed ok and Laura couldn’t help herself. Pulling the other student into a warm, soggy hug she buried her face into her shoulder before pulling back.

“I think things will be better now.”

Patting down a stray hair in front of her, her eyes crinkled. “I should probably get going but I’m in room 306 in Otranto Hall. If you wanna let me know what happens. All right?”

Anne swallowed hard and attempted a smile. “Thank you. For everything. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t....I mean...just, thank you.”

Laura’s cheeks flushed a little. Not least because she knew very well that she hadn’t done much of anything. But the girl’s gratitude warmed her cold skin a touch and she took it anyway somehow feeling that arguing about it would probably make things worse at this point.

Holding up a hand to wave good bye with one last look at the student as she made her way down towards the seating area her chest expanded as she realised she was finally free to go find Carmilla. A hundred tumbling apologies and thorny explanations clogging up her mind as she started walking towards the doors.

In fact she was so lost in her own thoughts that she almost didn’t notice the hand that landed on her shoulder until it pressed down, stopping her motion.

“I’m afraid we can’t let you leave right now Miss. We think its best you stay for an assessment as well.”

Laura swung around bringing her face to face with the thickset psych employee. Her face contorted in confusion, “What are you talking about? I was just bringing Harry here like you asked!”

His flabby expression went cold then and he grabbed her chin between his fingers dragging her face painfully upwards as he studied it. “They got to you too though didn’t they? It’s not as advanced as the others of course but it’s there nonetheless. We’ve seen enough cases to recognise the symptoms.”

Struggling to rip her jaw out of his grip, sick to death of feeling other people’s skin pressed against hers Laura quickly began thrashing about, throwing her body this way and that. The man for his part was impressively strong. For a brief moment she found herself free of his hold and took full advantage of that particular piece of luck but just as she pushed off the wall towards the doors a cold
piercing sensation bit into her just below the left ear.

Then everything started to get all wavy.

The elongated shadow of a pony tailed man in white grinned at her as Laura slumped heavily against the wall, her pulse throbbing against the inside skin of her neck and the lights flattening out into beautiful haloes of illumination.

Something was wrong. Laura knew it even before the floor came swooping up to meet her but the thing was, she couldn’t seem to do anything about it.

TBC...
Maybe being alone in the darkness shouldn't be your biggest fear

Chapter Summary

The focus is back on Carmilla sleuthing about, trying to figure out what the hell is going on...

Will she get any answers and what the hell is happening in the Silas Psych Unit?!!

Chapter Notes

A/N: I know we’ve all been missing the Hollstein interaction and that is coming I swear but needed to push the narrative forward first. Hope you all stick with this thing. Thanks to everyone reading, commenting and kudosing!

You are leg-ends.
Truly the end of legs.

Something was niggling at the back of Carmilla’s mind; like a worm wriggling around inside an apple.
But with the adrenaline burning its way through her system like the memory of a circulation she’d once had... and with everything else going on she couldn’t quite seem to put her finger on it.
It was something Laura had said in the library.
Something important.
What was it?

...Goddamn it.
She was trying her best to remember but all the words her roommate had thrown her way the last time they’d seen each other seemed to meld into an indecipherable cluster behind her eyes; melting on top of each other whenever she tried to form anything concrete. Replaced by an image of the hurt look on the blonde’s face. The betrayal and anchorlessness there.
She wasn’t sure that was something she was ever likely to forget.
Groaning with frustration Carmilla made another attempt to find some clarity as she walked along the corridor.
Tried to remind herself she was doing all of this for the tiny human. To keep her safe.
And that had to count in her favour right?
That was something to add to the scales when everything was said and....

Sneaking through the double doors in front of her, all coherent thought stopped in its tracks as her jaw fell open.

...

Carmilla had borne witness to a lot of things in her time. Somehow though, after all her mother’s whispered promises of infinity and answers, life had become a series of grotesque and perverse moments mingling with the tedious monotony of everyday living.
Pretending to be nothing more than a care-free eighteen year old when you’d held men’s throats in your hand and felt their larynx contract with a convulsive skirl was kind of a joke when all you wanted to know was why you were here. A horrifying blood-on-your-fingers kind of joke but a joke nonetheless.

This wasn’t though.
This didn’t even come close.

Staring around the room, trying to take in as much detail as she could Carmilla counted up the bed frames glinting dully at her.

Eight.
Eight beds- nothing unusual in that.
Except for the fact that the beds and their sleeping occupants weren’t lined up on the floor. They were suspended on the rooms walls, each white frame solidly hammered into the cinderblocks behind with heavy duty nails. Perfectly vertical; limbs pinioned tightly under tucked-in blankets. Almost Catholic in their positioning.

Her mouth open, Carmilla wondered for a brief moment how the students stayed in position even with the sedative they seemed to have been given but then her sharp eyes caught a series of small buckles and leather straps peeking out from the hospital corners of the linen.
They’re strapped in as well.

Huh.
Was that to keep them safe? Or to keep us safe from them?

Taking a silent step forward in the buzzing overhead light, she blinked a little as she stared up at the parade of beds, each one so perfectly spaced that the whole thing reminded her of the dinner tables she had found herself seated at during Styria’s period of gentrification. So many cutleries to her left and right that the urge to simply use her fingers had caused her to tuck them delicately under each other on her lap.

Lost in the memory she reached up for a moment and let her fingertips touch the hem of a scratchy blanket readying herself to pull on it.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

She jumped back with an imperceptible gasp.
Cursing herself at the raggedness of her own breathing though no human would notice it.
Peering into the dim corner of the room where the voice had come from Carmilla noticed then that a small single cot was pushed against the far wall, a huddle of white linen bunched on top away from the dull gleam of the central strip lights above.

“Who said that?” she hissed.

“Nobody of any consequence,” said the huddle. “Or a somebody that consequence didn’t feel worth their time I guess.”

Carmilla straightened up putting on the best game face she could manage with a heaving chest and began moving towards the mysterious person.

“You know what? This whole thing is getting a little bit too Lewis Carroll for my taste so you really need to show yourself right now.”

And if you turn out to be a caterpillar smoking a hookah I’m gonna lose my shit, she added
internally.

Peering closer, she watched as a small head slowly emerged from the blanket before a pair of thin arms followed clutching the cotton bedcover tightly.
It was a girl. A thin, wild eyed girl with limp unwashed hair but human at least and clearly as shocked by her presence here as she was.

“So...” She hesitated. “You...didn’t feel like being strapped to the wall today?”

The girl smiled a little; a sad imitation of one at least. “That’s for the special guests not long term residents.”

The brunette took another step closer. “And why shouldn’t I touch them?”

“They’ve been given Midazolam. It keeps you out of it but it’s only a conscious sedation. Physical stimulus cuts right through it. And then they’ll start with the talking and the shouting. That’s when the nurses come.” She licked her lips. “I get the impression you’re not looking for an audience.”

“Smart.” Carmilla flicked her eyes to the end of the small bed and watched as the girl nodded imperceptibly. Taking that as confirmation enough, she sat down gingerly on the threadbare coverlet. “What’s an insightful girl like you doing in a place like this?”

“Living the college dream, can’t you tell?” She swallowed dryly. “I thought getting away from home might help somehow. Reset something in my...” She touched her forehead. “In here. Didn’t work out quite the way I planned though.”

She cocked her head then. “Did you know the first madhouses were run by clergymen? They didn’t believe in medication so they prescribed regular attendance in church and pilgrimages to religious shrines.”

Carmilla grinned. “And how did that work out for them?”

“Shockingly, not great.” The student scratched at the skin on her left hand. “They tried to cure the mentally disturbed by encouraging them to confess their sins and seek refuge in God’s mercy.”

Even with the peculiarity of the conversation Carmilla felt a darkness pass over her face for a moment. “I should think the big guy has his hands full with the supposedly sane let alone the rest of us.”

A pair of eyes bore into her.

“Us?”

The brunette offered up a shrug, “The power of Christ...not that compelling when you’ve seen behind the curtain once or twice.”

“People like me...like us... I think we’re destined to be the afterthought.”

Just then a soft creaking from above cut through the quiet and both of their heads turned towards the other side of the room. A soft troubled breath followed but died off falling into silence again.

The girl pursed her lips. “It’s just a muscle spasm. The human body’s not used to being knocked out all the time.”

Suddenly those weary blue eyes sharpened. “Not that you need to worry about that. Why are you here?”
Carmilla froze.

Unsure whether to deny or confirm the unanswered accusation hidden beneath the comment. But she needed to know what was going on here, to make sure Laura wouldn’t be in any more danger. That’s all that really mattered, wasn’t it?

So she trained her gaze on the other girl’s, holding her fingers still to keep them from picking at the fabric underneath them.

“My roommate. Uh, friend. She had a run in with the things that I think have been doing this to students on campus. I need to find out how to stop them before they hurt anyone else.”

A pause followed.

“A noble vampire. Some would say that’s an oxymoron,” replied the girl softly.

“Some might say the same of a lucid psych patient.”

“The preferred term would be mental health service recipient. Didn’t you see the posters?”

A little taken aback, Carmilla’s cheeks flamed a little at her own ineloquence and she was just about to try and form some kind of apology when she caught the brief twinkle in those blue eyes and nudged the leg buried under the coverlet nearest her with a harumph.

“Sorry... I don’t get much chance to poke fun at people in here.” The girl giggled.

“No problem.” Carmilla deadpanned. “I’m all about comedy, me.”

Flashing eyes greeted her before dulling a little.

“You’re right though. The rest of them in here- it’s something different. Something I’ve never seen before. My parents, they dropped me off in here six weeks ago before any of...this.” She picked up on the inquisitive look on her guest’s face and wrinkled up her nose. “They couldn’t take the shame of their daughter coming home from college every other day because the only place she can sleep is her childhood bedroom. The neighbours started talking. And when neighbours tongues start wagging, family lips clamp shut. No more visits mean no more problem.”

“That’s heartless.”

The growl escaped the vampire’s lips before she could stop it and the student reached out to lay her hand gently on top of Carmilla’s; to her credit, barely even flinching at its coldness.

“They’re suburban people. All they have are suburban solutions.”

“And that doesn’t burn you up inside?! That they turned their back on you when you needed them?”

Her nose scrunched up again as she retracted her hand and cradled it against her ribs. “They love me. They just don’t know how to help me. Why would I be mad at them for that when I’m as clueless as they are on the subject?”

She breathed out tiredly as if it was a conversation she’d had with herself many times before. “Your friend’s lucky though, to have someone willing to walk into a place like this on the off-chance they might find the answer.”

A flash of Laura’s sleepy smiling face lying next to her in bed flung itself into Carmilla’s mind at that and she found herself grinning a little at the memory, wishing they had just stayed there cocooned in that place. With skin and blankets and walls between them and the world outside.
“She must be quite something.”

The brunette shook the thought away and slid her foot underneath herself. “She’s more than anyone could ever know.”

She sobered up for a moment.

“So you’ve had an inside view of this thing from the beginning?”

The rattle of metal on metal rang out in the suspended bed closest to them for a moment before receding again.

“If it’s a view worth having.”

Carmilla’s cast iron stomach lurched in a way it hadn’t done for years at the despondency laced underneath those words and she inched a tiny bit closer to the other occupant of the bed.

“Is there anything you can tell me that might help? Maybe... between the two of us we can make a difference here.”

The sallow girl grinned then. “All right, Tony Robbins. No need to get your microphone out.” She took a breath and placed her hands flat on the blanket. “To be honest, everything seemed pretty normal at first. I was the only one in here but I had my books and my music so it wasn’t that bad you know? But then they brought a newbie in. Rachel. She seemed all right for the first few days. A little spacey at times but friendly enough; she even asked to borrow my Lissie albums when she leant me her curlers. But then...she started having trouble finding the words for things. Like forming sentences or something. I thought it might have been meds they put her on but I never saw them give her anything off the tray...”

She shifted around on the bed. “When the second one came in, it got worse. Quickly. Like they sparked off each other or they re-infected each other or something. Rachel stopped speaking almost immediately apart from shouting out these random words. She’d shout something obscure then the new guy would yell out the word’s definition. Back and forth like that. For hours. No small talk, no conversation. Just a live game of dictionaries R us.”

Carmilla frowned as a shiver ran through her spine, her mind scrabbling around to try and remember if Laura had shown any of those symptoms last night. She couldn’t be sure, she’d seemed ok... well as ok as anyone would be given what she’d been through but Carmilla kept herself from interrupting nonetheless. Memory girl, my ass she thought acidly

“It was only when three more were admitted that the nurses picked up on it. That they were affecting each other like that. And they begged the doctors to move everyone into separate rooms but with the numbers being brought in going up and up, I guess they just didn’t have the room so the request was denied. They decided to strap them into the beds with mouth guards.”

The girl noticed Carmilla’s grimace. “It could have been worse. We should probably be glad they didn’t resort to iron collars and leeches.” She rubbed at her left eye. “Anyway the nurses were all up in arms because they didn’t know what else to do. And it was just before they strapped them all in that I noticed....”

She stopped.

“Noticed what?”

She looked a little reluctant to answer this time and Carmilla threw her an encouraging smile.
“Their faces. This might sound insane but they were all...becoming the same. Like physically changing. I thought I was going mad...”

She rolled her eyes at Carmilla as she went to say something.

“...Yes yes the irony. I know. But their eyes...it was like they changed the longer they were here. Until they didn’t even look like themselves anymore. Until they weren’t themselves anymore.

The vampire tried to absorb all of that as she leant back against the wall resting a backbone that seemed to ache terribly all of a sudden. Everything the girl had said fit with the things that Laura and her had seen for themselves and something inside told her that she was telling the truth. But it didn’t help much with figuring out what the cause of this thing might be. Or how to stop it.

More than anything she wished Laura was here beside her. She’d come up with some crazy implausible theory if she’d heard all this. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind.

She huffed out a breath and nodded towards the nearest bed.

“So whose idea was the horror movie sleeping arrangements?”

“Not the doctors or the nurses that’s for sure. They’re kind of ok most of the time if you have a sense of humour. Honestly, I was pretty out of it when some woman in a power suit just marched in with a team of carpenters and ordered the changes effective immediately. The staff weren’t happy about it, hell, they even threatened to walk out but she threatened them back with an NBA or something and they all shut up after that.”

“Must have been an NDA.” Hmmmed Carmilla. “Non disclosure agreement. Weird thing for university staff to have to sign but not when you consider this is Silas...maybe not.”

“Anyway, the woman ordered a mass sedation, muttered something about one mutiny being enough then she was gone again. I figured she was the Chancellor or something like that. They all gave her that stupid college salute.”

Every muscle in Carmilla’s body seized up momentarily and her eyes blew wide.

“What...what did she look like?”

She considered that for a second. “Dark hair pulled back of her face. Cold eyes. Kind of cruel face you know? Not a people person if you get what I mean.”

God, It couldn’t be. She was dead.

Carmilla struggled to contain the rising tide of fear building up inside her abdomen as the possibility broke over her. The Dean. Her Mother was alive. Had somehow recovered from the battle in the Pit that should have ended her. And was back running things behind the scenes again without anyone even knowing she was alive and well. As if nothing had happened at all.

Carmilla brought her eyes up to find the girl peering curiously at her.

“Do you know who she is?”
The brunette jerked away as fingertips brushed her knuckles; too shaken up to even apologise for the action.

As she turned away from the quizzical expression in front of her, her brain screamed wildly that she was allowing herself to jump to conclusions. Assuming the worst when it was barely even possible.

But just as she felt her jaw unlock a touch, enough to maybe even try and form a word or two the sound of squeaking wheels slid underneath the doors announcing someone’s intention to come in and she was on her feet in a heartbeat; a new wave of dread shooting through her system.

Looking about her with horror, she was scanning the room for somewhere to hide trying her best to keep from throwing up where she stood when a hand wrapped itself around her wrist and dragged her sideways.

It took her a moment to work out what was happening when she saw the girl pointing towards the space under her bed. It took less than that for her to drop to the floor and slither underneath dragging the edge of the blanket down to cover some of the gap.

She’d only just pulled her ankles under when the doors burst open and two orderlies pushed in a trolley alongside them.

“Order up,” One said snickering and Carmilla immediately had the urge to punch him in the mouth though her view of his face was partially obscured. “Did someone ask for the Humanities student served with a side of tranquilliser?

That urge transformed almost immediately into rage however when he lifted a prone body off the trolley into his arms and she caught a glimpse of that familiar honey blonde hair hanging down across his shoulder.

Laura.

That was Laura he was holding.

And she was unconscious.

A snarl built low in her throat as her body moved of its own accord starting to wriggle out of its hiding place when a leg came down in front of her vision blocking her escape.

She tried to push it out of the way but it held firm pushing back against her face and neck.

Keeping her there before she did something incredibly stupid.

And got them all killed.

TBC...
White lights and dark nights

Chapter Summary

Carmilla's finally reunited with Laura again. Not in the way she hoped but at least they're together. Now if she could just get them safe things would be all right.

Right?

God she wanted to rip their limbs from their body.

The way the sweaty lank haired porter ran his hands across Laura’s ankles when he thought his colleague wasn’t looking made her feel sick with anger. They seemed to linger at her calf with a kind of vile intention, their pads stippling her skin and it took all of her willpower not to launch herself from her hiding place and rip those fingers from their sticky sockets.

Not to sink her burgeoning fangs into his gelatinous neck and rip. Just rip away like a rabid dog.

Instead she watched in a cold rage, her view half obstructed by the leg dangling in front of her as his unshaven workmate pulled down a lever on the wall and one of the beds creaked and groaned as it descended, juddering to a halt before slowly rolling down into a horizontal position.

The metallic squeal of its motion scraped at her nerves in a different way but she held her muscles in stasis as it finally came to rest and then the two men were all professionalism; one sliding his hands under Laura’s drooping neck, the other slipping his whole arms underneath her knees.

For a moment Carmilla’s heart jerked as they took up Laura’s weight between them, soft skin on worn but then she was placed delicately on the smooth white bed sheet and their hands were busy again. Tucking and buckling; metal and cotton. Strapping her underneath layers as if she were some clinical piece of art.

“This one’s pretty huh?”

Her gaze snapped back to the clammy porter as he smirked lazily at his friend. “Think she’s been making the most of campus life?”

The other man shrugged. “She’s in here isn’t she? Don’t think she’s been holed up in her room with a bunch of books every night if she got mixed up in this.”

“You know she’s going to be out of it for a while.”

His friend’s eyes widened a little at that and a snarl began building at the back of Carmilla’s throat deep in the shadows.

“You know the orders.”

“The Grand High Witch and her evil eye can’t be everywhere at once.” Sidling to his left he came to stand by the head of the bed and let a hand reach down to stroke some of Laura’s hair. “We work hard taking care of the vulnerable; we deserve a perk or two right? For our humanitarian labour.”
Carmilla growled as a second leg swung down in front of her obscuring her vision even more and she forgot herself for a moment dragging her nails down the pale flesh. To the girl’s credit they didn’t even flinch from the scratch though they did move a little to the left allowing her a better view. She wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not.

“Come on mate, she needs to sleep it off.”

A scowl crossed his fleshy colleague’s face and in some kind of petty retaliation as if he’d been chastised he ran a thick finger across Laura’s parted lips. “If a tree falls in the woods mate and no-one’s around to hear it scream does it really make a sound?”

Carmilla’s fangs burst painfully through her gums at the salacious tone in the man’s voice and just as she readied herself to burst from her hiding place, the other orderly seemed to snap, shoving his colleague back with a surprising force away from the bed, his face blooming red.

“Really?!” Huffing out a disgusted breath, he threw his hands up. “We may be stuck working in the Bermuda Triangle of weird shit but we are still mental health professionals. Heard that word before? Professional. I doubt you can spell it but you’ll sure as hell show some of it when you come to work. We are NOT jokers. NOT perverts and from right now, you’re gonna stay the hell away from that girl. Any girl. Do you understand me?”

“Ok man, no need to throw your toys out of the pram!”

He snarled a little. “An interesting metaphor coming from a guy who seems to unable to rise above his basest instincts.”

Brushing down the bottom end of the bedcover with what seemed like a kind of restrained compassion the stubbled orderly turned his stony face from Laura’s sleeping form to his workmate.

“And if it’s only the fear of being caught that stops you from acting out the repulsive things that go on in your brain then you have even bigger problems than she does.”

His hand shot out and wrapped itself around a chubby forearm. “Smirk all you want Andy. But we’re leaving now. And if I find out that you’re key cards been used or you’ve been within ten feet of this ward without me then it won’t be Her Royal Highness you’ll need to worry about next time you go to sleep. It’ll be how far apart your body parts will be spread across your bedroom.”

The door swung shut with an angry click and Carmilla was already in motion. Wriggling out from under the bed, her knees protesting as they knocked against the hard floor she clambered to her feet, sprinting over to Laura’s prone form before coming to a standstill. She grabbed a spare white nurse’s tunic from the wall nearest the bed and quickly threw it on, hoping that if any of the other occupants of the room had the misfortune to wake up in the next few minutes or if anyone poked their head in that she could pass herself off as a staff member.

Staring down then at her soft breathing she swallowed a solid lump in her throat before leaning down to place a tender kiss to her roommate’s forehead as she worked to unbuckle the iron clasp holding down her shoulder.

It gave way under the violence of her shaking hand. As did the other three as she twisted them away from Laura’s unresponsive body and threw them behind her.

“Laura?”
Her own voice sounded small and pathetic to her own ears but she could barely find it within herself to feel embarrassed not with the pounding in her head and the sickening sterile smell assaulting her nostrils.

“Laura can you hear me?”

Watching for any signs of a response she peered down at the light smattering of freckles that seemed so dark in the strip lighting above.

There was no response except the barest twitch of a muscle under Laura’s eye.

“Try physical stimulus.”

She peered over at the other alert occupant of the room her brain too jumbled and unruly to understand what she was saying.

The student nodded. “That’s what the pharmacy guidelines say. A combination of oral and physical stimulus is the most effective way to interrupt the drugs effects.”

She looked questioningly at the girl who simply shrugged. “There’s not much to read in here. One of the staff snuck me their copy of the Lexi-Comp’s drug handbook.”

Swivelling back to look down at her room-mate, Carmilla put out an uneven hand and let her fingertips trail lightly across Laura’s chin, purposely avoiding letting them touch the lips or the lock of hair that that pervert had had the gall to stroke. Reaching the place where one of her dimples usually sat she followed the cheekbone up towards the bottom of her ear. It was only when Laura jaw moved suddenly that she sucked in a breath and waited.

Waited. For those chocolate pupils to appear.
And appear they did, slowly as if the eyelids above them were made of more than skin and were doing their absolute best to hold Laura in place.

Her eyes opened momentarily before sliding shut again.

Carmilla froze. And remained with her hand in place as they shuttered open again, blinking wildly in the buzzing lights overhead. Then they focused a little- fixating on the wall on the other side of the room before floating up to dark hair and a concerned gaze.

“Car...Carmilla?” she whispered brows pulling together in uncertainty.

“The one and only, sweetheart.”

The vampire’s stomach did a somersault.

“Carm why, ...why are you pretending to be Nurse Ratched. Is it Halloween?” Dragging her eyes fully open she stared up at her with bewilderment. “Does that make me Jack Nicholson?” She scrunched up her nose a little sadly. “I don’t want to be Jack Nicholson, that’s not sexy.”

Under any other circumstances Carmilla would have barked out a laugh at the confusion written on the smaller girl’s face but all she could manage right then was a small quirk of the lips instead, her mind too full of relief at seeing her brown pupils alert and awake.

She leant down, keeping the edge of her hand against skin, refusing to drag it away before brushing a stray hair off Laura’s forehead. “This isn’t fancy dress I’m afraid, cupcake. How are you feeling?”
Weight pressed against her palm as if Laura was leaning into her but that could have just been a mirage in her mind.

“Like my mind’s full of eggs and they’re just about ready to hatch. But I can’t tell whether it’s birds or snakes coming out of them.”

“Well that’s...descriptive.”

A little part of her rejoiced at the words tumbling from Laura’s mouth, the way she sounded so much like herself and not the other victims the girl had told her about. Nothing but words and meaning.

“Why is my head all hazy?”

Carmilla bit her lip gingerly as she debated momentarily whether to tell her the truth.

“You were given a sedative.”

“Why? Am I sick? Is that why I’m in here?” Laura asked, a dull kind of fear lighting up her gaze as it swept the room- the tranquilliser clearly still burbling through her system.

“No!”

Carmilla cringed immediately as she realised how defensive that had sounded and rubbed her thumb down Laura’s nose in apology. “The attack last night...the other victims, their symptoms began to deteriorate once they were brought in. I guess the psych staff resorted to drugs to make their day to day life easier.” A sarcastic smile bloomed. “Seems to be a common trait amongst humans.”

“Not all humans,” came a quiet voice.

She glimpsed down at Laura ready to retract her statement or quantify it maybe but then she realised that it had come from her left and she looked across to see the other resident of the room piercing her with a benign gaze.

“Not all humans...” she repeated. “Just the broken ones.”

There was a moment of silence in the room.
Not the thin kind but one loaded with meaning.

Finally Carmilla nodded slowly; acknowledging a truth in the statement that she wasn’t even sure she could explain before a small tug on her wrist drew her attention back towards the bed. Towards a pouting room mate.

“What?”

“Um, how come I smell like pondweed, my brains half made of porridge and here you are looking as put together as normal... with what seems like all the answers I’ve been trying to get since the library. It’s not exactly fair you know.”

And there it was again. That twitch at the farthest part of Carmilla’s brain that urged to tell her something significant. To offer up something she knew was important to whatever was going on- that could save them maybe if only she could grasp the edges of it. But then warm fingers were sliding in between her own, the same way they had last night in the dark of their dorm room and it was lost again. Lost in that cheeky dazed smile thrown so effortlessly her way.

“I’ve lived for two hundred years buttercup. After two world wars and a stint inside a dirty coffin,
you learn how to carry a look no matter how bad things get.”

Laura’s smile dropped as something seemed to occur to her.

“About what I said back at the library...”

The brunette shook her head in response attempting to pull her hand away. “It doesn’t matter.”

Laura grabbed onto her wrist as she struggled to drag herself into a sitting position. “Of course it matters...those things I said...they’re all I’ve been thinking about. I had no right. I wasn’t thinking...everything was just confusing and awful and somehow everything that came out of my mouth was awful too and ugly and...” She struggled for a moment with the wording. “...Judgemental. I was acting like a child. And all you were doing was trying to help that girl...the way you’ve been helping me.”

Carmilla shifted uncomfortably in response although in all the sterile white the feel of Laura’s warm hand in hers was enough to keep her from moving away.

“I think...I think you might be right. About me. Being nothing more than a stupid child. Searching for toy blocks in the rubble.”

The seriousness behind that sentence caught the vampire’s attention though and she frowned as she slid her other arm behind Laura’s back and allowed her to steady herself in an upright position before pulling back again. Letting the fingertips of her left hand grasp the dark blonde’s chin so that she was forced to look at her. “I don’t think you’re a child Laura.”

“You said it yourself Carm, you’ve lived for two...”

“A longer life doesn’t necessarily make you wiser cupcake, just disheartened. You know what they don’t tell you?” She hesitated, “The more beauty you see...”

She never got to finish whatever she was about to say because an electronic click suddenly sounded nearby and the double doors swung open bringing with them a rush of cold air. Letting her hand drop away Carmilla moved to block the intruder’s view of her roommate, growling threateningly as a figure walked into the room. Baring her teeth her stance instantly became predatory though it didn’t appear to faze the trespasser.

He simply stared at her for a moment before throwing his hands up in a conciliatory gesture.

“I’m not your enemy, ok?”

It was the orderly from before, the one who had practically thrown his colleague out of the room. His sallow face was impassive under the bright lights but for the first time she noticed a strange almond shape to his eyes.

“I’ve come to help.”

“I think you people have done enough, don’t you?” she said acidly.

He swallowed at that. “You may have a point. But I’m not your average psych nurse. And I can’t let this go on anymore. Not when I can do something about it.”

“How gallant.”

“Says the vampire masquerading as a simple college student. You honestly telling me you’ve never
slipped up and snacked on one of your fellow undergraduates when the hunger got too bad?"

“I don’t need to justify myself to you.”

“Neither do I,” he replied evenly.

She pursed her lips a little before turning back to Laura who was peering at the new addition to the room with trepidation from underneath the white sheet and Carmilla made a decision right then and there. In one fluid movement she slipped an arm underneath Laura and pulled her towards the end of the bed, drawing her up onto her feet. Almost immediately her legs crumpled underneath her, her hair flew from her shoulder and it was only the brunette’s enhanced speed that kept her from falling onto the cold floor.

“Carm, I... don’t think I can walk right now. Sorry.”

She gave a soft smile. “Not a problem cutie, I’ve got you covered.”

Then she lifted her up as if she weighed next to nothing, pulling her against her so that her head rested neatly on her chest, her warmth burning wonderfully into her chill skin. “Your chariot awaits.”

“So that’s it. You just leave the rest of them here to their fate?”

Carmilla snarled at the man. “I can’t save everyone. It’s the first thing they teach you in Eternal Life 101.”

“Would you if you could?”

She felt Laura’s small frame shift imperceptibly in her arms and knew somehow that in a lethargic way she was wondering the same thing. Was waiting for the answer to that as much as he was. And she felt her stomach roil as she tried her hardest not to contemplate the question.

“...It’s a moot point,” Carmilla said after a moment.

The man took a step closer revealing more of his slender face. “Maybe not. Do you know what I am?”

That buzzing at the back of Carmilla’s mind sprung into life again as she glanced him over, the awkward angles of his body and the shrunken skin on his face.

“A distraction. That’s all you are.”

Marching towards him, she kept all of her focus on his movements then craned her neck slightly. “Hey, you coming?”

The girl in the gown who had retreated back to the far wall stared at her with mild surprise. “You’d take me with you?”

Carmilla swallowed. “Of course. Come on.”

As she watched a smile bloomed on the girl’s face- the first real one the vampire had seen her wear before she shook her head slowly. “You’re kind. But I need to be here. I feel better in this place...even with everything that’s going on.”

Carmilla grimaced. “We could help you...”

She cocked her head. “No you couldn’t. And that’s ok. That fact that you’re willing to try means a lot though.” There was a lick of the lips. “Go help your friend.”
Carmilla thought about arguing. Thought about dragging her with them; she could probably just about manage it if she tried shifting Laura into a more convenient position leaving an arm free but the minute she saw that obstinate look on the face opposite she knew she’d be fighting a losing battle. That even if they got her back to their dorm room somehow she’d slip out at the first opportunity and come back to this place. She could see it all. Even understood why in some weird way. And though it made her chest ache even with Laura’s heat sat next to it, she forced herself to nod in agreement.

“Can I come back to see you when this is all over?” the brunette asked quietly.

The girl smiled again. “Of course. I think I’d like that.”

They peered at each other for a moment, the drone of the strip lights doing little to interrupt the unspoken conversation that seemed to be going on between the two of them and then Carmilla’s feet were moving of their own accord, heading towards the door.

Muscle memory disregarding any indecision she was feeling. Disregarding the screaming in her mind.

She was at the door when Laura tapped a finger against her neck breaking through her thoughts, signalling her to stop and she glanced hollowly downwards. Taking the opportunity the blonde raised her head up a little to make eye contact with the stubbled orderly standing a foot away.

“Thank you for helping,” she said softly pulling a hand free to offer it out to him.

Carmilla fought the urge to laugh at that.

He moved closer anyhow, ignoring Carmilla’s warning stare, taking Laura’s hand gently. “You’re wel....”

And then somehow his expression changed. Before anyone knew what was happening he let out a painful scream, pulling his hand back to cradle it against his stomach as if it were on fire.

Carmilla shared a horrified look with the student in her arms as Laura stared at her own fingers as if they might tell her what was happening. Might tell her what she’d done.

Another even more piercing scream sounded out well before she could formulate any kind of answer to that though. And it kept going.

On and on.

Until there was nothing but the white and the screaming.

TBC...
Chapter Summary

It's time to regroup and consider the things they've both learned.
Or maybe it's time for an attempted heart to heart.

Chapter Notes

So the story keeps rolling on.
Sorry it's taking so long to update, been sidetracked with Chrimbo stuff- my bad.
But I've been planning further chaps out so there's definitely more to come and some plot reveals heading your way soon if that makes up for it.

Cheers for reading!

CHAPTER 13:
The screaming lessened after a minute, falling into soft pained whimpers. Somehow though it still seemed to echo around the walls, bouncing off the sterile paint until Laura had to clamp her hands over her ears to block the sound out before it drove her out of her mind.

“We have to get out of here.”

Laura didn’t hear her words but felt the movement in Carmilla’s chest and stared up at the brunette with wide unfocused eyes causing Carmilla to shift the frame cradled in her grip; at least enough to snap her fingers an inch away from Laura’s face.

“Hey cutie. You still with us?”

Dark eyes blinked then latched onto her own. “I...I think so.”

“I’m taking you home.”

The poise with which she said it calmed the small girl in her arms. And with that Carmilla hefted her weight up a little higher against her chest and pushed against the double doors, doing her best to ignore the guilt pricking at her spine every time another whimper sounded. At the thought of leaving everyone in there to their fate. Her feet seemed to plough on of their own accord though and as soon as she was free of that room... that godawful room she picked up speed and the human bundle in her arms watched mesmerised as the pallid barren walls flew past in a strange blur before the clattering of metal sounded underneath them and cold air brushed against her face.

They were outside.
Carmilla only slowed a little once they were on solid earth and Laura struggled to angle her face so that she could see her expression as they moved.

“Where are we going?” she asked quietly.

“Back to the dorm.”

She sucked in a breath. “Wouldn’t that be the first place they’d look?”

Carmilla slowed her pace but didn’t stop, her gaze fixed in front of them. “I’m not sure anyone’ll be looking for us cupcake. Bigger problems, you know. And besides, even if they were...” She came to a standstill momentarily letting her eyeline drop downwards as she awkwardly patted down her roommate’s flyaway hair. “You’re kind of smart. I’m betting you didn’t give them your name when you...uh... checked in.”

Laura laughed at that; because of course Carmilla was right as usual though she regretted it a little as her muscles jerked in pain. The drug they’d shot her up with must have been wearing off because her mind seemed to be growing less cloudy and the myriad of aches and bruises she’d been blissfully free from began to gripe under her gown causing her to shiver a little.

Laura clamped her arms tighter, hoping she hadn’t given herself away.

Carmilla must have felt the movement in her muscles though because her head scanned the grounds for witnesses and then she was off again, the verdant campus gardens stretching out into a fluid line until grey breezeblock sliced into it and they were outside their dorm building. Up the shadowy stairs three at a time so fast it felt a little as though they were flying.

The sound of a door slamming behind them was the first real signal that they were home and safe at least for now and Laura tried to keep her wincing to a minimum as her spine was laid down gently on a thick duvet.

Carmilla’s duvet; a soft grey fabric with a comforting plushness she’d never noticed until last night.

Huh. That surprised her a little. Not that she was complaining. The thought of curling up in her own bed didn’t seem anywhere near as enticing as it usually did even though everything inside her urged her to sleep.

“You need to rest.” Came a lilting voice from above.

Laura looked up just in time to see the brunette sit gingerly on the edge of the bed, hands twisting around each other.

“Well, that sounds oddly familiar.” A tired glint sparked in the blonde’s eyes as her hand seemed to reach outward of its own accord to tap the knee in front of her. “You should be careful, some might say this is becoming a routine.”

“Two occurrences don’t make a routine cupcake.” Carmilla wore a half smile. “This would be a coincidence at best. Anyone who said that would be a moron.”

“Always with the logic,” Laura grumbled before stifling a yawn. “I thought philosophy majors were supposed to look for the magic and wonder in everything.”

“I think we’ve had our fill of those two things just now, don’t you.”

She couldn’t argue with that. Lying there, the foggy memory of Carmilla’s outline coming into view
in that hospital room filtered back into her mind for a moment, the low tones of her voice seeping into grey consciousness and arms...warm fluid muscles sliding under her spine.

An oddly familiar combination of sensations.

‘I know why you’re doing this.’

It was the warning tone in her mother’s voice that forced her eyes to blearily drag themselves open. Laura’s throat felt as if it were lined with razor blades and simply drawing in a breath hurt like hell. ‘Do you really think playing the invalid is going to make up for it?’

There was nothing to make up for though. She hadn’t meant to miss the annual dinner party that her mother threw for the shareholders and campaign backers. Hadn’t meant to miss playing the doll, the dutiful daughter in the designer gown who offered people canapés and top ups while trying to ignore the looks down her tops. The leering lingering looks that clung to her skin from across the room. Laura wanted to scream that. Wanted to push her wasting muscles to grab the prescription form next to her bed and throw it at her mother in some small act of defiance to prove that she wasn’t making this up. That the doctor had said something about glandular fever and that bed rest was the only thing besides liquid paracetamol that would get her back on her feet.
And surely her Dad had explained everything when they’d gotten back from the surgery? ‘I can see your brain forming excuses right now, do you know that?’
They aren’t excuses, she thought resignedly. Just truths. Unwieldy truths her mother didn’t want to hear.
‘So you have nothing to say?’
Her mouth opened against her will, almost on instinct and Laura fought with her own body to keep from speaking as she lay under her covers; feverish and aching.
‘Silence is guilt, Laura.’
The light flicked off again and she almost sighed in relief as her eyes no longer burned.
‘Which says a lot about a girl who barely speaks...’
Then she was gone again and Laura fell into the sweaty darkness of the room.

“Hey Laura, Laura...”

Laura’s head jerked up and she froze as she realised Carmilla had somehow managed to clamber onto the bed with her and was currently lying on her side a few inches away staring at her with concern.

“Where’d you wander off to this time?”

“...Home.”
The muscles on Laura’s forehead creased a little as if that wasn’t really something she meant to say and Carmilla caught her eyes darting around their small dorm room for a brief second.

She pretended not to notice though as she peered at Laura with muted interest.

“Or what I used to think was home. Before...you.”

This time Laura’s brown eyes widened at her own verbal diarrhoea and a blush surged up her neck as she faceplanted into the pillow screwing up her nose in embarrassment.

“Is there any chance we could pretend I didn’t just say that?” she mumbled.
“Sorry what was that, cupcake?”

Laura refused to rise to the bait leaving her nose buried in fabric where she could breathe in nothing except a faint scent of lilies and river water.

“I choose to blame anything I say for the next hour on the drugs,” she muttered and a small smile tugged at thin lips beside her though she couldn’t see it.

“Under the circumstances that seems...fair.”

Pursing her lips, purposely not looking at the pink tinge blooming under an ear and dark blonde hair Carmilla shuckked herself somewhat gracefully further down the bed until she was lying flat out next to her roommate.

“Home isn’t necessary a place you know.”

There was silence for a moment, a heavy breathy silence but then two chocolate pupils peeked over the hem of the pillow at her and for some reason Carmilla had to force herself not to look away. Because the gaze looking back at her was so open and so completely without guile that that every dark corner of her mind seemed to stop snaking about for a moment.

“You hang around long enough, you figure out that places never stay the same. That you need to make a home for yourself inside your own head.”

“That sounds... kinda lonely.”

The vampire shrugged and a small ripple of wrinkles spread out on the bedsheets. “Not if you do it right. If you... furnish it, with memories and friends you can trust. A love of learning. You have most of those already Laura. And when you’re done, you get to take it wherever you go.”

The younger girl seemed to take that in as she let a little more of her pink cheek show. “So...you did it right?”

The charcoal gaze next to her dropped to the duvet. “No.”

Huh. Neither of them was expecting that kind of honesty in the brunette’s response and yet somehow it had slipped out.

“But I know one or two people who have.”

Laura offered her a full sleepy grin this time. “Still working on it, huh?”

And Carmilla flinched as warm, tactile fingers suddenly brushed against hers, cursing herself as she sucked in a small involuntary breath.

Crap, what was she doing?

“That actually makes me feel a bit better....”

The vampire hmmed quietly at the admission but didn’t respond and for some reason the small sound made Laura feel a little brave. Before she could change her mind she slid her fingers firmly in between her roommates. Daring her to pull them away.

“Or maybe that’s the drugs talking.”

Carmilla’s head rose up at that, her smirk back in place. “More than likely. You very rarely make this
amount of sense.”

“That’s rude.”

“True though.”

Fingers squeezed Laura’s gently. Not retracting, though she held her breath as they moved. Then she caught her roommate watching her as if she’d noticed the pause.

“Sorry. Guess I’m still a little spacey.”

Carmilla shook her head, “There’s no need to apologise.”

Laura’s shoulders drooped against the pillow. “There is.” She let her eyelids sag shut. “Aren’t you tired of having to keep saving me yet?”

It was only when she felt warm breath running across her forehead that she opened them again.

“I told you cutie, two times doesn’t make a habit. And you don’t need to say sorry for things that are outside of your control.”

Laura sniffed, a glum smile pasted on her face. “Habit’s a hard thing to break.”

And Carmilla couldn’t help but agree, lying there practically tangled up in the smaller girl’s embrace.

Everything inside of her body was screaming at her to draw back from this, that she’d done her job comforting Laura, that she didn’t owe her anything more than the words they’d already shared. But as much as she wanted to ignore it, a deeper, aching edge to her soul was crying out for something else to happen. Something much more dangerous. Much more threatening. Something that would take the chance to break free the moment her lips moved that final inch and touched Laura’s.

“How do we keep ending up here?” she whispered almost to herself. Not sure she even wanted the answer if in fact there was one.

Laura’s face took on a serious look, though the glint in her eye was still present. “You’re asking the wrong girl. I’m kind of high right now.”

She hesitated then as the humour drained from her gaze. “Is it ok that I don’t know...but I’m still happy that we do?”

A heavy breath pulled itself into the brunette’s lungs; deep enough that Laura felt it well up against her own ribcage. “I’m not sure. Maybe...not?”

That stung a little, even through the fog inside her brain. Because Laura so desperately wanted this to be simple and easy. She’d waited her whole life to find someone who intrigued her as much as attracted her. Somehow she’d only ever been lucky enough to meet girls who had one of those things or the other. Mutually exclusive. The human freaking condition. But now...now somehow she’d stumbled across someone who told her she was ridiculous as often as she took care of her. Who stole her clothes every other day and yet let her sleep in their bed when she didn’t want to be alone.

Someone who just came out of nowhere.

Carmilla. A girl that was a galaxy of oppositions and warring forces all in one. A human oxymoron.
Or... an undead oxymoron to be accurate. Compassionate when she had no reason to be. And caring when she should had every reason to be cold.

And here Laura was. In her bed. In her arms. Wishing she could just kiss her and let the world fall away.

So she could...couldn’t she? There was nothing to stop her. Nothing that couldn’t be overcome, right? She swallowed hard.

Pushing a trembling hand from underneath the covers Laura reached out with it and let her fingertips hang millimetres away from Carmilla’s cheekbone. Studying her roommate’s expression she stilled herself and waited for the older girl to react.

At first those inky pupils dilated a little. She still didn’t move though and Laura felt her ribs grizzle as she stubbornly held her own position. Then fingers more slender than her own pressed feather light against their knuckles and pushed them gently against the soft skin next to Carmilla’s nose. Touching the corner of a smile before they were drawn back again just as suddenly and cupped inside the brunette’s on top of the duvet.

Laura’s heart sunk. “Carm...can’t we just...”

“What was on your hands?”

Ignoring Laura’s burgeoning question, blinking back what looked almost like tears Carmilla glanced down at their fingers. Refusing to meet her gaze.

And Laura’s forehead wrinkled up slowly at the non sequitur as she tried not to take the deflection personally.

“...Nothing. I mean nothing weird. Lake water I guess. As you can probably smell.”

This time the groaning pulse in her ribs actually made a welcome interruption from the ache that had suddenly taken residence in her chest.

Carmilla nodded at that and Laura forced herself to shove her lightly.

“Before that I was out by the meadow and I was playing with some flowers but I don’t think...” Eyes snapped to hers. With a turbulent expression too intricate to read.

“What kind of flowers?”

Laura tried to remember and her eyes narrowed a little. “...purple ones?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a journalist?” Her bedmate deadpanned and Laura stuck her tongue out at her though it lolled a little to the left as she did so.

“Ok. Well, long stems, the flower bit was kind of tubular I guess. You could put your finger right inside.”

A grin. “Interesting that that’s your first reaction to something new, sticking your finger in it.” Laura shrugged, “At least it’s not to bite it. That’s how you get rabies you know.”

Lowering her head the brunette placed her nose up to Laura’ small palms and took a silent breath in
causing a swell of apprehension deep in Laura’s stomach.

“Uh...is this a new kind of foreplay the kids are into these days?”

She was joking. Obviously. But the slight tremor in the question gave away a genuine kind of nervousness that played at the edges of something inside Carmilla. Resisting the urge to pull away she laid her face on the same pillow as Laura and watching strands of her own dark hair laying over blonde she gave a half smile.

“Plantaginaceae,” she whispered.

“Bless you.”

“Cute.” She rolled her eyes. “But that wasn’t a sneeze, cupcake. It’s a genus of plant. A kind of figwort actually; once called Scrophulariaceae.”

“Still sounds like something that comes out of your nose.”

Carmilla shook her head sardonically. “The common name is foxglove.”

Laura absorbed that for a moment.

“And it’s a good thing you didn’t bite it because it’s extremely poisonous.”

Trying her best not to notice the relief so obvious in that comment, Laura cocked her head, a guilty expression playing over her features. “Is that why it affected that man like that?”

Carmilla sucked in a breath and took the opportunity to run a finger across the back of her hand. And there was that anticipation again. And she didn’t seem to be the only one feeling it judging by the stutter in Carmilla’s pale chest.

“One plants worth of dust isn’t potent enough to do anything to a human by touch alone...”

“Unless he wasn’t human.”

Laura smiled across the fabric they shared breathing in a myriad of scents, mesmerised by the darkness of her roommate’s hair against her white skin. Carmilla for her part stared back at her, those darting pupils motionless now fixed on Laura’s face burning her skin with their intensity.

Then one of them moved. Neither was sure which; perhaps it was both of them, unconscious of their own motivation so that any blame could be shared out equally if this thing went horribly wrong. Which it could. Probably would.

And yet. Tasting each other’s breath, Laura’s eyes slid shut just as soft lips were about to press against her own and she tried her best to quiet the screaming her brain and ready herself for them. For the moment when they...

Thump thump thump!

Which was when a loud insistent banging on their dorm room door forced them to jerk apart, leaving both of them staring wildly at each other, their breaths coming in staccato bursts. Neither one sure of what they should do. Or what they had been about to do.

TBC...
It's a little late for knock knock jokes

Chapter Summary

A midnight visitor interrupts proceedings...

Chapter Notes

Can't believe I'm cockblocking Hollstein in my own fic.

*Sits in a corner by herself*

Still it's time for some plot reveals and exposition and hopefully the Hollstein angst in amongst it will keep proceedings from getting boring.

Cheers for reading!

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Under Cover of Darkness
Chapter 14

This was it.
She was going to die. Her heart was finally going to beat right out of her chest.
At least that’s how it felt thrashing against her ribcage making Laura wince every time it pulsed outwards and acid seemed to build up on top of her tongue.

Turning her head she peered fearfully at Carmilla who in the last two seconds seemed to have leapt to her feet and was now standing fretting a metre away. She could see that her breathing was ragged too, jerky and uneven under her tee shirt, her skin even paler and more clammy than usual and somewhere in the back of her mind Laura knew that that probably wasn’t a good thing. That seeing her usually unflappable roommate so agitated by all accounts should send real fear scudding through her. Should probably be the tipping point for some kind of nervous breakdown really. But somehow the tiny movements Carmilla was so desperately trying to suppress right now actually seemed to be
doing the opposite, calming the maddening bloodstream inside a little. The twitching in those fingers at her side, the strain in her neck muscles as she tried not to glance between the door and her bed mate was so unlike her that Laura’s optimistic side, the one she’d spent so many years trying to keep in check began whispering to her. Whispering things she shouldn’t listen to. Things like the fact that maybe she was just as responsible for those actions as the person waiting at their door. That there was even an outside chance that Carmilla’s behaviour had more to do with the fact that they had been about to kiss than anything else...

Thunk. Thunk.

Her pulse jolted with the second set of pounding on the door and real adrenaline slid through the muscles in her arms this time.

But that couldn’t be true...could it? That was just wishful th...

“You have to hide.”

Laura stared across at her blankly as Carmilla spoke in a hushed tone. “Huh?”

Wide eyes blinked back. “The bathroom. Whoever that is can’t know you’re here. Maybe I can convince them that I took you off campus for treatment before coming back here.”

She shook her head. “Carmilla no, we’re safer when we’re together...right?”

Carmilla said nothing though she took a step closer and reached out to grasp her forearm. As if she intended to drag her in there herself without any kind of preamble.

And suddenly Laura couldn’t take it anymore. After everything she’d gone through over the last two days, which included the remnants of the drugs inside her veins everything inside her nervous system seemed to be spilling out into the surrounding tissue. A headache was beginning to knot itself up behind her right eye. Every muscle in her side and spine was spiking painfully and her legs didn’t want to work quite right as they hung over the edge of the bed. In fact the only thing that made sense, that seemed to be willing to act according to the actual laws of physics was the gentle grip on her wrist. Carmilla’s skin. Strong and warm.

The only thing that even remotely felt real.

Noticing what must have been an odd look on her face, the brunette let go for a moment and the rush of cold air and unreality that followed as her fingers slipped away almost swallowed Laura whole. God. She couldn’t think anymore. She just couldn’t. All of a sudden her muscles moved of their own accord as she got to her feet and stretched her own arm out. A second after her fingers gripped the older girl’s face with determination her lips followed and she pressed them against softer ones in an unrestrained, wanting kiss that sent burning shivers through her.

After that her brain shut down completely.

Carmilla must have been surprised because she took a clumsy step backwards as their mouths pressed together. But then just as quickly she steadied herself and her hands were sliding into Laura’s hair, wrapping the soft strands around them, her mouth responding hungrily, kissing back with fervour that even Laura couldn’t have imagined.

Thunk. Thunk.

The whole world narrowed to just the two of them. Moist lips and warm bodies pulling closer than
seemed possible in the close air of the room as they kissed. A hand at the nape of Carmilla’s neck just above her shirt; humid skin on skin. And teeth. A slight nip as Carmilla smiled a little even in the middle of everything and Laura opened her mouth up to breathe or maybe to let their tongues taste each other just a little; in a kiss that seemed to contain more words than could be said in a lifetime.

It was like nothing Laura had ever experienced before.

It was only when the need to breathe properly forced her to pull away that the strange spell between them seemed to falter a little and Laura had the chance to stare at Carmilla with a shocked look on her face as if her own actions had surprised her just as much.

“I...uh...”
Her mouth kept moving but nothing else came out.
It’s possible that it might just have been the cutest thing the brunette had ever seen if she’d had the ability to formulate thoughts at that point; snarky or otherwise.

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. Thunk....

Swallowing hard at the knocking that now refused to stop, Laura bit her lip as her lungs burned.

“OK, I’m going to go hide in the bathroom now.”

With that she swivelled around and practically sprinted into the other room, pulling the door closed behind her leaving her roommate frozen in place unsure if that had actually just happened.

It had though. Hadrn’t it?

After all, she could still taste the coconut lip balm that Laura wore at the edges of her mouth. Smell the conditioner she used against the collar of her tee shirt where her hair had rubbed against it. Had been pressed between them.

It had happened. Her senses told her so indisputably.
But it couldn’t happen. The warning tone of her own conscience was equally as clear. It was the familiar sound of warring tribes with her skin as the battleground.

God. She almost wished she had a bathroom to lock herself away right now. But as ever, the ridiculousness of Styria wouldn’t allow her any peace. Of course not. Not when she...

Thunk, thunk, thunk!

Damnit.

First things first.

Steeling herself, Carmilla forced her mind to focus on the immediate problem which wasn’t hard because the familiar rivulets of adrenaline were beginning to trickle through her again as she made her way to the door. Hardening her features, she leant the metal poker that she usually kept hidden behind the door next to the jamb within arms reach.

Then taking one last glance at the closed bathroom behind her, making sure that the light wasn’t showing underneath she pulled the door open in one quick movement.

And sucked in a breath. Her eyes narrowing immediately. “What the hell do you want?”

“Nice mouth you got there. You didn’t see me cursing when you showed up uninvited at my place,
“did you?”

Carmilla sneered at the man her gaze dropping down to the hand he was holding to his chest for a second. “Yeah but your place is a torture chamber masquerading as a health facility so I wouldn’t be quite so quick to take the moral high ground if I was you.”

He looked a little taken aback by that although whether it was the accusation or the undisguised hostility in her tone it wasn’t clear.

“Listen...It wasn’t always like that. When they brought in the new rules I did try to...” One look at Carmilla’s sceptical expression and his words trailed off before he discretely surveyed the room behind her. “Where’s your little friend, by the way?”

A growl escaped her mouth at that and she blocked the space with her entire body. “Somewhere you people can’t hurt her.”

The orderly swallowed. “I never hurt her...all I did was look after her when she was admitted. Try to keep her safe. And to be fair,” He raised his hand into the lamplight to show the puckered purpling skin covering it, “I think I probably have more to fear from her than the other way around wouldn’t you say?”

Carmilla shrugged though her gaze was hard. “As I recall it didn’t stop you from making some pretty damning assumptions about her with your lecherous friend though.” Against her will her mind tripped back to those awful endless moments she had been squashed under a metal bed frame watching Laura’s unconscious form, unable to keep her skin free from that man’s dirty fingertips and her fangs started puncturing her gums almost immediately.

He actually looked a little ashamed at that. Fearful too as he caught sight of her teeth. “I am sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it. Sometimes to get a job done it’s easier just to agree with the person helping you even if their opinions make you want to throw up, you know?”

She folded her arms across her chest. “And with that beautiful apology the world tilts back on its axis and peace spread throughout the land.” Her stance hardened again. Her face too as if she were struggling against the canines in her own mouth, though it was well disguised. “Why. Are. You. Here?”

“To offer you some of the answers you’ve been looking for. If you have the time to listen.”

“Funny- you don’t strike me as the noble type.”

“Could say the same about you vampire.” He ran a hand across his thin stubbled chin. “Look, I understand your hostility. I do. But if you want to stop the spread of this disease on campus, you’re going to need my help.”

That galled her. Inside and out. The insinuation that she needed anyone. It didn’t help that her mind was stretching and pulsing with a hundred different thoughts, trying to contain them all. Trying to assimilate them into something coherent. And all the while she could sense the heat of Laura’s body a few feet away behind the bathroom door, her heartbeat panicked and irregular. On edge for what could have been one of a million different reasons

In fact it was that awareness of Laura’s anxiety that forced Carmilla into doing the last thing that she wanted to do. Motioning their unwanted guest into their room and towards her bed she kept her eyes on him as she backed up so that she could perch delicately on her roommates, legs deliberately uncrossed in case the need to fight might arise.
“So talk, mystery man.”

The orderly nodded imperceptibly and sat down before a silky smirk crossed his face. “Wouldn’t your friend rather come out here for this instead of listening at keyholes? It concerns her just as much as us.”

Crap. He could sense her too?
That wasn’t good news and Carmilla knew it. Thermoception was a trait bestowed on few creatures she’d come across. Hell even her own was temperamental at best and seemed to only work with people she was emotionally attached to.
Her mind wheeled momentarily but she kept her muscles motionless. Before going against instinct and turning her head to the right.

“Laura you can come out now. It’s safe.”
I hope, she added internally.

There was a moment of silence before the door swung open then and a figure emerged, the skin on her cheeks flushed, her gaze darting about to take everything in.

“I...I was just freshening up. It’s a girl thing.” she said to the man sitting on Carmilla’s bed before coming to stand next to her roommate. Her eyes asking a question wordlessly. The brunette seemed to understand what she meant though because she smiled softly and wrapping a hand around Laura’s forearm pulled her down to slide into the space next to her. Both of them facing their guest.

“Freshening up. Right.”
“So, um, what’s new?”

He raised an eyebrow at that and Laura’s blush grew brighter in the low light.

“I was drugged...” she added weakly.

“What are you?” interrupted Carmilla with more than a little impatience. Though her fingers splayed out on the bed sheet inched across and slid underneath Laura’s as she stared at the man.

“Now that’s a better question.” He said evenly.

“The Wechselkind? The Children who come and go?”

He sighed as they both shrugged, like their ignorance physically hurt him.

“Changelings?”

Carmilla straightened up at that. “You’re a fairy?”

“No and if you call me that again, this conversation is over.” He hissed.

“All right. Don’t get your pantaloons in a bunch,” she said sourly.

“In truth we are the descendants of a fairy race, at least we were created from them as far as our history goes but we’ve been a species in our own right for centuries.”

Laura put her hand up. “Ooh like modern birds and velociraptors.”
He blinked then looked at Carmilla. “Can we make a rule that she doesn’t speak until I’m done?”

“No.” Replied the brunette with a straight face though a smirk seemed to be burgeoning underneath.

“Continue.”

The man leaned back a little in response. “I suppose we should start at the beginning. My name’s Eifion. You can call me Eif. My particular family are plentyn cael as I said. Of Welsh origin though we have Styrian blood in us too.”

“I thought changelings looked like children so they could impersonate the human babies they were replacing.”

He tapped a finger on the duvet. “Our maturing processes are...different to yours but we do grow up. Every family is different.”

“You keep using that word,” Laura piped up. And he looked at her quizzically.

“Family. Seems like it’s a big thing for you.”

He almost smiled at that and nodded briefly. “When your creators turn their back on you and you find yourselves outcasts in the world, family is pretty much all you have.”

“They... turned their back on you?”

“There are as many theories about what happened to my people as there are stars in the sky.” A loud sigh escaped him then as if the conversation was taking a turn he wasn’t so enthused with. “Some say they were disappointed with what they’d created so they sent us out into the wilderness to make our own way in the world where they wouldn’t have to look upon us. Others say our ancestors rebelled against the constraints they forced us to live under and threw them from power with a bloody coup.” He hesitated. “My mother used to say that they made so many things with their magicks that in the menagerie around them they simply forgot we existed.” He sucked in a cleansing breath. “I have my own opinions on the matter but I don’t suppose the truth really matters anymore.”

“I think it matters,” Laura replied softly. “Don’t you have history books though? Diaries that might tell you what happened?”

“Unfortunately not. Ours is an oral tradition more like your Greeks then any civilisation since. We share what we learn through songs, folktales and stories told around firelight. Passed down generation to generation. I suppose we never understood the need for writing them down...until it was too late.”

“Score one for the humans I guess.”

Carmilla nudged Laura affectionately then looked back at the man. “Do you know what your original purpose was?”

His almond gaze dropped to the floor. “To teach humankind humility. Humility and gratitude for their lot in life.”

Carmilla hmmmed. “A valid enough reason to exist, that’s for sure.”

She flicked her eyes to Laura with muted apology as she realised what she said before clearing her throat. “And you do this by stealing their children and replacing them with one of your own?”

Laura frowned at that. “Um, not to be all biased or anything but how exactly does kidnapping and creepy pod-peopling teach anyone anything?”
Eifion scratched underneath his chin delicately. “The humans were carefully selected. They were watched for days, months before any action was agreed on by the elder members. It was only the ones who refused to show their children love and kindness that were picked out. The ones who cared more about their purse than their own flesh and blood. Who filled their evenings with selfishness, intoxication and violence when they should have been at home.”

The brunette slowly raised an eyebrow. “Well that seems like an...impressively heroic take on things.”

“Meaning?”

“From what I’ve heard over the years those aren’t always the only reasons behind abductions. He growled at her. “I don’t know what kind of circles you move in my Lady, but those were the rules my clan and all the clans around us followed. To the letter.”

She peered idly at her nails. “I’m not trying to cast aspersions on you and yours. I’m just saying I heard some other things, a few of which weren’t quite so noble. Like healthy, well loved children being taken so that they could be used as servants by their abductors. Slaves, until they were too old to go on. And Changelings taking the place of children because they had grown sick of their own lives and wanted another’s instead.”

Oh crap, thought Laura. This is getting a little personal.

Almond eyes suddenly narrowed into slits staring back at them. “I’m not going to speak for the motivations of the shady individuals you found yourself sharing a goblet of blood with back in the day.”

“You say shady I say earthy.”

“And you’d know all about that wouldn’t you since you crawled from the ground the night you were reborn.”

The tension in the room solidified as the pair of them glowered at each other. Growing increasingly uncomfortable in the cross hairs Laura finally threw her hands up in front of her. “Ok. Well everyone’s entitled to their own opinion right? You say potato. I say potahto. And none of us want to listen to hearsay, right? So to get back to the point...”

No-one spoke.

In fact Carmilla continued staring straight ahead of her and unsure what to do to help her loosen up the blonde threw caution to the wind, quickly angling her body closer to her so that she could press a kiss to the skin underneath her right ear. That certainly got her attention. But as quickly as she turned to stare slack jawed at her roommate Laura faced front again, trying to control the heat in her cheeks.

“Should I let you two be alone?” said Eifion sardonically.

Carmilla responded by flipping him the finger.

“Delightful. You really are a lady worth of your rank.”

And Laura groaned. This was definitely going to be a long night.

TBC...
It's good to talk (or is it?)

Chapter Summary

We finally get a few answers to what the frilly hell is going on...

Chapter Notes

Hey peeps, forgot to say in the last chaps notes that the name Eifion is pronounced Eye-Fee-un with emphasis on the first syllable. Just in case anyone was struggling with it. Caerwyn is pronounced Kai-uh-win again with the emphasis on the first syllable. Thus endeth the Welsh lesson.
There will be a test on this before the end of the semester. :)
Not too happy with this chap, to be honest, found it hard to get the backstory across and not end up really boring, so apologies in advance if it feels like mostly filler. I'll work harder next time.

PREVIOUSLY:

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UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER 15

“Rank doesn’t confer privilege or power. All it does is impose responsibility. You’d know that if you... had any.”

Eifion clicked his tongue. “This one been feeding you fortune cookies, princess?”

The brunette immediately pinned him with a hard gaze and with a tinge of panic Laura slid her hand around Carmilla’s right wrist; feeling the tendons strain against her palm.

She looked across at him nervously as she pressed the pad of her thumb against the brunette’s pulse point. “So, uh what happened after you selected a family?”

It was the only thing she could think to ask in trying to get things back on track.
Judging by his expression though their guest seemed to be having a momentary internal debate with himself about whether he was going to ignore that and return to baiting Carmilla. But after a quick sniff he leant back a little shifting his weight onto his wrists.
“The mother or whoever was watching the child was distracted by a member of our family, then after
the babe was taken one of my brethren would climb into the crib and shift to look like them.” He
swallowed. “The whole thing took a matter of minutes and the parents were always none the wiser.
Then after a day or so the ‘child’ would begin to grizzle for no apparent reason. Scream all hours of
the night. Screw up its normally placid face into a mask of ugliness and spit up its food everywhere.”

“How is that any different to a normal baby?”

Laura nudged Carmilla’s shoulder with a frown and she shrugged back.

The blonde thought for a moment. “But how does that...”

“He?” Eifion let out a dark chuckle. “A few days of that and the humans were begging the gods to
have their quiet, well behaved child back in their arms. The one they’d cursed and forsaken with
their hard words just a week before. And so began the prayers and rosaries and the wringing of
hands. All the repentance they should have shown without the need of... outside aid.”

The smaller girl grimaced at the nostalgic smile on their guest’s face but she forced herself not to say
anything. To be completely truthful, it was actually getting harder to follow the thread of the
conversation as the minutes ticked by and she could only hope that it was the remnants of the
sedative in her system giving off one last kick.

Leaning more of her weight against the slim shoulder
next to hers, she brushed a sheaf of hair behind her ear.

“What happened if they didn’t?” she said quietly.

He glanced over quizzically.

“Repent. What if they just didn’t...care?”

It was an innocent question, one unprompted by anything specific in her mind but the unsteady
undertone in her voice seemed to spark something in the silent girl next to her because suddenly an
arm curled around her shoulder, pulling her affectionately into Carmilla’s side. Into the warmth of her
skin. Waking Laura’s senses up good and proper for a few seconds; her heart thrashing inside her
chest.

“There were a few occasions where...” He faltered refusing to look either of them in the eye, “...your people surprised even us with their callousness. I’m not sure you’d want me to go into more
detail.”

Laura opened her mouth to say something but before she could her roommate tightened her hold on
her waist and raised her chin.

“Tell us. Please. It might be important.”

She said please.

Laura snuck a fleeting look at the vampire, searching her face while she stared straight ahead. Her
muddled mind trying to figure out if something kind of significant had just happened. Was that...Had
Carmilla recognized somewhere inside that the journalist in Laura would have to know what he
meant. The terrible details. Every small horrific part. And asked him to tell them so that Laura
wouldn’t have to.

She said please.

Honey brown eyes scrunched up thoughtfully.

Carmilla’s jawline gave nothing away though.
“Two of my cousins were found, their heads stoved in with god knows what. Consensus said a club. Maybe a cudgel. Whatever was to hand I suppose. The human race really does seem to specialise in a lazy kind of violence that you won’t find anywhere else in the world.”

Laura snapped her eyes back to Eifion. “I’m not sure that’s fair...”

“Really? You have an explanation for drive by shootings? You people can’t even be bothered to take the time to get out of the car anymore.”

“I...that’s not...”

So far she had been trying her best not to let the comments get to her but Laura’s cheeks blushed a little at that accusation despite the fact they were safe from such things in Styria. It was a strange and overwhelming position to be in, defending the human race as a whole to a stranger who’d just showed up in their apartment without warning and she appreciated the distraction when Carmilla hhmmed gently under her breath near the blonde’s left ear before clearing her throat.

“This is all very educational and all but we’re busy people with a full social calendar so would you consider skipping to the end and telling us what this has to do with what’s happening on campus?”

He raised his eyes then, almost as if he shared some of Laura’s embarrassment.

“As I said, that was our purpose.”

“I’m not sure that’s such a bad lot. Most people never find their purpose in life,” muttered the brunette.

He ignored her. “To nudge humans towards the humility they refused to show. To help them become better people. Save them from their own flaws. But after centuries of doing the same thing only to be cursed at time after time when we revealed our true face.... Of being chased from houses like a common rodent. Called all manner of things. Abominable. Monstrous... Of being compared to hideous things like disease and famine. Classified in books as nothing but aberrant occurrences sent by the devil himself. A small group of cael decided that they wanted to change their fate.”

He scratched at the back of his neck then and Carmilla motioned impatiently with her hand as if telling him to keep going.

Eifion blew out a breath. “You need to understand something. For those of us who had taken a humans place, though we shifted back into ourselves afterwards there were some features that remained. That refused to leave. It was different for everyone of course. Sometimes it was nothing but a tiny scar the human had under the hairline. Maybe the odd dimple.”

He caught Laura’s eye as she blinked tiredly and offered up a half smile before returning to his former seriousness. “For others though when they transformed back, their face resembled their targets more than their own. We think it was a genetic flaw of some kind. Some gene that limited the elasticity in certain individuals, one you didn’t even know you had until it was too late.”

“They were stuck like that?”

“Unfortunately yes. And there was nothing they could do about it; there was no way to rewind the clock. Those of our clan who found themselves in that position were suddenly forced to live with someone else’s face looking back at them. Forever. A reminder that they were servants to the needs of the human race above all else.”

“That sounds awful.” Laura said with the smallest of slurs as she rested against her roommate’s
embrace; Carmilla’s lithe fingers tapping against her ribcage with a familiar and comforting rhythm.

“Yes. Well. You see why this might have a hand in some of us taking a stand against our supposed calling.” A series of conflicting emotions chased across his face and to her credit Carmilla appeared to bite down on whatever snarky comment she had been about to say.

“One of my...one of my best friends, Caerwyn was badly affected. When he came back from replacing his charge I didn’t recognise him anymore. His eyes...God, his whole face.” Eifion glared at Laura and Carmilla. “It made no difference to me obviously. He was still my friend whatever he looked like. Why would I give a shit about that? But the looks everyone in the village gave him...the backhanded comments...the practical jokes the younglings played on him, shifting to appear as he did, as if he were a human target, it drove him almost out of his mind. It was Hell. He couldn’t keep things straight in his head anymore as to who he was and who he had pretended to be. Everything began leaching into one another. And the longer it went on the angrier he became.”

The older girl licked her lips delicately. “So he was one of the ones who decided to form a coup?”

“It wasn’t a coup!” He snapped. “More a clash of ideals. Have you even been listening to me?”

The room was silent for a moment.

“Revolution is a dictatorship of the exploited against the exploiters,” she muttered then under her breath.

“Jesus, you compare our plight to that of Fidel Castro?” He threw back with wild eyes and Carmilla looked up with something close to surprise.

“You know your quotes.”

“I also know that while I may not share a fondness for their methods, I don’t discount my people’s grievances either.”

Laura’s eyes blinked open at that point and she realised that while she had been listening, her eyes had somehow closed of their own accord. Running a hand down her face, she straightened her spine out a little, bumping against her protector’s hipbone in the process.

“What are their methods?” She asked.

His gaze snapped to her and softened a fraction. “Caerwyn and the others started small. So small that we didn’t see it building. Refusing the company of anyone outside of their circle. Eating in their own homesteads. Picking the field assignments that meant they didn’t have to socialise. But then something must have happened, some kind of catalyst. Because they started organising meetings. Rallies to stir up emotions. They began picketing those who continued to work and jeering at us, shouting insults whenever we left home. I guess at some point they decided that inaction wasn’t enough. That it was time the tables were turned.”

“And now they’re here on campus?”

He gave a hollow smile that Carmilla returned as if she had answered her own question.

“Can’t argue with their choice. A transient population made up of teenagers, most of whom have never been away from home and wouldn’t think anything of the odd occurrence here and there; the occasional feeling of being followed. Or of things being moved in their dorm.” She fought against the urge to look down at the lethargic girl wrapped in her arms. At the memories of what her mother had had planned for her. “A populace whose support network of family is often miles away. And
whose friendships are so new that a change in behaviour might not be noticed at first.”

Laura baulked as she considered what her roommate had just said. “That’s...logical I guess. And creepy. Hugely creepy.”

A shiver flowed through her and she clung a little tighter to Carmilla’s arm as she wondered whether or not she was going to be able to sleep later. An arm that tightened protectively unless it was her imagination running wild.

“So what’s the grand plan here?”

He pouted with frustration at Carmilla’s blunt question. “I’m not sure. I’ve only managed to collect snapshots of what they’re doing.”

She waited.

“But thinking about it...the most likely explanation for all the victims they’ve left in their wake seems to be that they’re trying to redress the balance. After years of being forced to wear the faces of their human hosts I suppose they think it’s only fair that the humans know what that’s like.”

“That we share their pain.”

Both of them stared at Laura as she said it and she seemed to sink into herself. Eifion clearly wanted to argue or at least make her feel better but apparently couldn’t bring himself to lie and so settled for a brief nod.

“And somehow they’ve worked out how to shift someone distinct from themselves.” His eyebrows knitted together as if puzzling that out. “I asked for a transfer here in the hope that I might get the chance to talk to Caerwyn. Convince him not to hurt anyone else. To come home.” Curling his right hand into a fist, he kept his eyes on the ground. “But so far I’m just playing catch up. It’s taking all of my time looking after the students they’ve already come into contact with. Whatever they are doing has side effects. You’ve seen it. The loss of mental function. Speech impairment. It appears to be degenerative. I don’t think that was part of the plan but...whatever they’ve done, it’s spreading. The proximity of the victims to each other, it’s speeding up the deterioration. Like a virus.”

His frustration seemed sincere, at least on the surface.

“Which brings us to the million dollar questions. How have they perverted the natural order to allow them to shift humans to look like them? And how do we stop this?”

Keen charcoal eyes zeroed in on the changeling and he clearly fought against the instinct to shrink under the gaze he didn’t need to see to know was there.

“That I don’t know. I’ve discovered nothing that would explain how they’ve done what they’ve done.”

As if in response to the admission Laura shifted against Carmilla for a second and she looked down to check on her, the smaller blonde nodding a little so that she knew she was alright although the red rims around her eyes gave away her sense of fatigue.

“You transferred you said. From another mental health facility?”

Eifion nodded.

“So you have a regular day job?”
“Carm...” came a soft voice.

His eyes narrowed as he opened his mouth to answer the vampire but she cut him off.

“Don’t get all pissy, I just find it interesting that you claim to stand against a band of brothers who rejected your way of life and decided completely independently to turn your back on your own calling.”

“That’s not...” he spluttered.

“Carm...seriously...”

“See in this twisted scenario you refused both tradition and expectation because it didn’t sit right with you. But unlike them you’re what? The righteous one?”

His almond eyes narrowed into slits and he bared his teeth. “Is that so hard to believe Countess? I heard you turned your back on mommy dearest when you’d had enough of her rules? I recall a saying about pots and kettles that seems pertinent at this point.”

Carmilla glared pointedly at him and Laura was jolted to attention as she felt her whole body coiling into a fighting stance beside her so she poked her waist gently to remind her of where they were before letting her fingers hook into the band of her pants. Anchoring them together.

“You doubt what I’m telling you?”

Carmilla didn’t look away. “No. Let’s just say I doubt your intentions. All the changelings I’ve heard of were known for one thing. Their cunning. They were tricksters who loved nothing more than ruining people’s lives while they pretended to help them. Which begs the other big question, why are you telling us this?”

He shot up onto his feet at that and Laura did the same, clearly intending to calm things down but her body didn’t appear to share her enthusiasm because her legs gave way beneath her almost immediately. In fact she would have collapsed to the floor if her roommate hadn’t been keeping an eye on her the whole time and moved swiftly enough to catch her in her forearms lowering the pair of them back onto the edge of the duvet.

Brushing hair out of Laura’s face, Carmilla tried to force her heartbeat to slow a little.

“Woah there cutie. Maybe you’ve had enough excitement for today, huh?”

At the concerned pair of dark pupils hovering next to her, Laura buried her head in Carmilla’s chest with embarassment.

“Oh God, I’m pathetic.”

The vampire smiled briefly before lowering her tone. “A tired hot mess maybe but not pathetic. Never.”

“Huh hum.”

Her countenance hardened as she turned back to an uncomfortable looking guest.

“Can I help you?” she said archly.

He threw his hands up then. “Look, it’s been a long day. Especially for your friend.” Pasting a conciliatory expression on his face, he took a deep breath. “And I can understand how you might be
wary of my...motivations in coming here. Since you don’t know me from Adam. But everything I’ve said is the truth I promise. So why don’t you take some time to think about what I’ve told you. We can talk more. Tomorrow perhaps.”

If she appreciated his thoughtfulness, she didn’t say it. He seemed content enough with her silence though. Shirking on his jacket, he peered down for a moment at Laura’s back. “And take care of her, ok?”

Carmilla rolled her eyes. “Damn. And here I was waiting for you to leave so I could chuck her out of the window and finally get some sleep.”

She thought he might finally crack a smile at that one but it seemed today was not her lucky day.

Instead, letting out a strangled sigh Eifion began muttering to himself under his breath as he readjusted his clothes and headed to the door, not even acknowledging Carmilla as he made his way out, slamming the door for effect with a hissed comment about ungrateful corpse-jockeys following behind.

And perhaps it was premature since the threat was far from over but as soon as he was gone, all of the caginess seemed to leach out of Carmilla’s body. She tried to get a better look at Laura’s face but no matter which way she craned her neck she couldn’t get a good look. Upon inspection (a modest cursory one) the smaller girl’s body was soft and inert; in fact... she seemed to have actually fallen asleep nuzzling face first into Carmilla’s top. Which was ridiculous. And possibly the most adorable thing the brunette had ever seen.

Not that that was something she’d ever admit to anyone.

Ever.

Making sure she could actually breathe with her nose buried like that in the fabric, Carmilla swung her upwards and carried Laura across to her newly unoccupied bed. Laying her down, trying not to imagine what it would feel like to do that every night, she paused, sneaking over to the door to lock it securely before padding back to the sleeping figure. Staring down at her messy hair and tranquil expression

She should just take Laura’s bed.

That would be the considerate thing to do, right- give the other girl some time to sleep and recharge without interruptions. Without someone else turning over in the night or accidentally kicking her.

Give her a break from everything. If only for a few hours.

She turned that over in her mind for a moment. It was literally a moment though.

Because Hell. She’d never claimed to be considerate, had she?

She was sliding in between her own wrinkled covers before her brain could talk her out of it, allowing her right arm to drape across Laura’s hipbone as she burrowed in next to her, her nose filling up with the familiar scent that felt so much like home.

Tomorrow she’d be selfless.

At least that’s what she told herself.
Tomorrow she’d be a lot of things.

TBC...
Sleeping with the enemy

Chapter Summary

Eep, the drama!
I apologise for upcoming angst.

But nothing's ever easy right?!

Chapter Notes

A/N: I know it's been a million years since I updated and I’m so sorry. I’m not gonna give you all the lame excuses but offer thee the next chapter as penance instead to any who might still be reading. Also I’m so sorry for the angst. Conflict is the stuff of life though, right? Anything worth having is worth going through some shit for after all. Thanks to anyone still sticking with the fic, def more to come sooooooon.
Also come find me on twitter or tumblr (Heligena) if you fancy, I’d love to hear from you. x

PREVIOUSLY:

She was sliding in between her own wrinkled covers before her brain could talk her out of it, allowing her right arm to drape across Laura’s hipbone as she burrowed in next to her, her nose filling up with the familiar scent that felt so much like home.

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Tomorrow she’d be a lot of things.

TBC...

“Mmmm...”

A low hum pricked at Carmilla’s consciousness for a moment and she groaned an obscenity under her breath at the unwelcome intrusion. Surely they’d only been sleeping for an hour or two at the most? It couldn’t have been longer-the dull ache in her legs and the clamminess of her skin was evidence enough of that.

God, it seemed like forever since she’d slept properly.

Sucking in a warm breath the brunette slumped sideways, dragging her spine towards the sound, an ungainly movement that brought her face to face with a comatose Laura whose hair was thrown out every which way around her head.
“Mmm nope nope nope...”

A hint of a smile worked its way onto the vampire’s lips at the soft scrunch of that freckled nose an inch away as the unintelligible burble fell from Laura’s lips and before she was even conscious of what she was doing her fingers were suddenly hovering with intention over the smaller girl’s jaw line. So close to touching it that she could feel Laura’s warmth in the whorls on her fingertips; her knuckles gripping at their frozen position as she held them there.

“No potatoes today thank you... fruit salad’s off...”

A small laugh actually broke from Carmilla’s chest at that; a muted frown crossing Laura’s still sleeping face as if somehow she realised she was being made fun of even in the depths of unconsciousness.

The brunette’s smile dropped then and her fingers quickly did the same. It was probably nothing, though. Just a stray emotion chasing across the other girl’s face. It didn’t mean that Laura had heard her or that there was any kind of reason for her to feel uncomfortable. The blonde was a series of tenuously-linked thoughts and deeds at the best of times and when she got lost inside her own head, even more so. It was nothing. Everything was fine.

And yet... feeling the heat of a sleeping body next to her, something inside Carmilla’s exhausted brain couldn’t help wondering if perhaps there hadn’t been other occasions when a younger version of the girl in front of her had fallen asleep to the sounds of something other than the usual nursery rhymes or lullabies. Something with a different kind of intention behind; soft whispers made up of well-meaning recriminations.

She was jumping to conclusions. Laura had only told her the barest of details when it came to her home life before Silas, never stating outright that anything had been wrong but she’d spent enough time with her own Mother to connect the unspoken dots. Burn marks and scars masquerading as freckles.

Her eyes flicked down to unmoving eyelids and soft lips. Jesus, she was being presumptuous and invasive. Carmilla looked away guiltily almost immediately. But even knowing that, knowing she was drawing inferences from absolutely nothing an unfurling anger had begun coiling up inside her chest. At the thought that Laura might not have been offered the love she was so obviously deserving of. At the thought that she might have laid there in her bed at night wondering what she’d done wrong.

Before she could do something stupid Carmilla drew herself away from the supine body an inch away and forced herself onto her back so that she could distract herself with the whitewash ceiling above. Swirls and strokes of paint that echoed in every room in the hallway. Every floor in the block, completely without design. Nameless and indiscriminatory.

You’re being ridiculous, Karnstein. Reading way too much into nothing at all.

Her own body was reacting without permission though and that was what frightened her most of all. That familiar hiss of acid that shot through her veins at the thought of something hurting Laura, even if it was something in the past was a compulsion with a mind of its own. It wasn’t healthy. She knew that. The twitch in her muscles told her that.

Anybody can become angry.
It was as she stared at cream coloured paint metres above that the dark hum of ink from a page in Aristotle leapt into her mind distracting her from the body below that was caught up in its own attempts to tamp down the circling wrath inside.

Screwing up her eyes, Carmilla remembered the words as if she’d written them herself.

Anybody can become angry. That’s easy. But to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, in the right way- that is not within everyone’s power and is not easy.

She had read that sentence at a time when words had lost all their meaning- well, besides some pathetic human plea stuttered out at the end of the chase. A vicious blood soaked time when she had allowed herself to be a predator and very little else.

Language had been for the living. A useless arrogant tool in an unwinnable war. What importance could soap-box speeches have had when shadows on the street waited for nothing but a chance to feed? When you caught your own reflection in a dirty half broken wine bottle and saw nothing but a monster with a face? All teeth and tongue; no larynx required.

She was so adamant about that. For years.

Could have been a preacher on the subject if she’d cared enough and it wouldn’t have undermined her own point.

But then.... one night, after holing up in a small out of the way bookseller’s below street level she had come across a copy of Nicomachean Ethics wrapped in supple leather underneath the counter where she’d flopped down to rest. A beautifully bound tome with knotted leather ties that called to her with its skin. At least at first. Until she had flicked through gilt-edged pages and begun to read a little. Just to calm the adrenaline. That’s what she’d told herself. Before discovering for the first time in a decade it wasn’t gore, it wasn’t screams or blood that mesmerised... but words that somehow sung to her. A few characters lined up on a page that threw up a kind of gloomy mirror. And showed her exactly what she had become. How far she had fallen.

“Mmm Carm?”

That sensation of horror...of realisation squatting there in that dusty backstreet store had been more cutting than any knife wound she’d received. Because unlike during the fight and the chase there had been no-one else to blame; no-one else’s dead eyes to look into for explanation.

“Hey.”

Carmilla felt Laura smiling lazily as she said it but kept facing overhead as the memories and sensations continued to play behind her eyes on an unstoppable reel. All sturm und drang.

Laura fidgeted drowsily as she rolled towards the brunette, stopping when there was no movement to match her own and looked over at her bedmate with self-conscious eyes.
“Um, are you ok?”

“I’m fine, cupcake.”

The dark blonde pursed her lips in an attempt to disguise a mischievous grin that threatened to break out. “Is that so... You’re fine? All good? Tip top?”

Carmilla didn’t say anything so the other girl waited for a second before slyly wiggling her way further down the bed underneath the covers without giving herself away then tapped against the vampire’s ankle with her big toe before drawing it back and peering it at her. No response.

Undeterred Laura rolled over onto her right hip snaking her calf across Carmilla’s wrapping it around her flesh like a viper. Heat on heat. Which by a stroke of luck left her hand free to rest on a buried hipbone, still at first then hesitantly tiptoeing across taut skin.

“Cutie...”

“Mmhmm?” said the smaller girl innocently.

Silence reigned as the brunette’s jaw seemed to clench against words she was trying not to say. Laura Hollis however was too busy directing her creeping fingers across tight stomach muscles to notice; lost in the pliant skin trembling beneath them.

“Please... don’t...”

“Don’t what?”

Laura whispered though her focus was entirely fixed on the duvet covering their two bodies and the slight motion underneath.

Each ballerina step of her fingertips sent butterflies swarming through her own abdomen in chaotic motion.

At least until finally something moved beside her. Something she might have rejoiced in except that that moving something was suddenly shoving her hand away as dark turbulent eyes bore down into her.

“Laura, stop.”

She jerked backwards at the seriousness contained in Carmilla’s eyes.

“Carm, I...I thought you were just...you know,...playing the broody vampire....”

“Nothing about this or me is a performance. I thought you knew that by now.”

Laura blinked, head spinning from the turn of events. Or maybe from the sedation. Or lack of sleep. All of a sudden it was hard to tell.

“Of course I know that,” she mumbled. “What happened to you?”

A brief sigh. “You did.”

Recoiling a little, the dark blonde’s eyebrows drew together as she inched backwards extending the space between them and ignoring the other student’s brittle gaze.

“And that’s a bad thing.”

It wasn’t a question it was a statement.
And Carmilla’s refusal to deny that turned every single butterfly in her gut into a stinging wasp.

“Laura, you don’t understand.”

“What could possibly have changed since we went to bed? What? Did I bite you in my sleep?! Did I tell you my dark and terrible secret? Because ...if I did then...I probably didn’t say that I only stole that My Little Pony the one time and I felt so bad about taking Princess Sparkle away from her friends that I took her back and handed myself in to security...”

“Cupcake, stop. It’s not that.”
Carmilla turned on her side and pinned Laura with a hard gaze which softened a little as she caught a flash of hurt in brown eyes.

“You just...”

Laura sucked in a breath waiting for the end of the sentence though she was clearly fighting against herself to stay quiet.

“You...this thing we have...it bring things out of me that are better kept buried.”

The smaller girl bit her lip. “I don’t know what you want me to...”

“This isn’t a fairytale cupcake. No matter how much you want it to be.”

The blonde wrinkled up her forehead as she scooted an inch back and laid back down on the pillow still holding Carmilla’s gaze as she struggled to focus.

“I know that.”

The brunette cocked an eyebrow.

“I do. I swear. But Silas craziness aside, this is real life.”

Carmilla shook her head with muted enthusiasm, her eyes sliding across their bedroom walls. Looking everywhere but at Laura.

“This... is a badly written novel thought up by a lovesick idiot with barely any talent and even less experience.”

Laura sniffed as her tired brain attempted to burrow through Carmilla’s words to find where this was coming from.

“And what does that make us...?”

A pinched half smile emerged for a moment.

“...A fable Victorian mothers would read to their children on how not to behave.”

Ram rod straight, her posture screamed at Laura to stay away but she found that she couldn’t. Reaching out gingerly, Carmilla flinched as warm fingers skated across her wrist and slid between her own.

“What’s so wrong with us?”

There was a hint of a quaver in the smaller girl’s voice as she asked the question and the injury behind it scored at the skin on Carmilla’s throat but willing all her muscles to hold, she kept her eyes
pinned to the far wall as she tried to untangle the knot of words and weeds in her throat.

“Nothing individually I suppose.”

The sentence hung between them and the brunette, though she had been the one to say it almost found herself hoping that her bedmate would laugh that off. Yell at her. Hit her even; do something to show she was being ridiculous. But the small blonde froze though she didn’t pull her fingers back.

Carmilla sighed, “Don’t you see? On their own metal and wood pose no threat. But put them together and you have arrows and spears. Pistols. Things designed with the sole purpose of inflicting pain.”

“That’s a little dramatic, wouldn’t you say?”

“Doesn’t make it any less true.”

The smaller student began to pout.

“Do you think...could we maybe skip the metaphors and you just tell me what you’re so scared of?”

She didn’t know if it was the accusation or the slightly prickly tone in the way it was said but something ignited in the vampire’s chest at that and she sat bolt upright, turning her head.

“You want honesty?! Well here it is cutie. You’re human. With all the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that comes with that. And that’s not your fault but watching you run headlong into danger, spending nights wondering if you’re hurt, if you’ve been hurt before or...or worse, it’s a subtle form of torture. One that I’ve purposely kept my distance from because I’m not....”

“I never asked you to be my protector Carm,” stuttered Laura.

“No! And that’s the worst part! I know you don’t, it’s a self appointed role so this is all on me.” Her fingers curled up into her palms. “But when I think about all the things people might have said to you, might have done to you because they’re selfish and stupid and they don’t think before they act, all the instincts of the monster that you try so hard to convince yourself isn’t here anymore, of the monster I tried so hard to bury come racing to the surface. And I want to rip them apart, limb from limb for their idiocy. No metaphors. Just carnage. Blood and bowel.” Breathing hard, lips clamped together Carmilla tried to settle her breathing for a moment. “Do you see? All the time you’re whispering sweet words in my ear, convincing me that I’m no different from you, the more you reignite the demon inside.”

Her head dropped.

“It’s you. You turn me back into the creature you deny is even there.”

Laura’s horrified stare was impossible to ignore even though Carmilla’s eyes remained on the duvet below. She could feel the trembling of her skin rustling against cotton and she ached to wrap the smaller girl up in her arms and tell her that she was wrong. That she hadn’t meant any of that and it was nothing more than fear poisoning her words. But that wasn’t true.

Laura deserved the truth even if it tore them apart.

And there was a selfish reasoning in that, that wasn’t lost on her. In wanting the younger girl to feel some small part of what she was feeling- so conflicted that she couldn’t tell which way was up anymore. More than that though, Carmilla needed her to know that her arms were not the safe place that Laura thought them to be. That they came with claws and sinew.
Sneaking a glance to her left the brunette took in the devastated confusion on her bedmate’s face and felt her chest constrict in pain.
But she didn’t move this time.
She couldn’t.
TBC...
Our girls come face to face with a few home truths on their quest for answers...

Where everything had been mute before suddenly the uneasy quiet was replaced with frantic motion, all of it centred around the tiny human in the room. Carmilla could only watch as Laura scooted away dragging some of the duvet with her, eyes wide and red rimmed until she was curled up against the back wall; chest stuttering.

The physical space between them was like a sledgehammer to her creaking ribcage but the brunette tried not to let it show as she scratched an awkward nail against the bedspread.

“Laura...please you’re going to aggravate your injuries...” The words faded out into ash on her tongue. “I would never hurt you.”

At that a bleak laugh fell from Laura’s mouth, a sound that seemed so out of place for her that it hung heavy in the air of the room. Right up until Carmilla chanced a glance at the angry tears building up in brown eyes across from her and realised how incredibly stupid that declaration had been.

“You wouldn’t huh? At least no more than is necessary, right?” said the blonde quietly. “Everything in moderation, cupcake. Isn’t that what you’re always saying?”

Carmilla’s body felt feverish and heavy as she tried her best not to rise to the antagonistic tone, tiredly letting her legs lay out flat in front of her in endless black.

“What I said....It wasn’t meant as an accusation.”

“Well it sure as hell sounded like one.” The blonde descended into silence for a minute.

Then two. Five minutes passed and she still hadn’t said anything; a situation that only served to amplify the vampire’s growing discomfort. She always hated it when the smaller girl got quiet. It meant that her mind was running over things too fast, in such a tangled race that she didn’t have a chance to verbalise any of the thoughts before they rushed off again.

And is that really so different? Just because yours come raging to the surface and hers stay buried inside ... the pace is still the same.

Carmilla shut down her own mind before it could take that idea any further and sighed, rubbing a palm along the plane of her face.

“What did you mother do to you?”

The abruptness of her own question surprised even Carmilla and without even removing her hand she felt Laura staring at her with open mouth.

“I...What?!...What are talking about, she didn’t do anything to me. She’s...great.” The small blonde threw her hands up. “This is crazy. Are we even having the same conversation?”
Stillness descended between them again.

“Laura this...what I said...it doesn’t have to mean that we can’t...” Carmilla trailed off at the sound of a shifting of ankles on cotton but kept her hand over her eyes. Her head bowed. “You know, sometimes pain can be just...the breaking of the shell that...

“Carm I swear to God if you quote some great work of philosophy at me right now I think I might throw up.”

The brunette was so shocked at the vehemence in that response that she turned to stare at Laura directly, taking in the hands curled into fists and the fire in her eyes.

“And these are your sheets so you’d have to deal with cleaning up the mess. Doesn’t seem like that would be your forte but there’s a first time for everything I suppose...”

Laura regretted it as soon as she’d said those words, wasn’t blind to the small breath Carmilla sucked in as though it stung the insides of her mouth but all she could feel were the cold, burning papercuts that seemed to litter her skin since Carmilla had said that she was one that brought the monster back to life. Since she had placed the blame for her own fears squarely at Laura’s feet.

Her voice suddenly lost some of its hostility. “You think I’m a child.”

Silence greeted the statement and her bitterness surged right back again.

“The kid that pokes a stick at some new creature they found just to see what happens.”

Miserable charcoal pupils glanced at her and she knew that her own expression matched them despite the fury she was fighting so hard to maintain.

“No.”

It was said so simply that Laura wasn’t even sure she had heard it at first but the look of contrition written on Carmilla’s lean face was enough to convince her that she had in fact spoken.

A thin smile followed. “Don’t get me wrong cutie, I think you were absolutely that kid when you were little...er.”

“Littler isn’t a word,” came the mumbled reply and Carmilla rolled her eyes briefly in response.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that you were first in line to prod some hornets nest back in the day.”

Laura’s chin rose up, “You ever think maybe you’ve watched My Girl one too many times?”

The vampire actually grinned for a moment, and let her left hand inch across the duvet before her smile dropped away. Fingers stilling as she thought about what Laura had said.

“Despite what you may think that’s actually a compliment not an insult. I’ve always admired that kind of curiosity.” She paused. “As a child... I had precious little of it. I was self interested. Myopic. And I was rewarded for that, after all it that made me the perfect daughter. A worthless human but a grand protégé.”

Her back stiffened for just a second into a painfully regal posture that changed her entire profile and the desire for physical contact hit Laura like a gut punch. She didn’t indulge it though. Not with the hurt and anger still slip sliding through her system.

She sniffed, “But ...”
Suddenly dark eyes bore into Laura’s and all the breath left her lungs with the weight of them.

“What they don’t tell you is that curiosity’s also a form of lust. With just as devastating consequences when it goes too far.”

A small groan erupted into the air to her left and somehow the brunette knew that she was losing Laura again, the way she always did when she tried to explain things. When she tried to put all the experiences she’d had into words. Into shapes and angles they could never fit inside.

And yet here she was again, making the attempt. Pushing that rock up the hill one more time hoping for a different outcome.

“God, talking to you is like arguing with the Caterpillar in Alice in Wonderland.” Grumbled Laura.

“Oh so I’m not allowed to make literary references but you are?”

Gloomy hazel eyes pinned her own. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to tell me.”

Carmilla swallowed. Placed a hand back across her tired eyes. “I’m not sure I do either.”

She was being truthful, that much was clear to the younger girl sitting opposite if nothing else. And suddenly it dawned on her. Just like that.

Carmilla was as lost with all of this as she was. She just didn’t want to say it out loud.

The tiny blonde considered Carmilla’s forlorn form for a moment trying to steady her wheeling thoughts by gripping the duvet cover with her fingers. Tried at least a little to step outside of herself and consider how hard it must be, to feel so misplaced and still be the person that everyone always expected you to be.

Steadfast.
Selfish yes but also a monument; albeit a living one. Never allowed to be anything but ageless, unchanging and unweathered like stone. Never believing yourself capable of it.

Hell, even Laura had been guilty of seeing her like that at times. Because...because it was comforting, knowing that there was something immoveable to cling to when the sky threatened to fall. Something that wouldn’t budge. Not even an inch.

As her mind turned that over she couldn’t help letting out a groan under her breath. Everything was turning out to be so complicated.

“What a mess we make, eh cupcake?”

Her face was still covered but the melancholia in Carmilla’s voice was more than present when Laura glanced up and it reverberated in the smaller girl’s spine; lodging underneath the skin.

But they couldn’t just sit here forever though, locked in a stalemate. Both of them so sure that they were doing the right thing for the other and letting that conviction feed their own argument.

Dragging her lower lip under her teeth she ever so slowly pushed her legs out so that they were horizontal to the vampire’s, Laura’s toes almost skirting her roommate’s left calf. A move that might have seemed playful but for the sombre tone in the room.

“I’m not going into this blind. You know that, don’t you?”
Laura straightened out her shoulders and sucking in a breath, screwed her courage to the sticking place, boldly tapping her big toe against cool skin hoping it might get Carmilla to show her face.

“I know, ok? I know that you’ve lived more lifetimes than I’ll ever have. And I guess maybe I am a child in that sense. But we’ve lived together, fought together. Sort of. So I also know who you are Carm. What you used to be. Who you are now and what you’re becoming. You think because you don’t reminisce about ripping people’s throats out over hot chocolate that I don’t see the animal part of you? That’s not how it works. Not talking about it doesn’t mean that I just forget.” Her forehead scrunched up a little. “In fact I think maybe I think about it more because it doesn’t come up.”

Laura’s neck seemed to flush a little at that, as if she might be embarrassed by the thoughts she was barely admitting to and lowered her chin to disguise it. “It’s always there, in the gaps in conversation, you know? All the horrible things you’ve seen.”

“Cutie...” Carmilla moaned.

“Fine. All the horrible things that you’ve done if you want to get all blamey blamerson about it.” Unless it was her imagination playing tricks Laura caught the briefest quirk of a lip to her right and used it to spur herself her on.

“I think about it. A lot. More than you know. Why do you think I have so many nightmares?” she added in a whisper.

That got Carmilla’s attention all right and her head snapped up.

“I...Those...they’re about me?”

Laura shook her head. “Not you. Your past. Some of them at least.” She gave a shrug though the action felt way too light-hearted for the conversation. “Because all I have to go on is my brain’s version of what happened to you. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed but this...” She tapped her forehead grimacing, “has a tendency to go big or go home.”

Staring at her wide eyes, Carmilla’s jaw hung down as if none of this had ever occurred to her, dark hair obscuring one side of her face. Like she were carved out of marble.

“I’m so sorry Laura.”

The dark blonde gave a sniff but reached out her fingers to rest the tips on Carmilla’s own. “I told you, it’s not about blame. God, I’m so sick of sorry’s, aren’t you? You don’t wanna talk about things because it means reliving them and I don’t argue because my subconscious is way too eager to imagine them without you saying the words. Either way your past is still here going strong, kicking our collective ass. You weren’t kidding when you said we were quite the pair.”

Speech over, Laura nodded slightly as pitch black pupils stared down at both their hands before rising slowly to meet brown ones, their expression troubled.

“One conversation isn’t going to fix this, is it?”

A lopsided smile answered. “Not even close. But conversation still beats silence, right?” said Laura. Carmilla pulled her knees up to her chin with an almost bashful air. “I guess it does.”

Laura nodded definitively, “You’re still an asshole for keeping this from me though.”

Her companion refused to smile though Laura felt sure something like that was aching to come out.
“Noted.”

She stretched her legs out again, drawing out the muscles and Laura’s toe butted her ankle gently. “A giant one. Just one huge walking crack really.”

Carmilla frowned, slapping the back of her bedmate’s hand. “Careful. We wouldn’t want for you to get your ass kicked by something other than my past, would we?”

She didn’t mean to. But the smallest of giggles escaped Laura’s lips at that and though it was a small all too familiar sound it seemed to strip the air around the two of them of some of its animosity.

Until an unusually pensive expression lit up the blonde’s face. “So what do we do now?”

“That’s an excellent question, cutie.”

“Maybe we should talk about something else? About what Eif told us?”

Laura peered over pensively to meet Carmilla’s dead stare.

“So just to be clear, your plan to distract ourselves from the terrible things that happened in the past is by talking about a different yet equally horrific thing that’s currently happening.” Carmilla couldn’t help her eyes rolling. Solid plan, buttercup.”

“Annnnd we’re back,” mumbled Laura. Then she pushed off the wall behind her and shucked her way across the bed until she was an inch away from the vampire.

“Maybe humour me though?”

Carmilla didn’t offer a reply but answered in her own way after a moment, her left hand reaching out to skim lightly down her roomate’s spine, pausing at each of the places she knew held a bruise as if she could feel the heat they were giving off.

“Eifion said he had more to fear from me than I did from him. Do you think that’s true?”

Long fingers rested on her hip. “Probably.”

Laura’s eyes went wide.

“You’re surprisingly intimidating for a halfling.”

Carmilla flinched then as Laura punched her shoulder before wrapping a hand around the human’s clenched fist. “No. I think they got interrupted before they could finish doing...whatever it is they did to those other students on campus. You’re fine.”

Laura didn’t seem convinced though. “But he called it a disease. As in the kind of thing that doesn’t stop without a cure. And that putting them all in one place was making it worse. What if just by being there....”

“Laura, I would know if you were changing.” She cupped her chin gently then, intangibly tracing the contours of her cheeks with the fingers of her other hand as the faced each other. “You say you know me. Well, I know this face.”

Carmilla felt the muscles in Laura’s chin tense as she fought the urge to pull away in embarrassment but didn’t say anything as her eyes sought the other girls.

“So how do we find and stop them?”
“Two very good questions. But we need to do this one step at a time.”

Laura nodded. “So, what do we know?”

“Well we know who’s doing this but not how to find them. Yet.”

“And Eif said they must have help since they don’t have the powers to do it by themselves.” She hummed to herself as she somewhat awkwardly rested her head on Carmilla’s shoulder. “In Persons of Interest when they don’t have much to go on Root and Shaw always start by looking at the connection between the victims.”

Carmilla chuckled at that before a serious expression replaced her mirth. “Unless they were random. Revenge has an incredible way of dissolving logic.”

Laura considered that. “If they were random, wouldn’t the campus would be on high alert by now though?”

There was a nod. “You’d think so. We start with the victims then. Look at the records, talk to their friends. It’s a start if nothing else.”

She glanced at Laura. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance you want to sit this one out, is there? Give yourself a chance to recuperate?”

The stubbornness in her roommate’s eyes was all the answer she’d get and with a soft sigh Carmilla accepted it, wearily levering herself up from the duvet, holding out a hand to help Laura up to her feet.

“Onwards then Macduff,” she said as Laura planted her feet on the carpet beside her, revelling in the feel of soft skin underneath her own cold flesh though she told herself that she shouldn’t.

Somehow though she couldn’t help herself.

TBC...
“Argh, this is just ridiculous!”

Carmilla tried to offer what she hoped was a conciliatory half-smile to the bunched up face staring across the table. She had to admit though that between the dust motes that seemed to aim specifically for the nostrils of anyone who dared stray into the bowels of the library and the stultifying lack of air in the Xerox room they were currently inhabiting she couldn’t blame the other girl for the outburst.

Her own claustrophobia was starting to gutter at the edges as it was.

“Come on! Isn’t there supposed to be some kind of government conspiracy that makes universities log information on their students?!’ Laura huffed. “What’s all the surveillance for if it’s not keeping tabs on any of us?”

“Interesting perspective cutie.” Carmilla’s lips quirked upwards. “Definitely one for the suggestions box.”

Laura pouted back at her. “Have you even seen my file? It barely has anything in it except my name and date of birth! Not even my school transcript or anything... I could totally be an impostor intent on burning this place to the ground. Right now. Walking around pretending to be an average college student.”

Carmilla smiled properly this time though she hid it behind her book. “I don’t think you could be average if you tried.”

A stream of warm air blew out of Laura’s mouth.

“...But I see your point.”
Dropping the hardcover onto the tabletop, the vampire wrinkled up her nose. “No luck on social media either?”

Two distinctly human elbows came down with a thump on the hard wood and the brunette winced instinctively.

“Nope. I mean yes some of the people from the psych ward are on there, the ones whose names you got off their charts but none of them have anything in common. They’re all in different years, studying different subjects. The profiles seem legit; there’s photos on there of each of them with a bunch of people in locations all over the world not just Styria. Even the Geotags seem genuine. And none of them have mutual friends. Which is weird in itself right? You’d think that by the law of averages a couple of them would know the same people.”

She watched Carmilla consider that then slumped forward.

“See! It’s a total dead end,” grumbled the blonde.

“...Maybe not.”

Laura looked up at her questioningly.

“You said it yourself, none of them had mutual friends.”

“I did. And that’s important.” Laura declared with confidence. Then paused. “Uh why is that important?”

“Because maybe the lack of a link between them is the link. Maybe they’re targeting students with small isolated pockets of friends. Sure would make getting to them and keeping them out of the limelight easier. And none of their friends would connect the dots if more than one went missing or starting acting weirdly.”

Laura’s chin came down to rest on the backs of her hands as that idea took hold; the way it just dropped so easily from her roommate’s mouth. It did make sense.

She had been a target though. Carmilla kept trying to convince her that her involvement had been purely accidental. But then...what if it wasn’t? Was that how people would describe her? Her school reports had always had things like friendly, engaging and full of energy scrawled on them in the comments sections but when she got older they also mentioned once or twice that she only seemed willing to open up to one or two people in class. That she had tendencies to be...what was the phrase they had used...insular. That was it: ‘tendencies to be somewhat insular during free periods.’

She felt her cheeks beginning to burn at the memory of stares she had received from her mother during parents evening when that had come to light; still remembered trying to sink down in the plastic chair when her tutor had assured them that it wasn’t a big deal, that she wasn’t the first to exhibit the behaviour. Exhibit the behaviour- Jesus, like she was some kind of performing monkey. That one word had stuck with her though.

Insular.

She’d looked it up in the dictionary in bed that night after stealing it from her Dad’s study and carrying it upstairs under her hoodie. What it really meant was inward looking.

Self-interested in other words. Narcissistic.

Egotistical. So maybe in their own twisted way Eifion’s people thought that they were doing the
world a favour taking those kind of people out of it

...Hell, maybe they were...

“Hey. Hey, Laura.”

The tiny blonde looked up to find concerned darkening eyes locked onto hers.

“You ok there, buttercup?”

She smiled a little bashfully straightening up. “Yeah, sorry. Just thinking.”

There was a pause, heavy like everything else in the room. “I wasn’t talking about you. You know that, right?”

Laura nodded, clearing her throat. “Yep. Not about me. Got it.” She fell back into easier thoughts. “But even if that’s what they’re looking for in their victims, it doesn’t explain what the long term goal is. If it was chaos then surely they wouldn’t want to be so clandestine about it, right? They’d be all, yo look at me, wearing my on trend shirt with its snippy slogan as I fire laser beams from my eyes, wouldn’t they?”

She looked up into a dead gaze.

“It’s a metaphor, Carm.”

“And no more drugs for you.”

The lithe vampire stretched out her arms behind her head before she snapped back into an upright position. “You may have a point though.”

Ignoring an incredibly dorky under the table fist pump from her roommate she bit her lip. “Other than payback the Plentyn Cael don’t seem to be getting anything out of making humans take on their appearance. Which as you said, might be enough of a motive if they were lounging around the place crowing about it. But they’re not. They’re trying to cover up what they’re doing. And you only cover up things if you’re not done yet.” Scratching her chin, she motioned for Laura to come over and smiled as she slid neatly into the seat next to her. At least up until she noticed the smug expression the younger girl was wearing.

Laura’s grin was practically luminous enough to light the whole room.

“Oh God, what?”

“Nothing. It’s just I could have sworn you said on more than one occasion that I was, quote ‘nothing more than a cookie-snorting distraction weasel when you were actually trying to concentrate and should observe the ten yard rule accordingly’. End quote.”

She was so obviously pleased with herself for forcing the vampire to break her own rules that a large part of the brunette wanted to send Laura back across the table to her own seat at that moment. Wanted so badly to keep their relationship from deviating from its natural course that she could all but taste the words sitting on her tongue. The problem was that the warmth emanating from the blonde was so enticing in the dank underground room that before her mouth could open she was already feeling her arm moving of its own accord to wrap around the small student’s shoulder dragging her into an affectionate one armed hug.

“Exceptional circumstances, cutie. I need you to attract all the dust away from me, it’s making me
“Mmhmm. Interesting how the tables have turned, that’s all I’m saying” came the mumble from the material on her shoulder where Laura’s face was buried and at that Carmilla dropped her arms back to her sides.

The younger girl’s face pulled away from her with a sad expression. And Carmilla shrugged.

“That’s what you get for being cocky.”

“But you’re always cocky!”

There was a flash of teeth. “I’m arrogant. Occasionally supercilious; not cocky. There’s a small but important difference.”

Laura’s arms crossed themselves as she leaned back on her chair and muttered something about autocratic rule changes under her breath. But to her credit she didn’t move away as the older girl furrowed her brow.

“I think the problem is that we’re not looking at the big picture.”

Laura suddenly stared at her wide eyed and Carmilla practically rolled her eyes into the back of her skull. “Not with you and me. With this whole situation. All we’ve got are a handful of typical university students who have been affected by the Cael.” She saw Laura open her mouth out of the corner of an eye and held up a hand. “Not meaning only in the sense that it doesn’t matter, of course it does. But we need to be working out their end game. It’s got to be more than messing up the lives of a few stray kids.”

Laura sat up a little straighter and pulled one knee up so that her sneaker rested on the chair seat in front of her. “Ok. Let’s try that.”

“So on a larger scale what else have these attacks actually affected?” The vampire paused. “Lectures are going ahead as usual. None of the student activities have been shut down as far as we know. Hell, there’s not even a curfew on campus right now. So the attacks aren’t aimed at shutting down Silas, right?”

“Right. And there’s nothing posted in either the Silas Boar or the Styrian Express about anything that’s happened so they aren’t looking to use the media in their campaign.”

“Which supports the keeping it under their belt theory.” Carmilla grunted in frustration. “So what difference have they made?”

“Well the Psyche ward is pretty much at capacity right now,” said Laura chewing the end of her pen. She was rewarded with a single raised eyebrow. “Which no doubt’s giving the faculty bureaucrats a headache with all the paperwork involved but I doubt that’s the ultimate goal here.”

“If it is then they’re truly insidious.” Laura swung backwards again, balancing her weight on the two back legs of her chair. “What about that girl? The one you got talking to in the ward.”

An arm whipped out to steady her as her chair jerked for a moment and she caught Carmilla’s eye sheepishly. “You said she refused the chance to go home even with everything going on?”

Charcoal pupils fell to the floor. “Yeah. I... couldn’t convince her to leave. She wouldn’t even tell me her name.”
Laura reached over feeling the weight of her roommate’s guilt from her position and stroked the taller girl’s palm. “But the rest of the students in that room were attack victims right?”

The vampire nodded, though she wasn’t sure where this was going.

“Which kinda begs the question what happened to the students who usually take up those beds when crap like this isn’t going down? I mean at any one time they have to have to be at least half full, don’t they? And that would be on a normal campus. At Styria, the take up rate for mental health facilities must be way higher.”

“They...discharged them I guess.”

Laura frowned. “That’s a pretty large group Carm. Discharged them where? To another facility? Where’s equipped to take on that number of people with a whole range of conditions. If they were detained there in a locked ward then at least two professionals had to initially sign them off as being unfit to look after themselves. They don’t do that lightly. And I can’t believe they’d just ship them off to any old place just to make room for newcomers.”

Carmilla peered at Laura noting the vehemence in her tone and she was sure she caught the blonde flush a little in the dim light though she didn’t offer any reasons for why she might have so much information on the topic.

She filed the thought away for later. “Ok so is there anyway your dread machine could find out a list of names of those registered in the Psych Centre over the last two weeks and see if there’s any info on what happened to them?”

Laura gave her a brief salute and reaching over the tabletop dragged her laptop across until she could pick it up. Balancing it on her knee, her fingers flew over the keys in a whirl of taps and pauses; a strange kind of morse code it seemed to the vampire though she couldn’t help being impressed at the purpose evident in her tiny roommate’s movements.

Laura hit the enter button with an almighty tap then frowned as the screen cycled through to the next page.

“It says fourteen students were discharged recently. It’s got a list of names but all it says next to them is next of kin informed and discharged on their own recognisance.” Laura looked over askance. “But they can’t mean they just let them out. Surely.”

“Well they’re not wandering around campus that’s for sure. Or we’d know all about it by now. So that’s good. Right?” Ventured the brunette.

Just as Laura was about to reply, a heavy whirring sounded above them and every light in the room went out simultaneously, the screen on the laptop dimming as it switched to battery power.

A heavy dust-covered silence filled the space and the pair of them went stiff in their chairs.

“Uh, Carm?”

“I’m here, Laura. Don’t move ok, hopefully it’s just a power cut.”

“Yeah that seems likely,” muttered the blonde though there was a tremor in her words as she said it. “Not interrupting your sleuthing, am I?”

Both of them spun in their seats to face the doorway where the new voice had come from and Laura felt Carmilla get to her feet, though she couldn’t say exactly how she knew.
“Who are you?” The vampire growled.

Suddenly the lights buzzed on again and the pair of them blinked as they took in the sight of Eifion leaning against the doorframe.

“Excuse the grand entrance but I didn’t know how many security cameras this place had. The psychiatric building is littered with them and in the current climate I didn’t want to take any chances.”

“And to what do we owe the pleasure?”

Laura cringed at the acid way the vampire phrased that last word but stayed silent nonetheless.

“I come bearing gifts actually.” He said with a smirk, “And yes before you say it I know the saying about that but this is one you might like.”

Nipping behind the doorframe lithely he proceeded to drag someone in with him, pushing them in front where both girls could see him. The newcomer stumbled a little as he pushed back against the shove, his hands tied behind his back giving him little to work with.

It wasn’t the restraints that caught the attention of the two students though.

It was his face. Even in the garish lighting of the room it drew their attention almost immediately underneath the shorn head of hair. Because...well, in all honesty it looked more like some kind of surrealist painting then something living and breathing. Where the nose should have been were two large gaping nostrils laying flat against the skin, puckering up at the dusty air and instead of a pair of matching eyes there were two asymmetrical pupils- the right large and round with a green tint, the other pulled down towards the corner, more Asian looking than anything burning with brown malice.

“Oh my God.” Laura whispered quietly.

Those mismatched eyes turned towards her and she flushed.

“What’s wrong human? Don’t like seeing your own handiwork?” The man hissed. “Cowards the lot of you. Easy pickings.”

Instantly Eifion grabbed his bound wrists from behind and held his guest tightly in place though he seemed to be trying not to cause the man unnecessary pain. He peered over at Carmilla as if inviting her to guess what came next and she stared back at him uncowed by the attention.

At least until a realisation struck and she shifted uncomfortably on her feet.

“This is your friend.”

“Caerwyn?” said Laura softly.

“One version of him at least.”

“Bloody traitor!” Snapped the man beside him and Eifion thrust him forward into the room, bringing a solid fist down onto his right shoulder to force him down onto the nearest chair. Though the blow was medium strength at best, the effort of it all seemed to leave the man still standing drained because Eifion turned away for a moment as if he didn’t want them to see his face.

Then he turned back, expression cold.

“I hope you don’t mind. I thought a meeting between your two parties might be...beneficial.”
Laura bit her lip as she made eye contact with him. “I guess you didn’t manage to convince him to give up the crusade then?”

The lack of judgement in the way she said it seemed to dissolve any knee-jerk defensiveness he might of had and all Eifion could do was shake his head regretfully.

“I’m afraid not.” Collapsing gracelessly in a chair, he loosened his tie. “I was hoping you might be more...persuasive?” His eyes flicked to those of his friend before returning. “And if not, then at least there’s a chance he might be able to give you some inside information that might help.”

Laura snuck a glance at her own companion whose own expression was turbulent as she stared at the prisoner.

“...We’re not going to hurt him though. Right, Carm?”

The sound of her name broke her from her stupor and the vampire took an age before sighing and wandering over to stand next to the dark blonde. Resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Of course not, creampuff.”

She felt Eifion’s eyes on her and ignored them.

“We’re just going to have a little chat, that’s all.”

TBC...
Love is a reciprocal torture

Chapter Summary

With a new captive, will our girls finally get some answers?

Or will they find themselves in more danger than ever?

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS:
Chapter 19

“Uh...Carm? Maybe we should formulate some kind of plan here?”

In the close air, the brunette could feel Laura’s posture stiffen without even looking and she knew the reason for it. Hell, the way her fangs felt as if they were itching to break out of her gums told her how close to the surface the monster inside was but she had this under control. There was only one entrance to the room. And their guest was tightly bound to the chair. There was no reason to panic. No cause for immediate alarm.

“So what?” A serpentine voice lilted into the air. “This is where you throw out some pretty words then rough me up when things don’t go the way you want?”

Yup. Totally under control.
Hopefully...

Trying her best to allay her roommate’s fears Carmilla ran a finger gently down Laura’s forearm as she wandered in front of the captive. She had intended to scoff at the bound man in front of her but when she was finally facing him, his own sneer beat out anything she could manage. So instead she dragged a chair right in front of him from under the table they had been using and turning it backwards lowering herself down gracefully.

“Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but pretty isn’t really my thing. Or yours...apparently.”

One eye glared at her in the dim light.

“Makes me wonder though. When you finally realised you weren’t going to be turning back and more than likely smashed all the mirrors in your house... how many years bad luck did that get you?”

He remained immobile but a single wide nostril flared in response.

“Um, does...does it hurt?”

The larger of his pupils switched focus to Laura who was tapping her left foot nervously against the lino and narrowed. “Well I’ll make you a deal Princess; you untie me, I’ll rearrange your sweet face just a little and then you can tell me. Deal?”

Carmilla growled at that and savagely kicked his ankle to draw his attention away from the other girl and back to her. To her surprise the bone felt almost chalky under her own and it was at that moment that a light bulb went off in her head.
Her lips pursed together. “Well that explains the attitude at least.”

If it was possible Caerwyn’s grin grew in size at that as his head tilted sideways and the vampire fought the urge to punch him hard in the throat. Instead she leaned evenly across the chair back and with a measured movement flicked a nail hard at the spot where his jaw attached itself to the skull. A tiny pop followed and that at least seemed to wipe the smugness from him quickly enough.

A small disturbance in the dusty air to her right told her that Laura wasn’t too impressed though.

Focus, Karnstein.

“You ever noticed what the natural consequence of living for centuries is, Fairy?” She said leaning close to his foul musky smell. “You find yourself privy to the never-ending cycle of illness that humans fall prey to. For every disease they manage to eradicate another one pops up in its place. And the Eighteenth Century? Man, that saw the crème de la crème.”

He said nothing. Neither did the vampire for a minute. She seemed to be surveying his body, all those hard angles and wilting edges because a moment later and still without a word being said her long fingers reached out and deftly twisted themselves into his wrist socket at the joint. The resulting crack echoing through the room making both the tiny blonde and their other guest start.

“Carm?”

Carmilla had to force herself not to react and her eyes flicked back towards Caerwyn’s, as if searching for something before she continued. “It was always worse for the children of course. Most couldn’t get the medicines and the nutrients they needed to ward off such things and so they suffered and died in the streets like cattle.”

A callous gaze stared back at her. “Not a problem you’ve ever had to worry about... In either life I’d imagine.”

Carmilla’s shrug was casual though Laura caught the flash of anger in her jaw as she changed position, to slowly, painstakingly bring the weight of her own chair leg down on to the bridge of his foot. He didn’t even flinch as she lifted her own boots from the floor and let her full weight come to bear on the small square of wood. “One of the worst and the most prevalent was something called rickets. You might have heard of it? It’s still around now in small pockets, mostly in the elderly because of malnutrition but back then it was everywhere. A lack of calcium and Vitamin D the Doctor’s discovered. And it meant that those afflicted, mostly children suffered from muscle weakness; often they couldn’t walk... or if they could then they had this kind of waddling gait that gave them away. Sometimes it even compressed their vertebrae and left them paralysed lying in their own filth.”

Barely stifling a yawn Caerwyn rested his head back, the muscles in his one leg spasming silently. “Is there a point to this lecture, vampire or are you just trying to bore me to death?”

“Of course the other major symptom was developing weak, soft bones that bent or fractured easily on impact.” Tapping her boot against his shin, her eyes flashed upwards with cunning before she was moving in a blur and her fist smacked solidly into her victim’s patella with a horrendous splintering noise. “Sound familiar?”

“Carm, stop.”

Laura was at her roommate’s side in a second, dragging her arm away from him and forcing the chair leg off of his foot but the taller girl knew she had no more need of violence to make her point and
allowed Laura to pull her backwards. Caerwyn for his part barely seemed to be feeling any ill effects though and was pinning her with a hard gaze before his thin lips opened a little; a small bubble of spittle creeping out.

“Congratulations Strigoi, it appears you’ve found my weakness.”

Carmilla straightened her spine. “Is it a weakness though? Really? I mean, sure it must make getting around difficult but, not feeling any pain when your bones shatter that’s got to make up for it, right? Takes all the fear out of an old fashioned interrogation.”

“This isn’t an interrogation, Carm...remember? You promised.”

Laura’s tone was urgent but tinged with disappointment and truth be told, Carmilla heard the whisper more than saw her lips move.

She wasn’t sorry though. Not really. For all her years studying the philosophies of man, only a few lines had called to her blood. Had felt inescapably true. And one of those was that whatever the dangers of action, the dangers of inaction were far greater.

She did wish that Laura hadn’t been here to see this though; that was the one concession she would make on the subject. The tiny girl had been through so much already and didn’t need any more kindling for her nightmares. But it really was too late now. Their hand was already half laid on the table.

So she did what she could; offering the other girl an almost hangdog nod of agreement that could have been interpreted a hundred different ways. And ambiguity had always been a friend to her, hadn’t it?

She went to turn back to Caerwyn soon enough but found herself all attention when a small hand wrapped itself around her wrist and a pair of newly quizzical eyes captured her attention again.

Laura was practically vibrating with the need to speak. Or the need to keep Carmilla from falling back into the darkness this cross examination was sparking inside her. Maybe both.

“But you’re not making any sense. You’re talking about human diseases. And all the books say that cross infection between humans and...” Laura’s energy stalled and she hesitated as both Caerwyn and Eifion clearly waited for her next choice of words. “Uh...supernatural creatures isn’t possible. Even blood borne pathogens can’t survive when someone transitions from human to vampire, right?”

God Damn I pick the smart ones, thought Carmilla then, not for the first time.

“You’re right.” She conceded with a muted smile. “Which begs the question, how exactly Cael Mclachlan here came by such an unfortunate condition.”

Laura giggled at that, couldn’t help herself. But then she stopped as a second realisation struck. “You said it was mostly children who got Rickets?”

Her mind was racing a mind a minute as the other girl nodded her confirmation and for the first time, tentatively it had to be said, Laura brought herself face to face with Caerwyn’s cruel features.

“So the obvious conclusion would be that it happened when you turned into a human child. You have to touch them first, right? Maybe you took on their immuno deficiencies when you did that.... Except that’s not possible because cross contamination can’t happen.”

Her brow seemed to furrow of its own accord as Caerwyn appeared to enjoy her uncertainty. Stalking around behind his chair in the shadows Eifion however refused to look at her.
Odd.
She didn’t stop to process the thought however.

“Which means there are only two other explanations, right?” She blinked. “Either one of your parents was human...”

It was that statement that broke the stalemate and the quiet in the airless room. At those words the seated man immediately tried to thrust himself from his chair, the veins pulsing visibly in his neck as he threw his body towards Laura’s.

“You take that back, you bitch! You don’t know anything about my lineage and I...I’ll rip out your goddamn tongue if you say that one more time...”

She barely had time to stumble backwards as Eifion circled around, throwing himself on top of the other man to keep him in the chair, his contortions turning the whole thing into some kind of absurd wrestling match. Carmilla for her part had already shifted into a defensive stance and was stood an inch in front of the tiny student, blocking her view of the scene.

“Don’t worry, he’s not going to hurt you. He’s a guest after all.” The brunette bared her fangs a little as the word guest fell from her mouth. “And there are rules of hospitality you don’t break. Isn’t that right, Gentlemen?”

If she was expecting an answer, she didn’t get one. All that could be heard were involuntary grunts as the pair continued to grapple with each other.

“I...I didn’t mean to insult his family.” Laura said then with a miserable gaze. “ I just...my mouth sometimes doesn’t catch up with my brain and when I work through stuff, things have a tendency to come out in kind of a rambled mess and I don’t know how to...”

Laura only stopped when she felt a hand cup her mouth. “If the worst thing to happen to him today is you insulting his good name then I’d call that a win, cutie.”

She felt Laura mouth something in reply to that against her palm and allowed herself a smile, despite the fact that in all honesty Carmilla had no idea what she’d said. It broke the tension between the two of them at least. And in a stroke of luck Eifion seemed to have gotten into a position where he could comfortable hold down his former friend who though red in the face was no longer screaming obscenities.

Sweat was beginning to bead on his forehead when Eifion finally spoke. “Neither of his parents were human. I can vouch for that. So you can discount that theory at least.”

Laura bit her lip. “And you’re one hundred per cent sure about that?”

“I should be....They...they are my parents too.” He replied quietly.

What?!

“Wait, he’s your brother? I thought...you said he was your friend?” asked Laura.

“Figures,” added Carmilla archly. “What was that you said about Greeks bearing gifts?”

Shame crossed his sallow features as quickly as rage passed across his captives.
“Oh so we’re just acquaintances now?” snarled Caerwyn beneath him throwing a shove with his shoulder. “My own brother refuses to acknowledge me like all the rest of those ingrates?”

To his credit Eifion didn’t let go as he craned his neck around. “This isn’t the same Caer. I didn’t trust them not to hunt you down until they’d heard me out.”

“Ha! And then they listened. And kicked you out. So you decided to take out the middleman and truss me up yourself with your lies and your ropes? Mother would be turning in her grave if she could see you; lickspittle to the humans and the night creatures.”

Eifion was quick to give him a swift backwards box to the ear with an elbow; face burning in the dim light. “Mother believed in our legacy! We coexist in peace with the humans or there is no peace to be had. For anyone. You remember her telling us that every night before bed?”

“Oh there’s peace to be found. It just has a different face to the one you expected,” came the self-satisfied reply, complete with a swift peek towards Laura.

The tension in the room instantly ratcheted up again. In some kind of effort to calm his shallow breathing Eifion twisted sideways off his brother and quickly busied himself with retying the knots at Caerwyn’s wrists before stepping away into the shadows at the back of the small study area.

Understanding his need for a little breathing room, Carmilla scratched the back of her neck before turning to her uneasy roommate.

“So what’s behind door number two in that brain of yours, Buttercup?”

The tiny blonde frowned once more as she tried to track back on her original train of thought. “Well, if he wasn’t born half human...”

She flinched as Caerwyn jerked although the motion was almost half hearted. “…then the only other explanation is that he must be becoming one, right?”

A raised eyebrow greeted that statement. “That’s kind of a leap isn’t it? If diseases can’t cross species then how is that anymore plausible?”

Laura threw up her hands. “I don’t know, just hear me out! If the Plentyn’s genetics allow them to like, mutate and take on a human appearance, then who’s to say that on a cellular level, if the original structure is, you know, weaker than usual then the smallest of breaks in the membrane would allow DNA to mix where it shouldn’t.”

Silence.

“So every time he changed into a human, some of their DNA leached into his, infecting the cells?”

“Maybe? Is it that so implausible?” she asked.

Carmilla hmmmed. “Eifion, how many times has your...brother changed form?”

“I’m not sure. Six or seven perhaps.” He replied thoughtfully as he walked back and forth. “I... I don’t know how relevant it might be but my broth...” He stumbled over his words as his sibling shot him a hate-filled glance. “…Caerwyn was a sickly child. When he was little, our parents weren’t sure whether he would even survive into adulthood. They didn’t say what was wrong with him but...there was something...in the way they spoke to him, treated him that set him apart from everyone else. Not that it ever mattered to me.”
“Except the runt of the litter finally decided to take a stand,” said Caerwyn with a bitter tinge of pride. “And you will learn to kneel before the last day comes. And all of you can see how it feels to look up into the face of your betters.”

Whether it was the coldness of his gaze or the pathetic attempt to crow in that grimy room that did it, none of them could be certain but Eifion let out a howl at that. Tearing from the corner of the room suddenly he was in front of his brother and cocking his arm back he let swing a punch that connected with Caerwyn’s jaw. Hard.

Hard enough to snap his head back, leaving a stream of dark blood pouring from his mouth and left nostril as he sucked in a series of harsh breaths.

“Jesus, we have a duty of care, Cae! We don’t hurt anyone, we help them! Our whole purpose is to curb the self-destruction of others not hasten it along, what the hell is wrong with you! How did you get like this?!”

Carmilla didn’t need Laura’s urgent touch at her hip to prompt her into action, she was already moving, circling her arms around Eifion’s flailing pair then dragging him backwards away from his brother. He was surprisingly strong for all his courteous airs and it took almost all of her muscle to pull him away to a safe distance as he screamed and struggled against her chokehold.

She should have known that Laura wouldn’t just stay where she was however and could only watch as the human girl rushed in the exact opposite direction to tenderly cup Caerwyn’s face as she assessed how badly he was hurt.

Not badly enough it would seem. Because as soon as she was close to him, the injured man screwed up his face and spat a thick bubble of blood and saliva into her own where it ran unceremoniously down her nose into her mouth.

He grinned up at her with crimson teeth. “You want me to show my weakness? Consider that a freebie. You’ll all know the taste of it soon enough.”

She lurched backwards again wiping frantically at her face with a sleeve as the foul necrotic flavour slid onto her tongue.

“With my blood, comes the revolution!”

And with that last rebellious shot the room fell into silence.

TBC...
If she thought the panic inside her veins staring at the mirror in their room had been bad enough, this was some whole other circle of Hell. Every inch of skin was on fire as she clawed at the corners of her mouth, trying to scratch away any drops of foul blood that were still on there. Her jaw and tongue felt too big; alien and infected driving all that terror into overdrive to the point where she couldn’t seem to form any words at all. In fact the only thing Laura was capable of was to keep staggering backwards, taking jerky steps until the top of her spine smacked into the wall. But even that impact clearly wasn’t enough to break through her fear as her wrist kept dragging itself back and forth across her mouth and she kept trying to spit out the substance sitting on her tongue.

Within a second Carmilla launched herself soundlessly across the room, quickly wrapping her arms around the other girl’s to keep her from rubbing the skin on her face any more raw than it already was. Softly turning her so that they were facing each other she uncoupled one of her wrists and used it to cup Laura’s worried face, holding it just tight enough at the socket that her lips parted and she could get a glimpse inside.

“Hold on Cupcake,” she whispered as she tried to make sure none of the blood was still in there. At first it was difficult to tell, all pink shadows and dark recesses but her eyes adjusted soon enough, her chest contracting as she spotted one dark bead left on her upper tooth and with a smooth motion reached in her pinkie finger and dabbed it clean.

“All gone. You’re ok. You’re ok, just breathe.”

It seemed as though Laura understood what she was trying to say because her flailing hands stilled a little at that though the shuddering in her small frame didn’t diminish and neither did the wheezing in her chest. She looked so tiny in that moment that the vampire couldn’t help wrapping her up in a proper hug this time, allowing Laura to bury her face into the crook of her shoulder underneath the waves of her hair without a word.

“You’re still you.” She cooed quietly. “One hundred per cent undiluted Hollis. You hear me?”

Her words were comforting. Carmilla’s eyes though were another matter, as they darted to the grinning misshapen man in the chair and narrowed into slits. He was leering at her despite his brother’s hands being clamped around his neck and shoulders, pinning him to the chair with enough force to leave the skin mottled white.

“I’m going to rip your head from your body,” she hissed murderously.

Eifion caught her eye, “Miss Karnstein...if I could...”

“The time for pleas of mercy is more than done Elf.”
He flinched but didn’t move from where he was. “I...understand. I was merely going to say that I
don’t think Miss Hollis is in any real danger.”

Her teeth bared of their own accord as she felt Laura let out a quivering breath underneath her chin
although whether that was instinctive or whether she was following the conversation she couldn’t be
sure.

“Caerwyn’s blood by itself- it hasn’t got any mystical properties of its own. Defective genes yes. But
DNA is a specific creature, in that it only destroys itself. It wouldn’t be enough to affect someone
else’s at a genetic level even if ingested. That would require some kind of outside alchemy.”

“So you’re a chemist now?”

“No. But I did my thesis on neurological pharmacology before going into Mental Health. The
science is inarguable.”

The vampire let out a low growl. “How about you share your theory with the students suspended
from the walls in the loony bin? I’m sure they’d have something to say about that.”

If they can even speak anymore.

A cold river of something ran through her gut and she hugged Laura’s body closer to hers.

He sighed. “You don’t understand...”

“Damn right I don’t,” she muttered under her breath. Sighing, her attention shifting back to her tiny
roommate, she changed position a little to allow Laura an inch more space next to her ribs and to
give the muscles in the small of her back a breather.

“It’s obviously an ingredient in whatever’s causing the epidemic. And he’s a part of it; I’m not
disputing that. But...Caerwyn,...I know him... Jesus, look at him, he’s no mastermind,...” he
floundered for a moment as if his mind was struggling to put things together. “Someone else has to
have been using him. Using his blood...and his anger. We should be directing our attention to the
man behind the curtain.”

“I think I’ll direct my attention to the person who just violently outstayed his welcome, thank you
very much,” she countered.

Blackening pupils glared at Caerwyn. “And that would be you, Frankenstein’s Monster.”

Just as she went to gently detach herself from the body wrapped around her, a warm set of fingers
seemed to press themselves into her ribcage and she looked down to see two shining brown eyes
peering at her. Stopping her in her tracks.

“He...He’s right, Carm,” Laura hiccupped. “Caerwyn can’t be the one doing all this.”

Brushing a slightly damp strand of hair behind Laura’s ear, Carmilla returned her gaze delicately.

“We can’t know that for sure, Laura. And after what he just did to you...”

The tiny blonde straightened her shoulders and balled up a fist to lightly punch her protector’s
shoulder. “Come on. After all that’s happened, this isn’t even the worst thing I’ve had to deal with in
the last twenty four hours. And you said it yourself; I’m OK right?”

A raised eyebrow greeted her though the older girl gently ran a finger across Laura’s cheek.
“... Apart from wanting to brush my teeth until the end of time and crawl inside a bathtub full of mouthwash, that is.” Laura gave a watery smile. “Seriously though. Like you said...My face is still... sufficiently face like. He didn’t throw any books at me or stick me with needles. What he did was beyond gross but he didn’t actually hurt me. And think about it for a hot second- I mean, he got captured more easily than you did.”

That earned her an even more snarky look and she blushed quietly but didn’t back down; instead looking squarely at the taller girl. “Besides he’s a big ball of rage. You always told me that chess players, good chess players at least, need to be calm and patient in order to win. That’s just not him, right? He can’t be the one co-ordinating all this, can he?”

Carmilla didn’t reply for a moment. The wheels were clearly turning in her mind even though she never broke eye contact with Laura; as if two distinct parts of her were at war with themselves behind those pupils. But then after what felt like an interminable amount of time, she ducked down and planted a firm but yielding kiss on the crown of her roommate’s head.

Laura had no idea what that meant; whether it was a sign of concession from the other girl or merely the sweetest of distractions but since her breathing had slowed to an almost normal level she decided to take it as a mild form of victory and returned the gesture with a butterfly kiss to the pale white skin of Carmilla’s collarbone, the place where she knew her faint pulse would pound wildly in response.

The two of them falling into a private language they’d developed all of their own without even noticing; the air in the room somehow heavy and humid again.

That was until Eifion cleared his throat snapping the pair of them out of it as he gingerly lifted one arm from holding down their captive.

“So we’re agreed then? No vengeful histrionics?”

Carmilla offered up a sneer. “That’s still to be determined.”

Laura frowned and elbowed her softly in the solar plexus to which she shrugged. “Violence is in my nature, cutie. Besides we still need to know who it is that’s supposedly pulling this one’s strings, don’t we?”

That fire was back in her eyes again. More fierce than ever or so it seemed.

Taking one last critical look at the tiny human next to her, visibly checking her out from top to toe, fingers jerking a little next to her hip as if they itched to make sure she was all right for themselves, a small concerned smile lit up her face before dropping away as she turned her focus towards Caerwyn. In its place a smooth mask of contempt forming as she stalked a few feet forwards towards his bound form.

No doubt she intended to get even closer than that but it was as she took one more step that an ear splitting cracking sound echoed through the beams overhead causing the rooms occupants to jump and cover their ears against the horrendous sound.

The room was quickly bathed in darkness again, the after-vibrations of the noise causing old deposits of dust to drop down on them from the strip-lights above.

“We really need to start wearing head lamps on these expeditions,” muttered Carmilla to herself.

Her words cut themselves off though as soon as she became aware of the smell. The tang of charring wood and sweet-salted burning flesh melting into it. Two things; living flesh and inanimate timber melding into one cloying sour aroma.
There wasn’t even time for her to scream out a warning.

And Laura could only watch horrified from her crouched position as Caerwyn’s whole body and the chair underneath him was somehow consumed in a shadowy ball of flame that seemed to flow across the floor like an oil spill. It didn’t burn like an ordinary fire though. It started at Caerwyn’s feet, nibbling at the laces on his shoes with muffled sparks before surging up the material of his trousers never stopping until it reached the plane of his thighs. And the colours weren’t normal either. The flares were a muted red at first obscuring his soundless screaming mouth as they soared up his chest and throat then a dull orange against his fizzling hair. Dirty yellow patches shone at the ties around his wrists where the material took longer to catch. And then finally they all ruptured into blinding white as the heat increased in intensity and the top layers of his skin, his lips and fingernails began to burst away to reveal bubbling deposits of fat that popped and burst across his biceps and thighs.

It had only been a few seconds but he barely looked human at all anymore as the fire set about its work with a disgusting kind of greed, licking its way across his exposed muscles, threading itself between the sinewy joints that snapped as if they were nothing more than cheap elastic bands.

With an inhuman shriek Eifion tried his best to get close to his brother but the second that he moved the fire almost seemed to pick up on his intention and small white flickers bust outwards from the main fire singeing his face and forcing him to back up again as the inferno peaked. Flames surged up towards the ceiling as Caerwyn’s body collapsed in on itself, the three witnesses beginning to retch as whatever was left of their captive burned away, the fat drying up to reveal sharp ribs and bones that turned from ivory white to a charred black within seconds. Then it was as if they’d never been there before crumbling as they did into a powdery ash that swirled around inside the firestorm, dropping out at the edges and floating down onto the lino in the gloom.

With its work almost done, the conflagration almost appeared to dip its head before a final whooshing sound announced its end, a cyclone of air cycling upwards blowing all the heat into nothingness.

And just like that the thing was done. Over. Silent.

And nothing remained of the man that had been tied to the chair a moment ago. Not even the chair itself. Just a black asymmetrical burn mark on the carpet, its fronds reaching out towards the four corners of the room and a powdering of ash obscuring some of its darker innards.

It seemed like forever before anyone out of the three lingering occupants of the room moved. But then Laura jerked. Once. Twice. An ankle first, her knee next. Soon she was slowly dragging herself to her feet, eyes wider than they’d ever been flicking between Carmilla’s hunkered down form and the black mark in the centre of the room.

Unsure of where the impetus was coming from and not really caring anyway, she quickly made her way over to the brunette and clamped onto her arm, pulling her upwards into an uneasy embrace, running her hands all the way down her upper arms until they found her wrists. Making sure she wasn’t burned or injured.

“...I’m so sorry.”

He didn’t even acknowledge her; eyes glazed and unseeing. Not even as her trembling fingers touched down feather-light on his kneecap. On his right hand which was clammy and cold to the touch.
It was like he wasn’t even in there anymore.

“He’s in shock,” said a low voice near to her ear. “His blood pressure has dropped and he’s not getting enough oxygen to his brain.”

“What can we do?!” said Laura with urgency.

Carmilla blinked for a moment as if searching her memory for something then placing her hand on his rigid shoulder, she gently pushed against it until his body hunched to the side without resistance. Sliding a wad of papers they’d been working on underneath the side of his head, she pushed lightly again until he was lying down on one side then reached in towards his throat and delicately undid the top two buttons of his shirt. She shucked off her hooded jacket and draped it across him.

“We need to call an ambulance if he doesn’t snap out of it soon.”

Laura nodded then gestured mutely to the burn mark.

“Who could do that?” she said in a hushed whisper.

“Could do it? Maybe a handful of powerful beings that have ties to ancient magicks and the training to bend them to their will,” said Carmilla.

The vampire let out a breath. “Who would do it? Even fewer than that. And on Silas property with all the charms and protection spells around the place?...The shortlist is getting progressively shorter by the second.”

Laura closed her eyes for a moment. “I guess they really didn’t want him to talk.” They sprang open again, tears burning at the corners. “But they could have done that at anytime. Why not just...you know, light him up the second Eif brought him in here? Carmilla considered that. “Maybe...maybe they were waiting to see how much we could work out.” She bit her lip. “The bad guys have a habit of underestimating you, right? It’s possible they thought that given how off the charts messed up he was we’d buy that this whole gig was Caerwyn’s doing, that it was just small time revenge. And if he pushed us enough to take him out ourselves then there’d be no danger of him giving anyone else away.” She paused. “But they didn’t count on that pesky compassion of yours, I’m guessing.”

Laura threw her a rueful smile.

“And when we ruled that possibility out...they stepped in to save their own ass and keep him from revealing who exactly was running the show.”

A frown. “But they just revealed a whole bunch about themselves by doing...this. What they’re capable of.”

“Think of it as a gamble? And a calculated one no doubt. All pros and cons crossed and double checked.”

Laura scratched her chin as she surveyed the room. “On the plus side... if its possible there even is one, at least they can’t get anymore of his blood now.”

Carmilla responded by peering at her with seriousness. “I’m more concerned that it means they’ve got enough already for whatever it is they’re planning. And this was just a really dramatic way of taking out the trash.”
Laura grimaced at that and grumbled something about Carmilla always ruining her silver linings as she tiptoed her way around the marked area of floor to grab her cell phone from the table. As she made her way back, she obviously wasn’t being quite as careful because her left foot slithered on a pocket of ash underneath its tread and she fell heavily onto her hands and knees with an ungainly oomph.

Face burning with embarrassment, she was about to push herself back up onto her feet again when she finally noticed something weird underneath the dark coating of ash on the floor. Some kind of pattern or blotch that seemed out of place.

And she really didn’t want to touch it. God, she really didn’t. Knew intuitively that that residue in front of her was all that was left of the man they had been talking to less than a few minutes ago and she should show him the respect he deserved. The problem was that the curious part of her nature burned to know what it was that peeked out from under the piles of dust alongside that sense of decency. It whispered to her. Telling her that she was stepped in this thing so far that it was impossible to go back.

So she compromised, using the side of one hand to push one small heap of powder an inch to the side. That wasn’t too disrespectful, right?

Her hand froze though when two black letters were revealed in the gap. IO.

Something was written there.

What the hell?

“Uh, Carm?”

Laura relaxed a little as she felt a warm presence behind her before a hand rested itself on her right shoulder.

And then that small sense of respite dissipated and she was forced to cover her face with one of her own hands because someone who shall remain nameless was blowing long hard gusting breaths towards the lino, driving ash and dust all over the place.

“Jeez Louise! That wasn’t quite why I asked you to come over here,” she said with a cough.

Carmilla didn’t bother to reply though since they both knew that was pretty much exactly why Laura had called her name; because she wanted the other girl to take the blame for desecrating the resting place of the dead instead of her. It was one of those unspoken requests that Laura had a habit of making to her. So instead she simply stared at the words burned into the floor with concern.

Comburet sicut facile recipiet sanitatem caro tua

Laura glanced over at Eifion’s prone form then leaned in with a whisper. “What do you think it means?”

Carmilla looked up at her with unease. “It’s Latin. It means ‘Your flesh will burn just as easily.’

The pair of them could only lapse into silence at the implications of the warning.

TBC...
The ghost that knew the most

Chapter Summary

Carmilla and Laura need some answers.
Like right now.

So it's time to take a few steps back before they can go forward.

Comburet sicut facile recipiet sanitatem caro tua

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UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS:
Chapter 21

The call to the emergency campus medical team only took a few minutes since the number was safely stored in Laura’s contacts along with the security office’s extension and the undergraduate help line. The tiny blonde hadn’t been too happy though when the cell phone had been ripped away from her ear as soon as the dispatch clerk asked for her student ID and Carmilla had terminated the call before depositing the device in her back pocket.

“I guess that means we can’t wait with him until they come?” the student said quietly.

A determined shake of the head was all the response she was going to get, and while she was vaguely aware of the hand taking hers, drawing her away from the melancholy pile of ash staining the carpet and the crumpled form lying next to it, a part of her knew that she was going to be seeing this scene again in her not too distant future. If she could even sleep again after everything that had happened.

Which was debatable.

The cold swirling air that hit her throat was the thing that finally got her attention. It was only then she realised that her roommate had somehow steered them up all the convoluted sets of stairs and out through the buildings lobby.

“Won’t they recognise my number though?” she finally asked with chattering teeth.

Carmilla slipped off her jacket and draped it over the smaller girl’s shoulders. “This is Silas not Homeland Security Cupcake.” She drew in a bitterly cold breath. “He’ll understand why we had to leave Laura.”

The vampire didn’t volunteer that in his current state Eifion might not even be able to separate the
image of the two of them from the monsters playing the tune that had led his brother through his fateful dance. After escaping interment she had met enough soldiers in her stumbles through the battlefield who had seen their brothers cut down in a hot spray of blood and copper. Whether she found them on their knees or leaning on a bayonet they had all shared the same hollow emptiness in their gaze and each one when they finally noticed her, a pale shivering undernourished girl somehow stalking through their own personal arena of Hell, their eyes had wished death and disease in her direction. Prayed for someone else, someone innocent (or so they assumed) to share at least a tiny portion of the gut-ripping pain they were feeling right then.

She’d read that Saint Augustine had once claimed that the greatest evil was physical pain. He had been entirely wrong though, as most clerics seemed to be. Emotional pain would outstrip it every time. If Carmilla was sure of one thing, she was damn sure of that. It was why she presumed the Great and Powerful Oz for hadn’t burned Eifion along with his brother.

Because they wanted him to feel those terrible flames move from his face to the inside of his chest. With maybe the added bonus of possibly turning him from Laura’s ally into an enemy; from a stone in the Puppet Master’s shoe into their own personal stooge.

This was quite the manipulator they were dealing with.

Something stirred deep under the hard organs in her stomach as she thought about that. As she thought about everything she’d learned at the Psyche Ward about the woman in the power suit.

“Uh...Carm?”

The vampire resurfaced from her thoughts to focus on Laura’s tense and exhausted face hovering next to her.

“What now?”

Her voice was like ice. “This has to stop.”

“Uh...ok? What does that mean?”

“Research isn’t getting us anywhere,” she sighed, scratching at her left elbow “... so without knowing the endgame I say disruption is the best course of action left in our arsenal.”

Laura smiled tiredly. “Disruption huh? Why do I get the feeling that isn’t exactly outside of your skill set?”

Carmilla remained tight-lipped. “We have to go back to the Psyche ward. Get everyone out. It would at least leave them chasing their tails while they refilled those beds, give us some time to come up with a more permanent plan.”

Laura rested her head softly on the brunette’s shoulder. “And you want to see if she’s changed her mind about leaving, right? If she’s even still there.”

Carmilla said nothing. But the silence was a kind of confirmation all the same and she appreciated the smaller girl respecting her enough not to delve any further into the reasons behind that.

If the idea bothered her at all, Laura gave no indication. She simply nodded against her roommate’s clavicle before straightening up; taking the opportunity to shake out her arms and crick her neck with an uncomfortable grimace.

“Come on then. Guess it’s time to get our hero britches on and mess with some Big Bad’s shizzle.”
She quirked her lips up at Carmilla’s vaguely horrified expression. Then took a step away from her motioning for her to follow with a cheeriness that didn’t feel quite one hundred per cent genuine.

But follow she did.
As always.

The walk to the Psychiatric facility seemed to take half as long this time though that was probably because Laura seemed to be converting her nervousness about going back into some kind of unstoppable inhuman stride. Knowing full well that her roommate wouldn’t have any problems keeping up.

The building reared up in front of them before they thought it would and both jogged up the rickety stairs in tandem before pushing their way through the smeared glass doors. The corridor was deserted which made things easier so they unconsciously slowed their pace and ambled along pretending to peer now and then at the ripped posters adorning the corkboards as they went. Laura even went so far as to pull one of the paper tabs off an accommodation advertisement, pushing it into her jeans pocket as she went past. They were just typical students roaming campus after all.

Nothing suspect here. Nope.

It was only when they reached the secure inner doors that a flash of indecision crossed Carmilla’s features as she remembered being interrogated by the pony-tailed wonder last time she’d been here. She was just about to suggest coming up with some kind of ruse about their reasons for visiting when she discovered her tiny compadre had already pulled the door open and strode straight in undaunted like some kind of pocket sized renegade.

She wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or irritated. She followed her in nonetheless, pupils scanning the wing for anyone official. But there was no-one there. The ward was completely unguarded.
Which admittedly made simpler for the two of them but did nothing for the blaze of anxiety shooting up her spinal column. Even Laura looked concerned.

“We shouldn’t just be allowed to walk in, should we?”

“This way.” Carmilla nodded towards their right and clocking the lack of a blinking red LED on security camera in the ceiling corner started up again, barely hesitating as she came to the next set of double doors underneath the sign for Lyssa Ward.

Got to love that Deja vu, she thought apprehensively.

Then putting all the weight of her shoulder against the middle of the two doors, she pushed. Hard. And almost went flying inside when there was no immediate pressure pushing back, skidding to a halt in the entrance to that oh so familiar room, the doors slamming into the whitewash walls beside her with an agonisingly loud crack.

Oh so familiar that was, except for the fact that it was completely empty.
All the beds lay trimly side by side on the tiled floor; deceptively typical in their placement, all sign of straps removed; the dust in the air suggesting that the room had been unoccupied for at least twenty four hours.
A mass clearout then? Or some kind of evacuation?

“Jeez, who knew hospitals rooms got even creepier when they’re vacant?” whispered Laura who
had followed her in and was staring around them with wide eyes. Her memories of this place were hazy at best and muddled with faint impressions of something warm touching her ankle and Carmilla’s porcelain skin floating to the left of her eye line, but she remembered enough of the screaming that followed to feel the distinct unadulterated need to get the hell out.

“...This...this could be good though, right? That there’s no-one that needs saving?”

Carmilla almost gave a snort at the naivety of the question. She restrained herself however for her roommate’s sake. She knew exactly why Laura’s mind might want to jump to the most optimistic conclusion given the awful circumstances of her stay and her desire to be, well, anywhere else right at this moment but that didn’t mean Carmilla had a duty to switch off her own common sense and indulge it.

In fact she didn’t even glance at her, afraid of what she might say to that and instead moved quickly towards the far end of the room where a single, neatly made cot greeted her- the turquoise knitted blanket pulled taut and tucked in military style at the corners. Frowning at the precision and care on display, Carmilla breathed out heavily before ducking down and sweeping an exploratory arm under the metal bed frame.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Jesus!”

The brunette practically jumped out of her skin at the tiny voice issuing from inside a metal cupboard and growled as she turned to see one of the doors creak open, a pale face peering out with something close to a smile.

Carmilla stared at her. “You seriously need to stop that. You’re going to give someone a coronary one of these days.”

The girl shrugged and a white hand snuck out to push the other door open. “Only someone with active bloodflow.”

Laura held up her hand from behind them, the other wrist clutched at her chest as if it could somehow control her ragged breathing. “As someone with a working circulation system I’d like to second the coronary thing.”

Pale blue eyes blinked at her before looking somewhat sheepish. “Sorry. You...you kind of forget social niceties in this place.”

“I guess you would if you...uh, live in a closet.” Laura took a few steps closer, frowning. “Why are you living in a closet?”

The girl finally emerged, those stick thin limbs under her hospital gown glowing white in the strip lighting and she crossed her arms. “I’m not living in it. I was hiding. Obviously.”

Laura guessed immediately that this was the girl Carmilla had been so concerned about. And the vampire for her part was dismayed by her appearance.

She looked even thinner than before if that was even possible. There were dark discoloured circles under her eyes and her hands seemed to tremble as she scratched at the scraped up skin around her wrist. Hell, a stern look seemed like all it would take to break her. That didn’t stop Carmilla from tiptoeing forward and in a completely uncharacteristic move side-hugging her for a brief second before stepping away and rubbing the back of her neck.
Two sets of jaws dropped open almost simultaneously.
The brunette cleared her throat, not making eye contact with anyone. “So you’re still here then?”
The girl shrugged. “I figure if I’m the last one then I get squatter’s rights and legally own this place. I have a whole plan involving throw pillows and an excessive amount of futons.”
“Christ, is there any situation you can’t snark your way out of?” muttered the vampire.
She grinned with stained teeth. “If there is I’m yet to find it thankfully.”
Carmilla’s features hardened. “What happened?”
The signs of some kind of debate played across the girl’s own face before she uncrossed her arms and tottering across the floor slumped down gently on the edge of her old bed. Careful not to ruck up the taut bedspread. “Phase Two happened.”
Carmilla glanced at Laura. And unprompted the dark blonde made her way over to the nearest empty hospital bed, only relaxing when the older girl plopped down next to her, fingers gripping the blanket a millimetre from her own.
“And what exactly is Phase Two?”
“The same as it always has been throughout history. Expansion.”
The brunette felt a shift in Laura’s posture as she waited for a clarification on that comment and had to admit that the student next to her wasn’t alone in feeling a slight sense of impatience at the cryptic nature of the remark.
She cocked her head to the side, “Meaning?”
There was a sniff as their acquaintance played with a piece of dull hair that curled around the lobe of her ear.
“This might take some time.”
“Duly noted.”
At that, the girl in the hospital gown pulled her legs up underneath her, ankles bony and cross crossed with veins. “Ok so you saw how busy the ward was last time?” She waited for a nod. “This room has eight beds plus mine. There are four other wards each one with the same occupancy. That’s space for thirty three admissions. Not a bad amount for your average university psychiatric facility, right?”
She paused. “There were twenty nine people in the unit before everything started. Some in the guys rooms were day cases but twenty nine students were officially registered as dedicated patients. And whoever decided to use this place as a stepping stone for their grand plans didn’t realise one thing when they cut everyone loose to make room for the newbies.”
She looked at the pair listening intently to her.
“Patients in psychiatric care form bonds really quickly. Shared experience and all that I guess. There were six people in this room with me before everything started getting crazy; Alice was only here for under a week, Franzi and Josy for five. It didn’t matter though. We were close. All of us. So when they were sent home to make space for the new wave of crazy there was no way I was going to just cut ties with them. Not with the few people I’d found that actually understood what I was going through you know? That’s why we all swapped usernames before they left and we’ve been talking
everyday online. Everyday.” And you know what? They’re the ones who actually helped me realise that this thing is a lot bigger than just Silas.”

“But...how could they help? I mean they’d already gotten out of here before everything went to hell.” whispered Laura.

She nodded back at her with a glint in her eye. “An excellent question.”

The deliberately enigmatic retort earned her a frustrated eye roll from Laura’s companion but she simply waved it off as she suddenly seemed to consider something.

“You guys must have tried to figure out why certain students were targeted, infected whatever you want to call it, right once this place was open to new customers?”

Carmilla sighed at the deliberate change in subject. “We couldn’t find any ties between the ones I could remember names for.”

“I’m not convinced there were any.” Mused the girl. “Apart from the fact that they had small circles of friends and no-one that would miss them. At last not at first. They’d be what some would call easy prey.”

Staring at the floor for a second, Laura bit her lip as if embarrassed to question the girl’s integrity for a second time. “How could you know that from in here? You can’t have met all of them.”

A ghostly grin answered her. “Every person in here has a chart. Every chart comes complete with a patient name and birthdate. And once you have the run of this place and get hold of those details...finding people’s student profile on the intranet and then entire life online is kind of a cakewalk. A quick scroll through their friend’s lists and Instagram pictures pretty much tells you all you need to know.”

“That’d be kind of creepy if it wasn’t super helpful,” mumbled the blonde exhaling.

“You wanted CIA level surveillance cutie....”

“Welcome to the upside of social stalking they don’t mention on the posters.”

Next to her left side, Carmilla could see Laura was deep in thought and it concerned her that her gaze hadn’t been drawn to the floor out of embarrassment but more because of one single phrase used a moment ago. Easy prey. Flicking her eyes to those in front of her, she was sure their new friend wasn’t entirely unaware of the effect of her words either. She didn’t seem too troubled by the fact however; an insensitivity that didn’t sit well with the vampire.

Bringing up one knee to rest on her other, she took the opportunity to subtly clutch the fingers of Laura’s right hand, the ones that were unconsciously plucking at the bedspread underneath them and gently pressed them against her thigh, her own hand covering them from prying eyes. Enclosing them inside her own cool flesh. Ignoring the skittering of nerves that the movement seemed to release under her skin.

Then her head tilted upwards and her pupils bore into the blue ones staring back at her with all hint of amusement bleached out.

“Enough with the smoke and mirrors routine.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop with that one statement.

“I know you probably don’t get much amusement cooped up in here. And that you like your games. But in case you haven’t noticed there’s no-one left to play them. And the only people that are here
are the ones who came back to help you. To help everyone before this thing gets really out of hand.”

Carmilla watched the girl deflate a little and sensed Laura’s gaze raking the side of her face but her expression refused to soften.

“So do me...do us a favour and just share what you know. No more dodging the question. No more verbal slight-of-hand. Can you do that? Because if not, we’re leaving right now and quite honestly you can entertain yourself until the apocalypse comes.”

Their skinny companion opened her mouth as if she were going to say something then closed it slowly again before offering up a hangdog nod.

TBC...
The truth doesn't cost anything but a lie can cost you everything

Chapter Summary

There be answers in this here chapter, ladies.

Time for some reveals to be had- that's a good thing.... Right?!

Chapter Notes

A/N: I know this fic seems to be never-ending (not sure if that’s a good or a bad thing tbh) but I just wanted to say thanks to all who keep reading and commenting including but not limited to Maruchi, Mbarduk, Fangs_for_the-Memories and Rae. You guys make all the difference and I wouldn’t write half as much without you! So thanks y’all for keeping me inspired. Viva La Hollstein (angst and all)!

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS
CHAPTER 22:

Everyone in the room shifted uncomfortably, no-one willing to make the first move and make eye contact with anyone else. But then the sallow girl who seemed to be all elbows and ankles clicked her tongue at the brunette.

“You’re kind of mean huh?”

Laura didn’t need to look to feel Carm’s gaze hardening into a shard of glass.

“Uh...She only meant that we kind of need to know anything you do if we have any hopes of stopping this thing. Carm just gets a little...overzealous sometimes. But she honestly came back to help you. To make sure you were ok and make things right.”

The tiny blonde gave a little gulp as she felt a round fingernail press into the back of her hand; not hard enough to draw blood but with at least enough pressure to leave a stinging crescent dip in the skin. She wondered nervously if maybe her vampire roommate had finally gotten tired of Laura’s constant need to apologise for her and the tiny blonde couldn’t help wincing internally at the talk that was sure to be heading her way sometime after this nightmare had ended.

Dark eyebags surveyed her for a moment.

“You’ve been looking at this the wrong way, you know.”

Interest piqued, Laura ignored the slightly sour sense of smugness in that reply. “How so?”

“You’ve been trying to find out why certain students were targeted, right? What it was about them that put them in the crosshairs; why they were chosen and not their friends? Well, it turns out that’s
not the question you should have been asking.”

Muttering to herself the girl rocked backwards momentarily. “Asking the right question takes as much skill as getting the right answer so they say.”

And another uncomfortable mechanical silence filled the room...at least until a muffled growl erupted from deep in Carmilla’s throat.

There was a huff. “I did exactly the same, ok? It was driving me crazy until I figured it out. Their importance isn’t who they are. It’s where they come from.” She paused as if waiting for that idea to settle beneath her guest’s skin. “After all of my... friends were sent home, I started keeping a diary of which facilities they had been sent to so I could write letters to them instead of trying to talk about everything that was happening in a hundred and forty characters. Didn’t think anything of it at the time. But then things got crazy here. And after the wards filled up and they started sedating everyone the orderlies began to talk. That the noobs were also going to be sent home. At first I figured maybe they couldn’t cope with the numbers anymore or they were expecting even more so they wanted to clean house and get this place set up for more admissions.”

“But that wasn’t the case?” asked Laura gingerly.

The girl’s eyes blazed. “I should have learned by now not to play the optimist. When I heard that I started making lists. Of all the new patients details, their histories, making notes on any paperwork I could find and it was only when I started looking back through that I finally saw the connection.”

She pinned Carmilla with an unreadable gaze. “Their hometowns, the ones they were being shipped back to. I’d seen those names before. Their addresses were so familiar and I couldn’t work out why until it hit me... They matched the ones in my diary perfectly, the ones for my friends. They were picked because of where they came from. Where they could be sent back to.”

Laura’s jaw dropped open and her hand slid down the leather clad thigh as her roommate’s grip fell slack.

“But...but that makes no sense. Why would anyone want to infect a bunch of students and then send them home to a place no-one else has heard of, where they can’t do your bidding?”

“Because they’re just a tool. My friends. The noobs. They’re pawns in a game that extends well beyond the walls of Silas.”

Her eyes flicked to Carmilla’s clouded orbs. “Think about it. The logistics of it. Young patients with genuine mental health issues get sent back home to a small town. No-one thinks anything of it, because it’s just one kid. No big deal. But these are kids where their regular treatments have been interrupted, medication regime stopped not tapered off, their sense of continuity and comfort broken.” Her eyes almost seemed to glisten for a second before continuing. “I saw Josy’s transfer order; the referral was very specific that the patient ‘no longer needed treatment or confinement.’ That was a freaking lie! But what it means is that my friends have ended up back at home in the community with parents who either don’t have the time to look after them or don’t give enough of a shit to even try. With no way to access prescription meds. No-one to talk anything through with. Nothing even remotely resembling care. Just left to drown in an ocean of their own making.”

Fumbling with a phone that she drew from her pocket, she stroked the screen absently as if it held secrets on there that she didn’t quite have the energy to share.

“Seems like maybe you got the better end of the deal staying here,” said Laura gently with what she hoped was a reassuring smile. It simply earned her a moment of indecipherable scrutiny.
The girl’s bare toes kicked at the tiles underneath them as a knowing grimace lit her face up. “And the others? I snuck a look at their transfers too. They had different instructions. They were designated at ‘risk for self care deficit.’ Meaning they supposedly have the potential for self harming, malnutrition; that they’re unable to look after themselves day to day. Which is another lie but who’s counting right? They were only to be admitted to local health care providers for immediate interment. Special treatment all the way for those superstars.”

“So they’re sending them back to the same place but keeping the genuine patients away from the infected?” mumbled Carmilla. “Why send them to the same place just to keep them separate?”

Laura bit her lip, “Because you want two different effects.”

Their acquaintance sniffed. “Yeah that threw me too. Until I started thinking bigger. Wondering what would happen if the cycle just kept going you know...ad nauseum. Picture it. No-one’s going to bat an eyelid at the odd student who comes home from Silas all messed up. Or another who’s transferred to their local nuthouse. No-one would see a link between the two. But then imagine other universities suddenly start doing the same thing. There’s another one let loose in the same community off their meds and spinning out. More taking up residential beds. It still wouldn’t set any alarm bells off not at a local health board level. Not until the situation got so bad that it couldn’t be contained.”

“Other universities?” Laura responded with a growing sense of nausea.

There was a moment’s hesitation. “The last thing Alice sent to me was a text about a girl she’d seen in the local diner. Aninka, from the year above her in high school. She didn’t know her that well, had apparently been studying at Columbia, got a physics scholarship because of her GPA but Alice’s Mom had told her that morning that Aninka had been excused from her current studies on mental health grounds. Anyway she saw her there in the diner so she was just going in to say hi when Aninka’s order arrived at the table. A bowl of tomato soup. Alice didn’t want to interrupt her so she took a seat nearby to wait for her to finish eating.”

Carmilla frowned. “And...”

“And she watched as Aninka stared at her soup for a second, as if she were trying to remember even placing the order and then pushed her face right into it. Right into boiling hot liquid. I’m sure you can imagine the scene that followed. Ambulances. Police. Witness statements. I think...all those questions...that might have been what triggered her into...”

Her words trailed off and a heavy melancholy took their place in the white room.

Carmilla’s expression softened, “One incident doesn’t make a...”

“I started googling news reports from the other small hometowns on the lists. Local papers. School messageboards. There wasn’t much on there, beyond stupid gossip and adverts for local tradesman. But there were a couple of comments from two of the other places, Harwicke and Labrevsie about local teenagers who had returned early from college and caused what they lovingly described as ‘commotions unsuited to a small town setting.’

She offered up a haunted smile. “I don’t know which is worse. Being one of the ones the system doesn’t give a fuck about or being strapped to a bed with a growing number of people from all over the country whose proximity is only going to make your infection spread.”

At that dismal declaration Laura’s flesh seemed to reach a point where she couldn’t bear to hear anything more said and stomach roiling, she leaned heavily back on her wrists, “I think I’m gonna be sick.”
Her forehead felt feverish and she desperately fought the urge to rest her head against Carmilla’s sturdy shoulder if only for a moment; unsure whether the vampire was busy trying to push her own nausea down or was still stung by the careless comment she’d made earlier. She was surprised then when an arm silently snaked around her waist and pulled her hip sideways, her right ear softly placed against cool skin and black hair.

“Take it easy Cupcake. Won’t do us any good if our heroine baulks before the game is over.” The whisper was so quiet that she almost thought she’d imagined it. And Hell, maybe she had.

“I can’t believe Eifion wouldn’t have told us about this,” she said.

The deep sense of betrayal was obvious in Laura’s tone, in the tremor underneath her pulse and the vampire ran a delicate hand through a sheaf of honey coloured hair. “As much as I love to badmouth Silas lackey’s I honestly don’t think he had any idea what was going on here.”

Carmilla looked up to find their guest peering at the two of them with a strange mixture of envy and terseness. She raised her eyebrow as if daring the other girl to comment.

“You mean that nurse, Eifion?” The pale student blinked, re-schooling her features before shaking her head. “He was the only one here who ever seemed to care about us. There’s no way he was involved.” She nodded as if to underline the point. “I don’t know what his deal was, I mean he obviously knew more than he let on but that’s no crime. And he cared about the noobs. You could see it in the way he... protected them from some of the other orderlies. I think maybe he took so many extra shifts over the last week because he thought that he could keep them safe, maybe even find some kind of cure for those on campus who were infected. When the plan came down from on high to discharge them and send them home to their local health services he even tried to convince himself that they would be safer away from each other.”

Carmilla hmmed. “He was probably right in some ways. Looking at how the disease progresses when it’s in proximity to other carriers, you can see the logic in that.”

“He didn’t see the big picture though,” said the girl with some bitterness. “I guess not all of us get that particular pleasure.” Then she looked directly at Carmilla in a strange way.

“Right...”

The black haired girl hoped that the brief conversation they’d just had brought Laura some comfort as she continued to press against her silently. The sterility of the room with its long finger-like strip-lights hovering overhead and gleaming bevelled bed frames was making her skin itch but she forced herself to be still while the tiny human clung to her side.

“So how do we stop them?” asked Laura softly then.

The girl across from them snorted. “You mean how do we stop Her?”

That got Laura’s attention all right. Enough that she didn’t notice Carmilla freeze in place next to her as she sat up straight.

“Wait, you know who’s doing this?”

The vampire tried her best to shoot a warning glare at the pallid teenager a foot away but it didn’t seem to have any effect because the girl simply side-eyed her back with a hint of a smile. “Well it’s pretty obvious given all the evidence. Right, Carmilla?”

Laura stared between the two of them with undisguised confusion as Carmilla fought to force even a
single word out. But her tongue seemed to have swollen to twice its usual size and skirted the roof of her mouth making a response impossible.

“I mean who’d recognise a Mother’s schemes better than her own loving daughter.”

In horror, the vampire watched then as the blank uncertainty in Laura Hollis’s eyes transformed into some kind of awful vibrant realisation. And all she could do was watch numbly as the smaller girl stumbled away from her, almost tripping over herself as she got to her feet.

“What?! You knew?” She asked in a shaky hiss. “You knew she was...back? That she was alive after what we...what I did to her and she was the one responsible for this...”

It was her turn then for words to fail her. The hands that had been flailing around a second ago crashed unceremoniously to her sides as she seemed to sink into herself, her chest sucking inward and Carmilla jerked a little with the fear that she might not even have the energy at this point to keep herself from slumping to the floor.

“Well of course she did, Miss Hollis. My daughter might be interminably lazy but dense she is not.”

Every head in the room turned to face the door as a tall, thin figure suddenly stepped inside; a smug lilting rictus of a grin pasted on delicate cheekbones suspended above a tailored pantsuit.

“Don’t be too disheartened though dear. A vague, ghastly suspicion is not necessarily guilt.”

Carmilla, chest full of jagged ice dragged her face away from the oh so horribly familiar silhouette framed in the doorway to stare pleadingly at her roommate; unpleasantly aware of what such an opening could allow the woman to do.

“Laura, no you’ve got this all wrong. I thought...maybe there was a chance but” She dragged herself onto her feet “...I wasn’t sure until now that she might be behind all this” Carmilla swallowed “...Please...You have to trust me.”

If Laura looked nauseous before she was positively ashen now, wide eyes flicking between the three figures populating the blindingly white room; her breath breaking out in shallow sickly wheezes.

“That’s my daughter. Always trying to put band aids on broken glass.”

“Shut up!” Yelled Carmilla as she stared at Laura, her mind scrambling to fix on a course of action despite the fact that everything was tangled and knotted up barely allowing for a single coherent thought to bleed through.

If the Dean was insulted by that she didn’t show it, outwardly choosing instead to tap a slim finger against her lip as she took a step forward. “You shouldn’t really blame her, Miss Hollis. Mircalla’s talents never lay in foresight. She never cared for sweeping ideals.”

Laura clenched her fists against her thighs in some kind of unconscious response to that but didn’t move giving the grinning interloper a chance to wander further into the room.

“You always did have a great deal of trouble dragging your eyes away from the details didn’t you Sweetheart?” The Dean glanced keenly at Laura’s pasty face before offering Carmilla a loving smirk, her hand drawn up towards the place where her heart should be.

She turned to face Laura then. “Do you know young lady that in her heyday I took Mircalla to the most exclusive art galleries? The Albertina in Vienna. The Cotrecini in Bucharest. The most elite and finest museums the world had to offer and yet, somehow, she always had difficulty with them. Oh,
she’d be fine for the first half hour or so wandering around making small talk with the patrons but then I would take her to see the one piece of art we had specifically gone there to view. And every time she’d stare at it in a most unladylike fashion. Benefactors and sponsors would come along and ask her thoughts on the piece and she didn’t even hear them. You see she became so lost in the details, in the minutiae at the edges of the paintings that if someone asked what the painting was about she didn’t even know. Didn’t even know what she was looking at. It was quite ridiculously... sweet.”

The dark haired vampire bared her teeth for a moment at those memories, recalling the humiliation and punishments she had endured at her Mother’s hands afterwards.

She was thrown then when Laura surged forward a few steps towards the Dean, her muscles taut to the point that she was shaking all over.

“But why?! What do you get out of any of this?” said Laura desperately.

The woman laughed at that; a sound that reminded the girl of bone scraping up against metal. “Why, chaos dear. Just good old fashioned chaos. What else?”

TBC...
CHAPTER 23:

“You made a deal? With her?!”

The girl in the hospital gown stared back at Carmilla, defences clearly up though she didn’t seem to have the energy for any kind of fight. “You don’t understand. It was the only way I could stay here. The only way to keep hold of...”

Her words petered out leaving Carmilla to scoff at her. “Of what? Your hiding place? From a world going to hell?”

“Always so dramatic Mircalla.”

The girl drooped against the wall. “To keep hold of the only place that’s felt like home.”

If Carmilla had a sharp retort to that the undiluted human misery looking back at her convinced her to hold it in. Just about. But her senses were still on overdrive, the antiseptic stench of the floors and the interminable buzzing of the lights above filling her nostrils to the point where she felt as if she were going to be sick. Or perhaps it was her mother’s presence. That always had the same physical effect on her even when she was...still alive.

“I don’t believe however that telling a pair of would be crusaders my plans was a part of that deal.”

The girl swallowed. “There was no clause that said I couldn’t.”

“Indeed and that’s not a mistake I intend to make again.” The Dean said delicately, features hard.

“I can still stay here though, right? You won’t... send me away like the others?”

She sounded so small; so broken that the question barely disturbed the air in the room but the Dean simply stared at her as if she were choosing her next words carefully.

Ever the Manipulator.

That familiar callousness kick-started something in Carmilla and her brunette hair flew round as she turned to her right. “Laura we have to leave. Now, before she gets her claws in any further.”

Then she stopped.

Because her tiny roommate was practically vibrating with all the nameless emotions flooding through
her; the way her eyes narrowed as she rounded on Carmilla though gave a pretty clear indication of which one was winning right now. Even the ashen girl nearby seemed to curl into herself at the waves of injured rage coming off the tiny girl.

“I don’t think we,” Laura said with a wounded tone, “have to do anything you say.”

A sardonic laugh sounded from a few metres away. “That’s right Miss Hollis, you make your stand.”

Laura’s head didn’t even turn. “That goes for all evil megalomaniacs in the room as well.”

The Dean’s features quickly turned to ice. “There’s no need to get snippy just because you have poor taste in girlfriends.”

“We’re not girlfriends!”

The reply came in unison, two voices spluttering it out though both seemed to suck in an injured breath when they realised what the other had said.

The porcelain woman licked her lips at that, “Well then...that makes all this a little easier doesn’t it.”

She gave no sign that she had even moved but it was at that moment that the doors burst open again and two bulky men in white tabards swarmed in, each advancing on Laura before grabbing onto a shoulder.

“What the...”

She struggled frantically against their hold, flexing and kicking at every opportunity, even managing to wrangle her left wrist free before a thick tattooed forearm wound around it again, dragging her limb painfully behind her back; her bones contorting so completely that she thought for a minute that she might pass out. She didn’t call out though. Not for Carmilla. Not for anyone.

Carmilla was up on her feet in an instant anyway. She was up in less time than it used to take to breathe; every inch of her intent on getting to Laura but for some reason when she tried to move her shoes they felt as if they were surgically attached to the floor tiles and no matter how hard she pulled at her muscles, they refused to advance even a millimetre from their current position.

She threw a vicious look at her Mother who was all amusement.

“Undo this right now...”

All she got in return was a raised eyebrow.

“Darling...aren’t temper tantrums a little embarrassing at your age? The clothes I can just about put up with but these conniption fits, I mean really? ”

With the smallest of nods the Dean motioned to the men holding Laura and they allowed her arm a little leverage as they started manhandling her towards the woman, the rounded toe box of her sneakers squealing as they dragged agonizingly against the floor. And then she was held still again, that pale and rigid older face right in front of her, eyes burning with cold delight. The blonde student couldn’t help it; she flinched as an equally pallid hand, all slender fingers and white nail-beds reached out before holding its position next to her cheek. Those same eyes rolling across her skin, reading it somehow. Adjudicating it.

“You’re not particularly beautiful, you know that don’t you?”
The tiny girl in front of her didn’t move but Carmilla caught the twitch of a muscle deep inside her jaw that suggested the insult had hit closer to home than she would have liked. That maybe it wasn’t the first time she’d heard those words and her veins crackled painfully as she urgently tried to push her ankles forwards.

“Oh I dare say it could be argued that you have a homely, unaffected kind of charm...what with those doe eyes and good intentions.” A cool fingertip brushed the bridge of Laura’s nose and the pupils facing her flared. “But doe eyes only get you so far in life. And while my daughter might appear to have been a little lax in her duties of late,” She snuck a glance to her left, “that doesn’t mean that she will ever be anything other than the glittering jewel she once was.”

Laura grimaced trying to turn her head away but unfortunately she was held static.

“Cynicism and misandry hide many things Miss Hollis but they cannot rob someone of their elegance. The sophistication I instilled in her all those years, it’s still there. Buried maybe but there nonetheless. And there is no world I have ever found where you would be worthy of someone like my Mircalla.”

A wave of something oily and nauseating settled in Laura’s gut.

“Laura, that...that’s not true.”

If the blonde heard Carmilla’s plea she gave no sign of it, other than taking the same set of shallow breaths she seemed to be relying on just to stay sane.

“You think I’m being harsh but Mothers know these things.”

A rictus grin appeared on the Dean’s face and Laura didn’t know why but that reptilian smile cut right through her stupor; her entire body going cold with the way the older woman offered that last comment. The tiny student’s muscles were practically juddering with the effort of not recoiling though, so perhaps that’s all it was. Because there’s no way this woman could ever know...

“I was expecting a small town simpleton you understand, when I called your Mother the first time. All righteous indignation and recipes for pecan pie. But I’m not ashamed to admit that, well, she surprised me. Overturned all of my preconceived notions you might say. Who knew she would turn out to be a woman after my own heart?”

Laura felt a crack in her chest. “You...you spoke to my Mom?”

As if on instinct she glanced over at Carmilla’s frozen form, at the sympathy etched into her face but then she seemed to remember the betrayal from a moment ago and her eyes slid to the floor instead. And all Carmilla wanted to do was scream at her. Tell her not to listen. To stop up her ears to those honeyed words her Mother dredged up so effortlessly from that dark pool inside her. That’s what she wanted to do. The problem was that the throbbing wound behind Laura’s exclamation still thumped at the top of her spine and the ease with which her supposed friend had turned from her, not even giving her the chance to explain herself ate further into the contusion. After all, she’d earned a little trust hadn’t she? A little faith after everything that had happened?

Carmilla’s resolve flickered for a moment but... that smell. And the buzzing, that goddamn buzzing. It was all she could do not to push her palms deep into her eye sockets. And so she simply said nothing.

“At first I was just going to threaten her with lawsuits of course, get her to rescind your enrolment. Withdraw your funding for tuition. Perhaps come storming up here to drag you home to some
backwater little town where you couldn’t entangle yourself in administration bureaucracy. I had a whole script worked out.” The Dean gave a click of the tongue. “But do you know before I could even delve into your misdemeanours here at Silas she just started volunteering stories about you. On your burgeoning crusades as a child, how you managed to ruin all the opportunities she’d set up for you; embarrassing her at every turn with your ripped school uniform and time outs, with all those inelegant speeches and soap-box diatribes.”

Laura felt her chin being lifted upwards by a single finger and tried to harden herself, she really did. Even though the slew of memories and hard slaps to the back of her legs smarted on her skin.

The Dean sighed. “Face it: you’re just not the daughter she wanted. Certainly not the one she deserved given all that she tried to do for you.” She caught a flash of moisture in the tiny girl’s eyes and her features lost some of their hardness. “I’m not telling you this to hurt you Miss Hollis. But I need you to understand how sharp the sting is when you give life to someone, create them from nothing and they decide to disregard all the hopes you have for them. All the wishes that you had to dig out from inside your ribcage just to give to them.”

Briefly she released Laura to look over at the trapped brunette with a strange and violent kind of affection then returned her attention to the girl who seemed to have gone slack in her captors grip.

The Dean took all of her in again. Every inch. And then slowly, almost tenderly leant forward to place the softest of kisses on her forehead, leaving her lips there against the skin.

The fact that Laura didn’t even shy away filling Carmilla with a new kind of alarm.

“The world lies to little girls, in ways you can’t even imagine. It tells you that a Mothers Love is infinite. Unconditional. It’s not. Every time you prick us, a strand of that love breaks. It is a discourteous act Miss Hollis. Ungrateful. You are ungrateful. I’ve no doubt you think it a vexing thing, an annoyance to disobey your Mother but you’re wrong. For us... each of these acts is a tearing unendurable convulsion that never goes away. A kind of epilepsy that no medication will fix.” She pulled back finally. “And the world is far too easy on those who write it off as a small act of rebellion.”

The Dean took a full step back and those slim fingers returned to grip Laura’s jaw, tilting her face slightly one way then the next, though her eyes almost appeared to moisten.

“That’s why I have to do this. I know you’ll understand.”

Lost as she was, Laura wanted to ask so many things. ‘Do what?’ being first and foremost amongst them but the words that should have been so easy to form simply echoed around the cavern inside her head, repeating over and over until they lost all meaning, smashing into each other as they went.

Discourtous.
Ungrateful.
Unendurable.

A burden. Always a burden.

Through her reverie, she felt those eyes on her again; keen and searching for something and she used all her energy to focus on the silhouette in front of her.

A silhouette that was shaking her head.

“I had plans set aside for you. Did you know that? It seems my hostile little friends however didn’t quite finish the job, did they? A few bruises aside that is. I hope you won’t judge me for saying that I
was quite put out when I was informed of their oversight. But now...given that your darling Mom has abjectly refused to have you home earlier than planned especially when I suggested there might be ‘mental health issues involved,’ I suppose those plans will have to change. After all I don’t take a Mother’s blessing to ‘take you in hand however you see fit,’ lightly.”

“Please stop, she has nothing to do with this.”

There was a tremor buried so deep in Carmilla’s defeated tone, when she finally managed to get the words out that Laura couldn’t be sure she’d even heard it but the Dean must have picked up on it because a hoot burst from the her willowy throat, and she clutched at her sleeve.

“Knowing how deeply inquisitorial Miss Hollis is, even if that were true it wouldn’t remain so for long.” She craned her neck to match gazes with her daughter. “And don’t think for one second that our little discussion was simply for your study buddy’s benefit...Darling.”

And there it was again. That urge to fight and rail surging up inside the tiny human in front of her underneath all the fog and fire. Perhaps it was the derisive tone the Dean used with Carmilla, her own daughter or the fact that Laura was so beyond sick of people talking about her right in front of her face. About her not to her. She really had no idea where it came from, but a burst of strength swam through her limbs momentarily and she used the opportunity to jerk her body hard to the right. It must have surprised one of her jailors because all of a sudden her right arm was free and she used it to lash out, leaving red deep scratch marks down the Dean’s shocked face before the woman reared backwards. Just as Laura tried to drop down releasing the other half of her body though, her ankles seemed to lock together of their own accord and completely immobilised by their refusal to move, she was immediately trussed up again by muscle and sinew, her laboured breathing causing spots to dance inside her vision.

If the misplaced concern in the Dean’s expressions had been disconcerting before, at least Laura no longer had to worry about that because all pretence had fallen away now. Hissing furiously, the woman grabbed a knot of Laura’s hair at the back of her head and wound it tight around her fist.

“Well if you wished to prove my point about breeding Miss Hollis, then...bravo,” she said with teeth bared.

She pulled hard yanking Laura’s head backwards causing her to cry out and then she snapped it forward again, relishing the way the small blonde screwed up her eyes in an effort to keep from crying.

Then she turned to her henchmen. “The new arrivals will be here soon. She may not be infected and I may not be able to send her home ranting and raving with the rest of them but I think a little bonding time with our latest guests might just teach Miss Hollis how to hold her tongue.”

With that she waved a hand and suddenly Laura was moving again. It was almost a relief after being held immobile for so long. Almost. Until her shoulder blades burned as she pulled against those holding her. Struggling against them. Fighting them. All to no avail. And Carmilla could only watch in terror as she was dragged from the room, their eyes connecting for the briefest second before Laura was gone and the doors swung drunkenly on their hinges.

The Dean smoothed down her collar for a moment and turned to face her daughter for the first time.

“Now Mircalla, where were we?”
This was so much fun to write- I've always been fascinated by Villains who are manipulators rather than violent thugs and the Dean fits perfectly into this mould.

So I had a blast trying to think how she would combat Laura's incessant invasions of her privacy while teaching Carm a lesson at the same time.

Anyways I'm rambling, hope you enjoy- I'm planning about 30 chapters in total so we're heading to the climax now. Hope you stick with me guys, as always leave feedback, suggestions, criticism on the message board if you feel that way inclined, I love input from y'all.

Stay happy good friends!
Give the people what they want and let it burn them down

Chapter Summary

Ok so angsty McAngst is here and I can only apologise for this one. I was listening to London Grammar when I wrote this so I blame them completely.

CHAPTER 24:

As the doors sung shut with a gleeful unoiled finality Carmilla couldn’t bear to see the self-satisfied smirk painted across her mothers face and instead pushed all of her rage and frustration into the muscles of her calves, inwardly screaming at the fibres and tendons coiled up inside to just rip themselves free of the force holding them hostage. She felt them twist and pull under her skinny jeans, one or two of the weaker fibres at her ankles even tearing with the effort she was putting them under but they still didn’t move even an inch; not even enough to tap her booted toe on the ground. They simply held in place like goddamn sentinels in her mothers army.

“Still the standard bearer for misplaced endeavours I see.”

Of course her Mother had noticed her struggles. Carmilla abjectly refused to look the Dean directly in the face even with the flush that those words caused. Instead she scorched the ground with her gaze, wishing all the flowing hate inside her could set the tiles ablaze to burn the whole damn place around them. At least that was until a set of cool knuckles pressed the underside of her jaw forcing it upwards.

“A ladies eye line resides at the level of those whose company she keeps.”

Clamping her eyes shut, she snarled. “Guess I must have lost my copy of the Aristocratic Handbook somewhere along the way. Apologies.”

“All this newfound respect for human life doesn’t seem to have affected your affinity for snide remarks I see.” The Dean clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and Carmilla wished for a moment that she might cut that devilish pink piece of muscle on her own elongated canines. The wish went ungranted of course.

Hers always did.

“Perhaps another lesson in the perils of civil disobedience will change your mind.”

Carmilla felt her chin being released from its grip and heard her mothers heel clack away from her on the tiled floor. She allowed herself a brief moment of relief but then a whimper sounded somewhere to her left and her eyes shot open without permission to watch as her mother moved in front of the only other occupant left in the room. An occupant that was cowering back against the metal frame of the bed behind them.

“We...we had a deal.”

The Dean stared coolly down at the shivering girl in her hospital gown.
“Yes we did. And I’d like to thank you dear.” She reached out a hand to place a cold hand on the breastbone protruding out from the thin material in front of her before allowing her hand to glide across her neck and shoulder, slip-sliding further and further down towards a thin veiny wrist. “For reminding me why I should never break my own rules.”

Clamping her fingers around that bird-like wristbone, she looked deep into the girl’s tawny eyes. Drawing them into her own with a strange kind of commanding force that wriggled around inside her prey’s gut and whispered to her of all the monstrous and wonderful things it could offer.

“Tell me; what is it that you’ve always wanted, dear?”

Don’t tell her, something inside mumbled but the spiralling darkness in that gaze swirled around her tongue loosening it, begging her to tell the truths hiding underneath. It felt like the time she’d been given Sodium Pentothal to ‘free up her conscious mind’ in the old days except this was so much stronger, so much more alluring. This wasn’t an invader in her system- it was an invitation.

“I...uh...” She hesitated though her eyes never broke away.

“Come now, tell me. We’re all friends here.”

“I...I want to beat it,” she whispered in some strange tone of defiance and embarrassment. “To cut it out of me.”

“Beat what?” Those words were liquid silver.

“The part inside me that’s broken.”

The Dean smiled affectionately at that as if it had been the answer she was expecting. “And after all that you’ve seen and read about chemical treatments and experimental neurosurgery, all the medications we’ve administered without billing your parents I might add, all the therapy sessions with others like yourself, do you still think that’s possible?”

The girl faltered again.

It is.

It is...It has to be.

“I...I...” She blinked for a moment with moisture on her eyelashes. “I...don’t...”

The older woman pushed back a little and caught her eye again, as if pushing for a more definitive answer.

Small shoulders slumped as those timeless pupils burned into hers.

“No I don’t.”

Oh God, it was the truth.

And you’ve said it out loud.

You’ve made it real.

“You know I could see you were far too intelligent to be stuck in this place the moment I met you.” The Dean leaned forward and surprising everyone pulled the human girl into a warm embrace, smoothing and stroking her hair with one thin hand; Carmilla only feeling nausea boil at the back of her throat. At the facsimile of real concern she’d seen so many times before.

The girl though didn’t seem to recognise the difference. Or chose not to as she simply clung to those consoling arms, gripping at the blazer jacket with a fervour that by all rights she really shouldn’t have
been able to conjure up in her weakened condition.

“But knowing that this darkness inside you isn’t treatable...aren’t you tired, aren’t you exhausted of fighting such an unstoppable force? Aren’t you weary of trying to be strong all the time?”

Jesus, it felt so good to be held.
That should have been kind of pathetic but she honestly didn’t care anymore. All that mattered were the words and arms around her.

“Yes.”

The answer was said so quietly that no human could ever have picked up on it. But both vampires did and the gentle smile on Carmilla’s mother’s face grew out of all proportion into something lascivious and horribly maternal at the same time.

“So if that is out of the question, what do you want now?”

The girl burrowed further into her arms and after a moment of what came close to indecision let out a weighty sigh that seemed to contain more sorrow than air.

“To sleep,” she said softly. “To just float away so no-one has to worry about me anymore”

“Oh baby girl. I can help you with that at least- would you like me to?” murmured the woman holding her.

Carmilla shook her head furiously, but the human teenager in her mother’s arms gave a submissive nod, catching a few flyaway hairs on the collar of the black suit jacket she was clinging to.

“Of course- anything for you,” said the Dean. Careful not to jerk the girl in her arms anymore than was necessary, she brushed a reassuring hand down her thin upper arm down towards her wrist again- as if ghosting the skin; testing it for weaknesses. Then turning that collection of oh so breakable wrist bones upwards she took a moment to kiss the girl lovingly on the forehead.

“Ready sweet thing?”

The girl whimpered in the affirmative though her glazed eyes still held to the vampire’s neck like a child.

It was only then that the Dean stretched out her fingers and ever so gently brought the sharp taloned nail on her index finger up to the light. She whispered a quiet hush now and proceeded to slide the nail deep into the slight web of skin, allowing a bubble of thick red blood to well up over the tip. A sickening gleam flickered in her eyes as she began to drag it upwards with an ease that made Carmilla feel queasy in every part of her stomach; a line of similar crimson beads following its path as she sliced her way halfway up the girl’s forearm. Then she pulled her crimson finger out and away from the mess only to watch the globules of dark blood swell and coalesce, bumping and merging into one another before dribbling a lazy path down towards the palm.

The Dean rubbed her shoulder lovingly, a nostalgic look on her face. “They used to do this when I was alive you know. Bloodletting to purge you of your bad humours. It seems to have gone out of fashion now but I always thought there was something in it.”

The comment didn’t seem to even register with its recipient as the teenager turned her head to stare in a dull kind of fascination at her own trickling wrist, holding it gingerly with her other hand. She
barely even noticed when that cradle was gently pulled away and pierced in the same manner, this cut sliding upwards even faster than before, the way a pair of scissors glides through fabric.

“No....”

It was the only word that was capable of crawling its way out of Carmilla’s horrified mouth as she watched her mother hold her friend close whispering into her ear, watching all the energy draining from her posture as she slumped into that treacherous clinch, wrists flopping limply next to her body, the muscles too torn to even hold them up anymore.

Her eyes slid closed, breathing shallow as the Dean pressed a lasting kiss to her temple.

“No tears little one. There is a kind of peace to be had from dying in the place you call home. Neither Mircalla nor myself were given that luxury but I offer it to you now, as the final addendum to our agreement.”

There was no response as the vampire fondly checked the pulse at her neck and rested her lips next to an unresponsive ear. “Take comfort.” She whispered. “Take comfort in the fact that your parents won’t have to fight their way through all that tiresome shock and grief, given that this wouldn’t be the first time you tried this little trick, would it young one? They’ll be able to carry on with their lives, already prepared for this eventuality. That can be your gift to them.”

Finally, ever so gingerly she pulled herself free, extricating herself, letting the limp body of the dying girl flow onto the floor around her feet. Looking down with a turbulent expression she straightened out her clothes, wiping a few drops of blood from the sleeve then turned her gaze to her daughter.

“How...how could you?” gasped Carmilla.

“I give people what they want darling. It’s my gift to this world,” she said disapprovingly.

The room reeled the more Carmilla watched the mesmerising pools of blood seep outwards in almost perfect circles on the floor. And the smell. God, it should have been awful. Clowing. Metallic and repulsive to her but the truth was that it didn’t smell sickly at all, it was thick and glorious in her nostrils regardless of its origins and it set her muscles quivering in an ancient animalistic kind of way.

If the girl’s skin was sallow before it was almost translucent now, her skin papery and threaded through with bluish arteries as she lay there listlessly.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

Carmilla fought to hold back the tidal wave of emotions coiling around her spine as she finally looked into her mother’s eyes almost scared of being pulled into the same whirlpool her friend had fallen prey to though she knew that it didn’t work on her. It never had.

“Come now- are those tears for a human who didn’t even have the decency to tell you her name?”

Carmilla breathed raggedly. “You could still call the medical team. She doesn’t have to die.”

“Of course she does. I will it therefore it’s granted. Besides the staff here more than have their hands full right now.”

A sly glint appeared in those ice cold pupils as they faced off. “I have things to attend to myself as you can imagine. So I’m going to leave you here for a while.” Her Mother sighed. “You can
interpret that as a punishment for your insolence or see it as a chance for you to make sure your little pet here doesn’t go into that vast void alone. The choice is yours.”

She smiled before sweeping past her frozen daughter.

“Life is all about choices Mircalla. Remember that.”

She was gone then leaving Carmilla standing stock still in the centre of the room unable to sag to the floor as she wanted. Unable to do anything but stare at the almost lifeless body a few feet away painting the sterile white tiles a bloody red.

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Meanwhile... a few feet away

Laura fought as best she could while they dragged her through the double doors along the sterile white corridor, twisting her body this way and that to try and rip herself free from their grip so that she could get back to Carmilla. The two orderlies however seemed immune to anything she threw at them, simply moving their hands to another spot under her arms and she wondered idly for a moment how many other patients in this place had tried exactly this without success.

It was a demoralising thought and dampened her spirits for a moment.

They took advantage of that and pulled her through the main corridor and into another side room, equipped in much the same way as the one she had just been in; beds lined up and strip lights buzzing non-stop. Cold and humourless.

Hauling her over to an empty bed, one quickly slipped his arms underneath the small of her spine and scooping her up plopped her down on the bed with ease, the other scooting around the bedframe to grab her arm and wind that horribly familiar strap around her wrist. It pinched for a moment, more than she remembered from last time as he pulled it tight before doing up the buckle and in the minute it had taken him to do it his counterpart had repeated the move on her other arm; prompting that recognizable sense of dread she’d felt before.

“Turkey’s all trussed up. Christmas must be coming.”

His stupid joke would have pissed her off any other time but half of her was just glad that they’d taken their hands off her and the other was fixated on the Dean’s words as they rushed through her head stealing all her attention. “She may not be infected and I may not be able to send her home ranting and raving with the rest of them but I think a little bonding time with our latest guests might just teach Miss Hollis how to hold her tongue.”

Should she be relieved that that was as close to definitive proof as she was going to get that she wasn’t infected? That she wasn’t going to lose all sense of herself and get shipped off home for her mother to leave her in some equally sterile facility telling acquaintances that she was on some kind of hotel and spa break? Maybe she was relieved and the adrenaline rushing through her was simply blunting the sensation. Or perhaps she couldn’t feel anything properly anymore, her nerve endings burned from firing too many times over the last few days. Was that a thing? That the human body like a lighter only had a certain number of catches in it and when all the fuel was burned off all you got was a dull spark, unable to do anything but sputter and go out.

Was that how Carm felt after all these years?

It wasn’t a mean thought but a sobering one and it reminded her of the frustrated apologetic look on her roommate’s face as she was hauled away from her. A stab of guilt snuck into her side and she
channelled that acid into her muscles, jerking herself backwards and forwards as fast and hard as was possible given the leather biting at her wrists and almost complete lack of mobility.

It did no good though and she wilted back onto the sheet with hairs coated in sweat stuck to the back of her neck. She was so goddamn tired of being the victim. Of having to be saved that she wanted to scream.

The tendrils of a plan however began to knit themselves together behind her eyes as she lay there forcing her mind to work through everything that had happened. If her muscles were of no use she still had one left unfettered, right?

The flowers. It had been bothering her since yesterday what had caused Eifion’s physical reaction to her touch when she had last been in this place and all she could think of were the flowers she had messed around with on campus; the pollen from them caught on her fingers and glued there by the dirty water of the lake. It had burned him like acid. Like poison. And if the Dean’s plan involved spreading more of the Plentyn’s Cael’s sickness on campus, escalating things then maybe whatever solution she had made from their blood could be counteracted by the flowers properties. It seemed worth a shot and as far as she remembered there was a plentiful supply of the plants where she had been.

So all she had to do was get out of this place, grab Carm, pick as many of them as they could find and find a way to dump them into the main supply of infective material.

That was all.

Jeez.

Still, an almost impossible plan was better than no plan at all.
The thought gave her a surge of strength and she flexed her arm muscles one more time.

“It’s no good struggling girlie. Those restraints have kept bigger things than you in check.”

Laura’s head turned as one of the orderlies came back in with a large syringe in his hand, filled with some kind of creamy liquid inside.

“Besides it’s time for your medicine Miss Hollis.”

She swallowed nervously as he approached. “Uh... you don’t have to sedate me again. I can’t get out, right? You said it yourself. And I’m sure there’s like some kind of limit on how much of that stuff you can have within a twenty four hour period you know? Side effects and everything. I’ll be good, ok? You don’t need to...”

“Oh great we’ve got ourselves a rambler,” he muttered, pushing the few hairs he called a comb over flat against this head as he approached. “But this ain’t no anaesthesia honey. This is our newest batch of linctus and before she called us in the Dean was very clear in her instructions regarding you.”

Leaning over her as she tried to move away, he wrapped one hand around her neck, pushing it to the side to give him access to the vein.

Those words came back again like a bullet.

“She may not be infected and I may not be able to send her home ranting and raving with the rest of them but I think a little bonding time with our latest guests might just teach Miss Hollis how to hold her tongue.”
Laura’s eyes went wide as he plunged the needle deep into the side of her neck and she screwed her eyes tight to keep from crying out at the sting of metal in her blood.

She’s not going to send me home but she didn’t say anything about infecting me herself and keeping me here.

He let go and Laura lay back breathing heavily as the room began to spin a little. Trying to organise her thoughts into some kind of system, the clarity she’d found a moment ago seemed like a distant memory. Where they had had purpose and direction before now they were more like scrabble tiles at the bottom of a silk bag right as she tried her best to remember what her plan had been.

She’d had one she was sure of it. Something real. Something feasible.

But right at this moment as she stared up at the ceiling she couldn’t for the life of her remember what it was.

TBC...
A dream is a wish your heart makes...so make sure your heart is pure

Chapter Summary

Memories are a painful thing

Chapter Notes

Hey guys and gals

Just wanted to quickly say to anyone still here- thanks so freaking much for sticking with this story. I know it's been rumbling on for what seems like years but the final crescendo is almost upon us, with some big action to come so hopefully it won't disappoint.

Also I was trying to describe a kind of fictional version of PTSD in this chapter so this is a trigger warning for anyone who is unlucky enough to suffer with that and also an apology if it doesn't do the condition justice- having never had it, I had to rely on my imagination. I'm really sorry if it doesn't ring true, I did my best but that's not always good enough I know.

Anyways, you all rock and I worship at your feet, dear readers. Just wanted you to know.

UNDER COVER OF DARKNESS
CHAPTER 25:

She had no concept of time. Or when the immobilisation spell might have worn off. After an hour (or maybe a century or two) of bone-sharp pain at her locked ankles and a shallow kind of half-life breathing from the floor to her right, everything around Carmilla began to flicker. Began to fade ever so slowly into a kind of featureless washed-out haze; one that was far too familiar for her to ignore. She tried to fight it as best she could, the rebel in her wouldn’t allow any other response …but it was only in the same naive way she had when the black fuzzy patches of mould began to grow on the wooden surfaces of the coffin walls around her; creeping and crawling- horribly alive and leech-like above her head and underneath her neck. The fungus infecting her thoughts until it seemed to slither through the air itself; seeping into the surface of the blood she lay in, coating everything inside her vision with black oil. Turning everything in her small world into a dark pit of yeast and endlessness.

She struggled to turn her head, to change at least something in her eyeline, a desperate attempt to delay the inevitable but Carmilla knew how this was going to play out before it happened. And all she could do was watch numbly as the metal brackets on the headboards across the room started to drip liquid silver and stare as the expanses of whitewash above her head warped inside her vision, elongating and narrowing into a funnel; cream coloured this time but just as insidious as the black she remembered.
She didn’t even try and move her feet anymore.

One or two therapists had come and gone of course when her pride had faltered after she’d gotten out and the nightmares at being trapped in black had become too much. None of them had helped though- dream journals and changing your sleep patterns were the suggestions of a child not a clinical remedy.

But on her way home from her sessions sometimes she’d wondered whether there was actually something physically wrong with her brain, a kind of tangible scar leftover on the fringes of a lobe somewhere from her turning that was responsible for these godawful fugue states. Other times when she was alone in her bed in the early hours she pondered if it was actually the exact opposite. If it was the decaying human side of her brain working overtime trying to protect itself from the onslaught of horrors and tamped down revulsion pricking at its folds.

Or maybe it was some combination of the two and she was finally slipping into that pool of madness the way she always assumed she would. Any other time the distinction might have seemed important. But right now she couldn’t seem to care which of those things was true. Not when the colours leached from the surfaces in front of her tired eyes- washing out the pool of thick black blood that had been creeping towards the toes of her boots, wiping away the crooked shadow of her own body hovering over her feet. It wasn’t long before the shapes of the room snuck away too, slithering after the colours like children in a game, followed closely behind by the metallic smell and hot sweaty discomfort inside her rouched socks.

Soon there was almost nothing in front of her at all. Just white fog. A pallid mist. Nothing to focus on. Nothing to cling to or grab.

Only one of her five senses left untouched.

Sound.

The most ancient of them all or so the philosophers said; a relic from a time when humans had been born blind and hairless, burrowing their way out of damp moss and superstition. A time when grunts had mutated into the beginning of words and stories had begun to be told at dusk- no record of them ever having been spoken except living memory and a rounded piece of flesh to get them there.

And now that’s all there was; just the heavy thrum of electric strip lights somewhere above her pulsing on the off beat and the slightest of breaths from someone that could have been the dying girl or Carmilla herself- it was almost impossible to tell in all that white.

And yet she was aware that there was something she was supposed to be doing. Something important Carmilla knew she should be focusing on kept nagging at the back of her mind as she listened to those sounds, a hazy piecemeal memory of rapeseed yellows and hazel browns nudging up against the fog in front of her before retreating again. Gone again in a flash.

Here she was again though; standing alone. Clinging onto the barest of noises from the room around her. Clutching at anything that proved beyond a doubt that the world outside hadn’t ended and she wasn’t lost in some inane purgatory where physical things just weren’t able to exist. That proved she was in fact still here.

But wait…what was that?

Carmilla inhaled sharply as the subtlest of melodies whispered in the air for a moment, a tune so achingly recognizable that it sent a shudder through her entire system.
There it was again— a soft refrain riding the mist.  
A swathe of violins and cello.

The shudder from a second ago was nothing to the jolt that rocked through her as she realised that the sound had somehow come from her own throat, humming its way out in just a few bars.

A sad strange prelude from the oldest parts of her memory.

Sucking in a breath Carmilla stopped herself, holding her lungs tight against her chest to make sure that the sound had in fact come from her and wasn’t some awful trick being played.

Silence and the low drone from above took its place.

It had been her.

Swallowing hard, she unfurled the soft tune over her tongue again, letting it seep out of her nose and throat into the static air; a gentle collision of notes that came from a place below her conscious memory; a place where she had been if nothing else, alive. Real and present in all the ways she should be.

Those vague and tiresome fears that spoke of forgotten responsibilities butted up against the piece of music as she hummed louder, nudging at the edges of her thoughts before receding again into the pale void; the expanse of numb space between her ears crowding them out almost immediately. But once again every-time she reached for any kind of clarification, the orchestra deep in her belly stamped their feet and began tuning their instruments, the jarring cacophony of discordant sounds only weaving themselves into the stirrings of that same tune again when she stopped trying to figure out what they meant.

“It’s an amateur offering, darling.”

Who had said that? Carmilla remembered nothing of them but their tone; it was frigid and unimpressed, the voice of someone who hadn’t even given the composition a chance to breathe. But for herself Carmilla had loved the symphony, of that she was sure of because she could remember the sensation of eagerly losing herself in the waves of sound soaring off the musicians in a pit feet below. All shadows and strings vibrating in the soles of her slippers.

The Theater an der Wien. That was where she had heard it. Where her mind had ridden the rise and fall of the violins, bumping up against the beautiful marble dome overhead before sighing and floating down into the velveteen seat in the upper circle.

“It seems they’ll let any classically trained hack into this place these days.”

She felt a frown bloom on her face as that same bitter faceless person had sniffed and dragged her from her seat down into the foyer before demanding the use of a waiting carriage. Recalled a howling sense of loss as those same slippers touched dirty cobblestone, as the melody faded out the further away they moved and how she had turned to face out the window rather than show her companion how bereft she was.

Choosing the path of least resistance once again.  
Her go-to hiding place.

Perhaps it was the white gloom in front of her creating illusions but she could have sworn the cool white and slender arms of the Theatre’s marble columns burned briefly in the spaces in her vision before fading once again into the whitewash void in front of her eyes. White Doric masterpieces and stone steps, a dirty street girl with straw hair and an eager smile passing by the open window next to...
her face. Too small to be healthy, too content merely to be in the presence of such a plain unindentured carriage as theirs. She wouldn’t last long in the world, the thought flitted through Carmilla’s mind as it had once before and then her hand seemed to jerk of its own accord as another girl stood there in her place within her mind’s eye.

A girl whose smile wasn’t anywhere as green or as brittle but held indignation and kindness behind it in equal measure and hung below dark blonde swathes of blonde hair that was undeniably soft to the touch.

She knew that girl.

Those feelings of inadequacy surfaced again inside her, pulling at her chest muscles as she struggled to remember the name that went with that face; the moniker that urged her to break out of her white prison. Out of the sarcophagus of helplessness and inaction she’d let herself sink into.

But the waves of white were so numbing and a smile could never be bright enough in itself to rip through the ice in a vampire’s veins could it?

Not even Laura Hollis had that kind of power to…

Carmilla felt the lock on her lungs unlatch at the name that had come to her just like that. Laura Hollis. A rush of frigid air siphoned itself back into her chest as she sagged to her knees, her palms hitting the tile with a stinging slap that should have been humiliating.

Carmilla’s throat crawled as she slumped there.

How could she have forgotten Laura, even for a second?! A howl threatened to burst its way out but she clawed at her own composure to keep it pressed inside as image upon image burned her retinas. An angry scowl forming as she booped her tiny roommate on the nose the first day they met. The silhouette of a figure accidentally brushing against the dirty white shower curtain they shared, that spine hunched as Laura desperately tried her best not to sing the godawful pop song reverberating around inside the girl’s brain. Nose scrunches as she dreamt, their intensity increasing the more vivid the dream was that she was caught up in.

Cinnamon and starfruit shampoo. Wide eyes counting the freckles smattered across a nose which appeared backwards and slightly askew in a warped discount store mirror. Warm toes digging into Carmilla’s own calf muscle as they stretched out all the sleep in them.

Warm everything when Laura was around. Even when she was afraid she seemed to burn from the inside out with righteous anger and curiosity.

And right now she was alone somewhere. Terrified out of her mind.

It was a wonder given everything the tiny human been through that the building around the two of them wasn’t covered in flames, the ceiling caving in.

Carmilla swallowed hard.

And in a strange way the intangible kaleidoscope of images flashing in front of her eyes seemed to galvanise the muscles in her legs. All those memories they’d shared since being assigned to the same dorm room appeared to run on silver and black celluloid behind her eyes and it was that movie reel along with the stark realisation that right now her Laura could be anywhere, with her mother doing God knew what to her, that caused Carmilla to let out that roar that had built up in her throat from minutes ago; all of her frustration and humiliation and hopelessness from years and years of torment and torture weaving together into an animalistic howl that reverberated around the room.
She howled until her throat felt like sandpaper and the blood screamed back into her toes. And then she gagged, her whole body trying to expel the rage, purge itself of it.

Not that there was anything in her stomach to release.

Breathing painfully, she took a minute to collect and pull all the ragged strands of herself back together as the floor tiles swam back into her vision, the white murk beginning to recede. But she only allowed herself sixty seconds reprieve because the new surge in her blood flow made her head spin with the need to be moving, to make this nightmare designed by her mother end. Permanently.

Carmilla was bursting out through the doors with a single purpose in mind before she even knew she was doing it— that purpose being getting Laura the Hell out of there while at the same time repaying her dear Mama for all the pain and suffering the pair of them had been forced to endure.

Because maybe the woman did know all the ways to slide into the cracks in her heart but Carmilla also knew some of her adversary's weaknesses. Her pride. Her conviction that she was untouchable to those that she hurt.

And maybe...maybe that might just be enough to bring her down one final time.

TBC...
Chapter Summary

Laura's got some Macgyvering to do.

Chapter Notes

A/N: You all thought I’d forgotten about this story, right? Eep, well not quite. Been out of the country for the last month volunteering in Kathmandu but now that I’m back this mother is top of my list to finish. So for anyone still reading, the end is super nigh and thanks so much for not giving up on me! Enjoy….

Something wasn’t right. Things in Laura’s vision faded in and out for a moment but that might have been due to the fact that her eyelids seemed to be closing of their own accord, drooping and making the neatly made beds opposite sag. Fighting the urge to fall back into the pit of tiredness stretching out underneath her, Laura shook her head quickly to try and disperse at least a little of that weariness before attempting to sit up.

That was a bad idea. She slumped back down taking the opportunity to gather her strength then pulled herself up onto her elbows again and took a look around.

It seemed that six new occupants had been shipped in while she was floating in and out of consciousness. The series of blank, wide faces staring impassively at the wall behind her head made Laura’s skin crawl with a new kind of anxiety that ribboned through her like a threadworm. It had been awful before seeing the infected. Waking up in that other ward with no ideas of how she got there. But now with her groggy head and the pain emanating from the injection site on her neck this whole nightmare seemed so much more…personal; especially with the way her fingers seemed slower to respond than normal, scratching at their bonds way more idly than she wanted them to.

She had a plan though. That was something, right? Well, parts of it at least. Lilac flowers.

Sitting up fully, Laura steeled herself and peered at the students across from her.

“Um, hey I don’t suppose you could give me a hand with this…”

It was such a simple thing but the word she was searching for eluded her for a moment as Laura stared at the worn leather wrapped around her wrists and a tremor of panic ran underneath her ribcage.

“This uh…strappy thing?”

A slender necked silver haired girl stared back then opened her mouth into a questioning O.
“Strapping young lads?” she said slowly.

“Oh uh, no thanks I’m good.” Laura paused and wrinkled up her nose. “Or…if you’re asking me for some… then I…I don’t have any on me right now. Sorry.”

Holding up her right wrist, she shook it. “I need to get it off. This Strap?”

The girl tilted her head. “Strapped for cash?”

Ok this clearly wasn’t working.

Laura’s mind fogged over for a moment as she struggled to work out what to do.

“I need to not be tied up. You know?”

“Red rooms.” Whispered another stockier girl hunched up close to the window with a secretive kind of smile and Laura groaned, pressing her lips together to keep the sound from escaping.

She clearly wasn’t going to get much help from right now.

Instead she wriggled back down into the bed scooting towards the end as much as she could and then started twisting her wrists, to test the straps for any give. Any leverage. There wasn’t much to be had though and the rough hide scraped her skin raw as she wrestled this way and that, mussing up her hair in the process as it snagged on her pillow.

“Wriggly wriggly worm,” called out silver hair.

“Yep thanks for that,” she muttered as she continued to bend her forearms this way and that but the ties held firm, the metal buckles gouging at the thin skin around her veins tracking red lines across them.

She was just about to huff and give up when she felt a set of cool fingers pressing against her own and she unscrewed her eyes to find a messy haired chubby boy standing next to her bed, peering down with placid eyes.

His fingers began tapping out an almost familiar rhythm on hers.

“No hurt,” he said blinking and she gave him a little smile in return at the brief flicker of compassion in his eyes.

“I’m not trying to hurt myself. These are hurting me.”

She rattled her constraints again. “If you take them off, they won’t hurt anymore?”

She held her breath as his pupils darted to the pelt cuffs then back to hers.

“No more hurt?”

Some kind of internal conflict played across his flat face as she tried to implore him to understand what she was saying with her eyes. At first he didn’t move but then ever so slowly, mercifully his plump fingers left hers and began slowly undoing the buckle on her right hand.

She could have kissed him right then and there but as soon as her hand was free and she leapt onto her knees on the bed to undo the other binding he flew backwards with a start.

Cursing her recklessness, once both her hands were free, Laura carefully put her hands up in surrender.

“Hey it’s ok.” She whispered, “I’m not going to touch you if you don’t want.” Climbing off the bed, planting her feet a little unsteadily on the floor, she offered another smile, a full one this time. “Thank you.”
His mouth quirked up just the tiniest bit, almost imperceptible to anyone else.

“Hippocrates,” he said with a tinge to his words that sounded almost like pride.

That threw her for a moment. She struggled to take in the meaning of his words, of what sounded like nothing more than another piece of complete nonsense, her mind turning the phrase over as best it could in its sluggish state though it felt like she was wading through tar. She had heard that name before, she was sure of it but where could it have…

Then it hit her. It was in another room much like this one, a hospital ward maybe when someone…someone she loved…had caught pneumonia. That was it. She remembered spending evenings begging to be allowed to visit the person, just to make sure that they were ok. She had snuck out of school one day after gym class and made her own way to Avondale Memorial Hospital, and a friendly Indian Doctor at the nurse’s station had taken her to the room himself and shown her a piece of paper with what looked like two intertwined snakes embossed on it. She remembered the cadence of his voice almost perfectly. ‘That is the symbol of Hippocrates, little one.’ He had a wonderfully rich way of speaking. ‘Whenever you see this symbol, it means you’re with people who will keep you safe and protect you from harm. So you don’t need to worry, your father is in good hands.’ Her father! That’s who had been sick. Of course. Who else would it be? The Doctor had then told her about the oath he had taken in the Greek’s name. And how all Doctor’s stuck to their promise for the rest of their lives.

Disentangling herself from the memory, Laura let her gaze fall to the boy’s bleeding wrists, the skin scored open near the palm where he must have pulled himself free of his own restraints and grimaced.

“You’re a med graduate huh?”

He said nothing.

“Doesn’t the oath apply to hurting yourself?” she said quietly. He tilted it to the right a little then queasily shook his head and she had to resist the urge to throw her arms around the boy. Instead she chose to lower her hands down to her sides.

“Thank you for keeping your word. Even in here.”

His chocolate brown eyes seemed to swim with something liquid and turbulent for a moment before he simply turned away and padded back over to his own bed, crawling on top and pulling his knees up to his chest.

Laura though, couldn’t afford to waste any more time trying to figure out the awful backstory of the others in this room, as much as she wanted to. A series of jumbled thoughts trammelled through her brain. She had to find Carmilla- that was number one. She had to apologise to her for the harsh words she had used earlier. Really apologise. She couldn’t quite bring to mind what it was she had said; the spiteful barbs that had fallen out of her mouth were floating just out of reach of her memory but the pool of shame in her stomach was real enough, burbling with embarrassment and the need to just wrap her arms around her roommate. Take away the look of hurt that had stared back at her
before she’d been dragged out of that room.

She was going to make it right. Convince her that she hadn’t meant those things…whatever those things were. And after they fixed this mess she was going to prove to her every day in every way that she could that she was so unendingly sorry. Tidy up their room. Pull all the black hair from the shower drain without a fuss. Give her cookies to have with her mug of warm blood. Hell, even buy her flowers. Purple ones with a black stamen and dots on the leaves. She’d like those.

The image of the flower she desperately wanted to buy Carmilla was so vivid in her mind that it almost felt as if she had seen it before. Almost felt as if it was the most important thing of all because…because it would engage all of her senses, give her something to make her forget this nightmare. Make Carm feel better. Then Laura would feel better. Everyone in the room with her would.

The weirdness of the thought caught her off guard.
That didn’t make any sense. Did it?
Sucking in a breath, Laura grabbed her head. What was she babbling about?
A flower, no matter how pretty wasn’t going to solve this.
What the hell was she saying?

She sagged against the metal end of the bed, the room spinning a little as Laura tried to trace that thought back to its origin but the impish thing giggled at her before scuttling off into the recesses of her mind.

She almost felt like screaming right then.

Not that that would help either. Falling apart wasn’t getting anything done and neither was staying here trying to unravel her own insanity. All she seemed to be coming up with were suggestions of things to do on how to make matters worse.
Jesus.

Straightening up Laura pushed her hair out of her face and stared at the door; the real obstacle. She didn’t need to try the handle to know it was locked, although why they felt the need to do that when everyone was supposedly strapped in was unsettling.

Slowing down her breathing she glanced around the room for inspiration.
Nothing came.
Nothing except that burning rush of unease that had been tiptoeing through her endocrine system since this whole thing had started.

She spun around to the other five occupants staring blandly amongst themselves, legs thrust up to their chins for the most part.

“Uh, does anyone have any ideas on how to get out of here?”

No-one replied or even turned their head to look at her. Their lack of a response pricked at that river of disquiet roiling its way through her but she ignored it. It wasn’t their fault after all. They were just pawns in this game of chess.

Like you.
In that order,

Jeez Hollis, snap out of it.
Laura was just about to try and push through and say something again to try and get the attention of the others when a horrible buzzing sound erupted over their heads followed by a burst of static.

What now? She thought anxiously.

A smooth female voice slipped out from a speaker.

“Apologies everybody. I hope I didn’t scare you, this PA system is not exactly state of the art.”

The Dean.

Though it was simply a voice and nothing more, Laura still recoiled.

“I do hate to interrupt your rest, but as head of the administration team I wanted to make sure that as my special guests in this facility you understand that I am personally taking responsibility for your welfare here.”

Silence crowded in for a moment.

“You have nothing to fear little ones. You’re safe here. All we care about is taking care of you and getting you back home to your families and communities as soon as we possibly can.”

Laura’s eyes practically rolled into the lower part of her skull at the honeyed tone purring over the tannoy and a wave of dizziness rolled over her, forcing her to grab the metal bed rail to stay on her feet.

“We here at Silas are charged with your care, and your health has always been our number one priority.”

A few of the other patients tilted their heads upwards and nodded benignly at that. Their vacant acceptance of that pinched at her skin and she frowned in response.

“You can’t listen to her. She’s lying to you.”

No-one gave Laura a second glance and her face flushed beetroot red.

“You need to help us though. Responsibility is part of rehabilitation. The medications and checks we provide will help of course but the most important thing you need to get better is community. To be close to others like you, to be around people who understand what you’re going through.”

Laura pffted.

As if knew, the tannoy squealed for a moment as if someone had pressed the button down with their nail. “And that brings me to my next point.” That voice sweetened a little. “If you find there is anyone with you that doesn’t seem like they’re part of the group you need to make them feel welcome. You need to show them how much they mean to you. To all of us.”

The Dean let that sink in for a moment.

“…Your health depends on your kindness.”

A few pairs of eyes suddenly descended from the tiles above and crept over to where Laura was still resting against the bed; pupils that were not quite as blank as before. They were curious now. Not warm exactly but questioning and alert; at least as alert as they could be lost in those flattened out features. She felt the urge to touch her own face as she looked away, their attention beginning to feel a little unwelcome all of a sudden. The fragile sense of solidarity she had thought existed between
her and the others feeling more like a shackle than it had before.

“You need to help us help you, my darlings. Won’t you do that?”

What was she up to?

Something deep inside Laura’s dulled brain warned her that the Dean was playing tricks again but she couldn’t quite work out what they were. Why on earth would she want them to get along now, it wasn’t as if she actually cared about any of their welfare?

As if something had clicked into place for her the silver haired girl took a sudden step forward and Laura took one back as her own instincts seemed to kick in. They stared at each other, a hesitant smile on Laura’s face.

“You don’t have to listen to her, you know she isn’t helping you.”

The girl stared at her then slowly held her arms out.

Laura winced. “Uh, don’t get me wrong, you seem like a nice girl but I don’t think we’re at the hugging stage quite yet you know.”

“Kindness.”

Laura stole another few inches as the chubby boy and the two other girls turned to face her. “Yeah the thing about that is, too much of it can kill you, so…”

Her own words triggered something in Laura’s brain and her mouth fell open. Proximity.

Eifion had said that being in close quarters with infected people made their condition worse. She had figured that’s why the beds had been hung up, the patients strapped in in the other ward, so they couldn’t move away from each other but that realisation seemed as if it had come a million years ago. When there weren’t deposits of something viscous underneath her ears, slowing the thoughts down to a trickle. But this was a whole other level of messed up.

You need to make them feel welcome. You need to show them how much they mean to you…

Was this the Dean’s version of torture- using people’s compassion as a weapon? Taking a group of students who were in a vulnerable state, convincing them to keep her close and all the while their nearness fed the thing inside of her.

She felt sick. Woozy and sick and Laura skittered backwards as the group seemed to clam together in front of her eyes, crawling up from their beds to glom together. She wanted to hate them, her skin begging her to grab something, anything to use as a weapon but she couldn’t do it. It wasn’t their fault. They didn’t know what they were doing.

They advanced together, piercing her with a shared gaze.

She jerked her arms up. “No no you need to stay away.”

The chubby boy didn’t seem to register her pleas and the look of hopeful concern etched into his face made her feel like some kind of monster as he moved.
“Seriously, just stay where you are.”

“We help.”

“This won’t help any of us. It’ll make us worse. You don’t understand.”

He smiled a little as if that were absurd and she shook her head, her body shivering underneath her as she tried to keep calm.

“She was the one who did this to you,” Laura hesitantly said. “Don’t you remember? What things were like before any of this happened? When everything wasn’t blank and…fuzzy?”

“One of us,” said the silver haired girl sympathetically nodding her head towards Laura. It was an eerie thing to witness when the intention behind it was so completely insidious.

“I…am. But…you don’t see what she’s doing. What’ll happen if you get any closer.”

As they surged forward Laura felt the brush of their hands on her skin and it crawled under their touch. It reminded her too much of a featherlight touch at her ankle that she couldn’t quite place. Her whole body quivered as she pushed the mass of them away, batting at the hands and wrists that tried to cling to her.

She shot backwards towards the door, head whipping around for anywhere to run to. And coming up painfully short. Goddamnit, there was nothing. Just white walls and metal beds. An unplugged monitor in the corner of the room caught her attention for a moment but it was way too high up to reach even standing on the bed and what was she going to do with it if she managed to get hold of the thing? Throw it out the window and scream her lungs out? Anyone who might hear her would just think she was another psych patient having some kind of breakdown.

Was it terrible that there was something tempting in the idea nonetheless. In doing something, anything instead of waiting around for Carmilla to save her yet again?

The name blazed through her bloodstream focusing her thoughts.

And so, Laura scanned the walls again, scrutinizing them from skirting board upwards. They were full of tubing, sockets and such, half of them labelled with abbreviations that mean absolutely nothing to her.

A disembodied hand skirted her hip and she elbowed it away hard, adding a sorry internally to herself.

“In this together.”

The boy’s plaintive voice pleaded with her and she had to slam her hands against her ears to block it out. She didn’t even have the energy to formulate a reply when a strange rod-shaped fitting came into eyeline; a round white port with some kind of cylindrical glass test tube sticking out of it. Squinting hard from her almost kneeling position, she saw the symbol O2 inscribed on the edge and a wild idea formed in her brain as she stared at the apparatus.

Oxygen.
That was it.
Her chance.

For a flicker of a heartbeat she smiled. That was until the realisation came that the others were right in her way and she had to get through them before she could do anything.
Of course. One step forward.

A little cynicism wasn’t going to stop her now though, that was for damn sure. Laura fortified herself for a moment, trying to bring her breathing down to some kind of vaguely normal human level, if that was even possible. Then she placed her hands flat against the wall and pushed off, sprinting forwards into the tangle of chest and arms in front of her. They threatened to surround her for a second, fingers digging into her hair and the muscles of her back as they tried to grab hold but she shouldered them away angrily, pushing past with every ounce of energy left in her.

And then she was free.

In one deft moment she careened into the far wall next to the oxygen port and twisting a lever, heard the hiss of the gas escaping as it siphoned its way into the glass regulator, the small red ball bobbing upwards as it filled up. Ten millilitres.

Twenty.

Fifty.

All the way up to a hundred before she quickly shut it off again.

Unscrewing the glass tube from the wall a little clumsily she pressed the pad of her thumb against the end to keep the gas from escaping and turned back around. Her wonderful roommates had coalesced again near to the door as if somehow they had figured out her intention and her heart sank for the second time, realising that she couldn’t implement her plan with them so close to her target.

Laura dropped the hand with the glass in it down to her hip in defeat, though she kept her thumb steady.

“Hey guys?”

All those pairs of bovine eyes swung in her direction.

“I guess I’m ready for that group hug now… if you’re still up for it.”

Holding out her one free arm in welcome, she motioned for them to come forwards, pulse racing in her chest. When they began to herd together she forced herself to stay still. To wait for the right moment.

“Come on, bring it in everyone…”

It seemed like an age before it came. With each tottering, unsure step the other students filled up her eyeline until she couldn’t even see the door anymore. But it had to be there. That’s what she tried to convince herself of as she waited.

Waited and waited. Until Laura could feel their warm, sour breath on her face and she wondered when the last time was that they had the chance to brush their teeth.

And then she punctured the muggy thought and moved- dodging to the right, her head spinning as she feinted as best she could without falling over, skidding past the group before rounding back on herself towards the door.

She didn’t even spare a glance backwards as she forced the glass tube vertically into the metal door handle leaving the rubber edged opening sitting an inch from the keyhole and lock. It didn’t fit exactly but it would have to do. Then taking a breath she pulled her thumb away.

The hiss of gas was audible but she didn’t have any time to waste. Running over to her bed, she unwound the strap and buckle from the frame then scrambled back to the door. Turning her face away as best she could, hoping that the oxygen wasn’t leaking out too fast for this to work, she
swung the buckle over her head, letting it slap down onto the metal door handle with as much force as she could manage.

There was a loud clang but nothing else.

She hesitated then tried again.
It had the same result.
Noise but no spark.

Oh God.

The gas was going to run out soon, she was sure of it.
So, she gambled.
Pulling her arm back Laura changed the trajectory and using everything inside swung the strap in a roundhouse movement bringing it crashing down through the glass cylinder smashing it before the centre of the buckle hit the handle in a plume of tiny shards.

Truth be told she wasn’t really sure if the glass breaking would amplify or dampen the effect she was going for. Physics had never really been her forte but just then a small array of sparks came to life as metal hit metal and a small explosion cracked against the plane of the door, the whoosh of combusting air singeing Laura’s arm before she pulled it away.

It stung like hell and she cradled it gingerly before pulling her shirt down and using it to cover her hand as she waited for the small flume of flame to blow itself out and tried the blackened door.

The handle clunked loosely in its fitting but the damage wrought by her home-made bomb seemed to have displaced the tumblers inside the lock enough that she could heave the thing open, dragging it inwards by its broken limb.

She was free.
She’d done it.

The relief inside her chest burned almost as fiercely as her arm. Though everything inside warned her not to, she couldn’t help stealing a glance back at the puzzled faces inside the room and blinked at them apologetically.

“I’ll come back for you ok? All of you.”

That wasn’t a lie. There was no way she was going to leave any of them here to whatever awful fate the Dean had planned for them but she had some things to deal with first. Big bad things. Things that it was her responsibility to fix.

And so, she turned away from their open, trusting faces, unable to take looking at them anymore. And made her way quickly out of the door she had just ruined.

The corridor seemed longer than she remembered as she jogged tremblingly up the middle of it but it occurred to her that that might be an optical illusion. The way the striplights flicked at the upper edges of her vision more than supported the idea.

She was just turning the corner onto another identical passageway, her sense of elation beginning to gutter itself when something dark and wholly solid crashed right into her from behind.

TBC…
The gals are finally back together.
Yay...you might think.
But should you...

Something small and trembling smacked into Carmilla’s right side knocking her squarely out of her panicked thoughts; it was only her vampire reflexes that stopped the two people from toppling to the floor in an ungainly pile.

Anger surging through her, exacerbated by the hot surge of the blood returning to her limbs the brunette started to bare her fangs when she looked down and suddenly realised that the person caught in her strong arms was familiar. More familiar than she would ever have thought possible; all that honey blonde hair limp as it was and those piercing eyes behind dark circles.

It can’t be…

With strong arms around her waist Laura peered upwards, adrenaline guttering at the edges of her lungs. Comprehension hit her at exactly the same time as she saw who it was that was holding her in place.

Her heart leapt at the sight of raven hair and dark eyes and before she had even conjured the thought she launched herself against Carmilla’s chest, burying her face in those almost black curling locks that blocked out all light; her throat choked up with all the things she wanted so desperately to say.

“Laura,” Carmilla whispered reverently.
Pulling her tighter against her.

Laura didn’t respond lost as she was in the sounds and smells of Carmilla’s lean body. But then, ever so slowly her form seemed to move of its own accord and her lips ever so slightly pressed into the soft flesh of her roommate’s neck, repeating something inaudibly.

The same thing again and again.

Carmilla tilted her head down to try and work out what that might be and her lungs stiffened when she finally recognised the words pouring from her roommate’s lips.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. Sorrysorrysorry.”

They sounded so small and wretched, she had to squeeze her eyes shut
Nonetheless, Carmilla hugged her fiercely in response.

“You don’t need to apologise, Laura.”

Whether or not that was true, she wasn’t sure. The sting of the smaller girl’s inability to stop herself from lashing out at her during stressful situations wasn’t gone from her skin but the heartbroken human shivering inside her arms was truth enough for the words to fall out of her mouth.
Laura seemed to hear that because she pulled back an inch but didn’t uncover her face. Instead she sniffed quietly.

“I’m going to get you roses. We need to go to the flower shop, like right now and I’ll get the biggest bunch of roses they have…lavender ones to put in a vase,…we might need to buy a vase too because I don’t think we have one in the dorm but you’ll have vases and roses so purple you won’t be able to stand to look at them and then…then…things will…”

Two warm palms encompassed her face, cutting off her wild rambling. “Laura stop.”

“They have to be purple,” she whispered urgently, eyes wide. “Purple and black. Royal colours. Because…because you were a countess and that makes you royalty. Kind of.”

Carmilla dragged her thumbs gently down both cheeks, urging Laura to stop hiding and look at her.

“Thanks cutie but I’m not the kind of girl you buy flowers for.”

From what she could see of the corner of one eye Laura started to tear up at that and Carmilla wished she’d never said anything.

“But…but we have to get them…they’ll fix everything. It’s what they were made for.”

Even during her relief, the vehemence behind that statement gave Carmilla pause. She watched carefully as Laura pulled back, pupils finally brave enough to latch onto hers; searching them, as if she were trying to convey something she couldn’t quite figure out how to put into words. It was only then that she noticed something else too; the changes that had been wrought on Laura’s beautiful face.

The planes of it were flatter than she remembered, the smattering of freckles across her nose invisible against pale skin as if they had never existed in the first place. And it was whiter than it should have been. Familiar and yet…altered in a series of small indefinite ways.

“Laura…” Her voice petered out as her thumbs hesitated, not sure whether she might be hurting the skin that seemed to be pulled tighter than it should have been.

“What’s wrong?” The smaller student blinked at her unsure how to react to the hesitance. “It’s me. …You recognise me, right?”

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Carmilla wrapped her up in another ferocious hug, doing her very best to convince herself that it had nothing to do with the fact that she couldn’t bear to look at that strange version of the face that she knew so well. She wasn’t that cruel, that weak.

Right?

Laura shifted uncomfortably in her arms and she cursed herself as she lessened the pressure ever so slightly.

“Sorry cupcake. I’m just glad to see you, that’s all.”

“But not enough to let me buy you flowers?” came the mumble.

There was that oddly insistent tone in Laura’s voice again and it pricked at something at the base of Carmilla’s mind even in the midst of her worries. Unwrapping her arms enough so that she could rest her hands one on each shoulder, she studied the blonde’s puppy dog eyes, hardening herself to their charms as she tried to work out what exactly Laura was asking for.
“Flowers, huh?”

“Yeah!” Laura said hurriedly. “Purple ones with…with pretty stamens and petals and stuff. I’d look after them, you wouldn’t have to do anything. We could put them on the windowsill in our room so they get a little light...”

Carmilla’s mind processed the level of animation practically vibrating in the tiny girl in front of her. For some reason, despite everything else going on she had fixated on the idea and Laura Hollis, for all her faults never did anything without good reason. So, it had to mean something.

Something she was missing.

“Can we do that? Go get the purple flowers?” asked Laura imploringly.

It was only when confused and frustrated, Carmilla slid her hand down smooth skin to tangle in between Laura’s fingers and she felt the touch of warm palms that she remembered exactly what those palms had done. To Eifion. To his skin. What damage they had wrought.

Because of flowers. Purple flowers- Nightshade from the woods. Or more specifically, the pollen from them stuck to Laura’s skin.

And she suddenly understood why her roommate had become so preoccupied with the idea, even if she had twisted and corkscrewed the thing until it became something almost completely unrecognisable. She’d been searching for ways out of this nightmare the whole time. While the Dean did…God Knows what to her. She was still fighting.

Carmilla brought their interlocked hands up to her mouth as she smiled admiringly at her tiny human. A flush of red rose instantly to Laura’s face making it seem almost healthy as she felt those penetrating eyes take her in.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Carmilla’s smile grew wider at the smaller girl’s discomfort. The flustered, irritated look was so unbelievably Laura that just for a moment she could pretend that there was nothing wrong with her, that she was as had always been. But then her gaze skirted the lines of her face again and caught the glaze in her eyes and the smile fell away.

Because Laura’s plan was a good one. But it wasn’t going to work.

And apparently, she was the one who was going to have to tell her that.

Ruefully, Carmilla blew out a breath. “I like your thinking cupcake, the problem is that my mother’s the consummate chess player and she knows every inch of the board before she even thinks about making her first move.”

A fleeting confusion swept across Laura’s face.

Carmilla squeezed her fingers lightly. “The good news is that arrogance like that also comes with weaknesses. Which means this isn’t hopeless.”

Double checking just to make sure she wasn’t wrong, she sucked air in through he nostrils and cringed as the faint tinge of burnt skin and petals tickled the insides of her nose. Nope. She wasn’t wrong.

She turned back. “It seems that Mother has been busy taking care of the rest of Caerwyn’s rebel alliance while we were otherwise engaged.”
She didn’t bother explaining that underneath the scorched floral notes in the air the second stench, even fainter but present nonetheless; that of seared flesh was coming from multiple places. For them to get away with their schemes on campus for at least two weeks, there couldn’t have been more than a handful of Plentyn Cael orchestrating what they thought was some kind of revenge kick but judging by the ease with which her Mother had burned Caerwyn out of existence from within the walls of her ivory tower no less, there was never much chance the others would escape her attentions.

She looked down and found a pair of wide mirthful eyes staring up at her.

“What?” she said suspiciously.

Laura half smiled, “You just made a Star Wars reference.”

“I did not...I was using a well-known cinematic trope to illustrate a point.”

“Yeah a big old nerd trope,” muttered the dark blonde, her smile growing a little. Again it reminded Carmilla of the old Laura, that mischievous antagonistic gleam in her eye that she knew so well and the thought simultaneously bolstered and discouraged her.

They didn’t have time for sentiment though. Not when her Mother was out there.

“So, grabbing one of the little squealers and extracting their blood is out of the question since we’d need a dustpan to pick them up at this point.”

She said that more to herself than anyone else. “And by the smell of it all the foxgloves on campus have gone up in smoke so that’s out too. Sorry, cutie. It was a good idea though.”

Laura’s whole body seemed to deflate. “Do you think there might be any off campus? Outside the Deans reach?”

Carmilla shook her head. “Mother had the ones in the wood imported and planted back when Silas was being landscaped. They don’t grow naturally in Austria so they were bought from a wholesaler in Oeiras, Portugal. Mother liked the colours and it gave her a thrill to think the odd idiot student might try eating or smoking them and make them sick for a week.” She shook her head. “I guess they thrived here because they like disturbed ground to feed on.”

Neither of them needed to say out loud that disturbed ground was a pretty apt description for the university around them.

“Your mom really doesn’t like split ends, huh?”

Carmilla’s attention snapped to Laura whose face and chest had flushed a neat red colour again.

“Loose ends...I meant ...loose ends,” she stammered.

If Carmilla noticed the tremor in Laura’s free hand as she slapped it against her hip, she said nothing, choosing instead to draw the smaller girl an inch closer to her though she had to turn her face away for a moment so as not to give away her concern.

“So, there’s no way to make an antidote.”

“No obvious way to make an antidote.” Carmilla let out a breath through her nose, if nothing else just to get the stale smell of ash out of her nostrils. “But if she’s only on the second wave Mother must have a pretty large stash of that solution she’s infecting people with. She’s in this for the long
Laura shuddered imperceptibly and Carmilla’s arm snaked around her shoulder in response. Feeling her heartbeat through the space next to her spine.

“Even with her powers and the Alchemy club’s influence, it would still have to be kept under strict control conditions to make sure the effects were uniform with each batch of students—temperature controls and acid levels. Constant scientific monitoring. And she wouldn’t store it somewhere she couldn’t protect it where idiot students could stumble in.”

At that Laura slowly realised what she was implying. “You think it’s here somewhere?”

A hmmm was the response to that. “Seems like the logical conclusion.”

“Then we have to find it and destroy it.”

Carmilla nodded with grim acquiescence. She was just about to make a suggestion on how they could go about doing exactly that when Laura gripped her fingers with a strength that surprised her.

As if everything was settled already with those few brief words Laura was suddenly off down the corridor and with their hands still being intertwined Carmilla found herself being pulled along behind the girl who was clearly on a mission.

And she didn’t have the heart to argue, not when Laura seemed to have found something to keep her focused. To keep her from backsliding.

They strode their way down the main corridor, ignoring the rooms they knew were nothing but inpatient wards and finding a stairway through a side door made their way down a floor into a labyrinth of storeroom and supply closets. They were all locked, but a quick glimpse through the port style windows was enough confirmation to tell the two students that they didn’t have anything resembling the equipment they were looking for.

So, they carried on, down the next dank flight of stairs with its flickering lights which did absolutely nothing for the aura of nervousness wafting off both of them. This level seemed to be one above the basement, the white corridor walls marked with metallic streaks where gurneys had unceremoniously scraped against them; the undulating lines looking more like fingernail scratches than anything else.

As Carmilla peered into some kind of laboratory, she heard Laura make a small noise at the back of her throat.

She should have known a question was coming just from that, but her attention had moved to a laminated poster on the wall above her head that offered instructions on sedative agents and what proportions should be used according to weight.

“Carm, why do you think my infection is progressing slower than everyone else’s?”

“Because you’re you. And nothing keeps a good Hollis down.” Moving her attention to the fire safety floorplan she’d discovered, Carmilla had answered without thinking.

Apparently, it was the wrong thing to say though because she was quickly confronted with a face full of Laura, arms folded across her chest as she refused to walk on any further.

A sigh escaped Carmilla as she took in the serious expression opposite. “Or...”

“Or?”
Her mind flitted across the conundrum, a question she had been trying her best not to think about. Except now it was staring her straight in the face.

“Or...it’s possible when you touched Eifion and your skin burned him, he was able to transfer a few cells of his own natural immunity through the blister. He didn’t have the mutation but genetically speaking it’s likely that he had some kind of hereditary resistance to it.”

There was a softening in Laura’s stance as she slowly hopped from one foot to the other. “Do you think he’s ok?”

“I...” The vampire honestly didn’t have an answer to that but she knew she had to say something. Flicking her gaze upwards she shrugged. “He wasn’t like Caerwyn, going all Che Guevara on us so there’s a chance my...there’s a chance the Dean might have left him alone to suffer the pain of losing his brother. She always enjoyed watching other people’s grief.”

“I’m not sure which of those is worse.”

Neither was Carmilla and the wet shining eyes facing her seemed to know that.

Satisfied, Laura turned away and resumed her investigation into the row of locked doors as if the conversation was closed for now but she flinched when an arm clutched gently at her elbow. Carmilla let her fingers cup the hard bone there for a moment.

“This doesn’t seem to be getting us anywhere. And judging by the floorplan, it looks like our best bet’s the basement level. Large open spaces and shadowy rooms galore.”

Laura gave a watery smile. “Awesome. Just for once it might be nice if the nefarious stuff was kept in the penthouse though.”

Unable to help herself, the taller girl slid her hand up to Laura’s bicep. “Agreed.”

She was going to say something else, something to keep the glazed look in Laura’s honey coloured pupils at bay somehow but before the words could unfold from her tongue the tiny student was off again, and she had to jog a little to catch up as they hit the next stairwell, and began a descent into the lowest section of the building.

Unlike previous times, when they walked through this door though there was no corridor, no series of rooms laid out before them. There was just one metal door leading off the antechamber; hinges thick and neatly bevelled with no windows to offer a glimpse inside. The stench of blood leaked from the pad lock and Carmilla recognised it at once. Her Mother’s blood, used for a protection spell. It smelled of age and acrimony. Mould and acrid skin. And it made her want to back the hell up.

She couldn’t though. Not when they’d come so far. She wondered for a moment if that was how she herself smelled but dismissed the thought immediately. Instead she decided action was the way to go and grinned reassuringly at her anxious roommate before taking her fingernail and pressing it deeply into her palm.

Normally she would have used her wrist, the free flow of the blood making things infinitely easier but the image of her Mother’s nail sliding up the girl’s forearm right in front of her, as if it were the easiest thing in the world meant she couldn’t bring herself to do it. Not here.

Not ever again maybe.

“Carm...”
Ignoring Laura’s panicked whisper, she held up a hand in encouragement despite the stinging then pressed her bleeding hand up to the handle. The metal and the burning sensation made her blanch but she intoned the words she had heard years ago, hoping desperately that they would work. That her Mother’s fondness for Latin proverbs hadn’t waned.

“Ut effringerent fores pulsans cum sanguine non operatur iram.”

Laura’s jaw dropped as the metal door groaned; shivered and squealed for a moment as if fighting its own internal urges then swung open reluctantly.

Carmilla offered up a crooked smile as she wiped her blood on her trousers. “And she says I’m the predictable one.”

“What did that mean?”

She looked over. “When knocking doesn’t work break the door down with your blood and rage.”

“So glad I asked,” Laura mumbled.

“It’s a quote from Alexander the Great. Mother always did admire his…ambition.” Carmilla straightened her shoulders. “Guess she didn’t count on her own kin trying to bring her down though.”

Pushing the door fully open with her shoulder, she snuck a glance back at her companion who answered her with a decisive nod. Then they walked inside, not sure what they were about to find.

Unlike the others they had come across the room was laid out in one large space; long and dimly lit with dirty brickwork where the windows should have been. The floor was marqued with chipped tiles instead of carpet but what grabbed their attention the most was the large square swimming pool in the centre; the metal ladders at the edges removed and what looked like some kind of extractor hood fitted above it, a series of dials attached and suction tubing snaking in a sinister fashion into the corners of the pool.

The liquid inside the pool was a black glossy colour that seemed to suck all of the low light into its depths but at its corners wisps of grey magic leaked up and out of the brew, leaving a scummy white foam.

“Nefarious stuff definitely located,” whispered Laura and the sound seemed to be pulled into the black fluid of its own accord. “Score one for us.”

If it was supposed to be a victory, it sure didn’t feel like one as Carmilla stared at the foul liquor slopping against the side of the pool and she pulled Laura back a step away from it as she surveyed the room again.

All she could think was- how were they ever going to destroy it?

The protection spells around the ooze prickled at her skin, a warning chime sounding at some kind of cellular level.

Laura seemed to be sensing it too, as she wrinkled up her nose and slipped a little closer to Carmilla as she stared at the oozing mass of liquid.

The whole place felt menacing and ominous.

As they scanned the walls for anything they could use as a contaminant, a door on the other side of the room slammed open, reverberating against the brick causing them both to jerk backwards.
A shadowy figure emerged.

A voice drifting from the rafters, oily in its own indefinable way.

“Darling girl... welcome...”

The two girls tensed.

“After our last little tete-a-tete I thought I might have finally got through to you. But here we are again, the same familiar dance. The one where you just can’t seem to keep your nose out of my business.”

Carmilla’s jaw jutted out at the accusation though she couldn’t keep a tinge of pride from her stance at the obvious exasperation behind her Mother’s cool words.

“Well I can’t be blamed then for repaying the favour, can I?”

The figure across from them stepped into the low light and Laura sucked in a breath at the sight of Eifion standing there- dishevelled, his clothes mussed up, his face hard.

“During an outing, I happened to stumble upon one of your lost puppies. Of course, one could argue that it was the humane thing to do, taking away your little friend’s wretchedness and replace it with an emotion a little more empowering...”

The anger in his muscles was causing them to twitch and the angry bloodshot eyes contained none of their previous warmth.

“And I thought who better to protect my investment?” A cold snigger followed. “If he lives up to expectation he rids me of the thorns in my side that I’ve tolerated for far too long. And if he doesn’t...well his blood will be on your hands. And you still have nothing to counteract my beautiful potion.”

As if some trigger word had been spoken, with a roar of anguish Eifion began sprinting towards them, his boots clunking on the old tiles beneath them and Laura felt herself being shoved backwards, the wall rearing up to greet her chin and shoulder with a jarring impact.

Carmilla took the brunt of the collision as his coiled form smacked into her and the pair of them slammed to the floor, his entire weight landing on Carmilla’s slender form. All the air punched its way out of her but her vampire reflexes had her back on her knees in a second; she took the opportunity to elbow him hard in the ribs and a horrible snapping sound followed the motion.

“Carm...”

She didn’t hear Laura’s whimper as she tensed, back on two feet.

“Carm...you can’t kill him; he’s under her control. It’s not his fault.”

His fault or not, Carmilla honestly didn’t care anymore. He was a threat. To her. To Laura. He was the only thing in between them and putting an end to this nightmare so all she could see was his flesh and the blood underneath that needed to spill onto her shoes. An old crimson kind of rage flowing through her as she kicked him viciously.

TBC...
The blood of patriots and tyrant

Chapter Summary

Shitteth is hitting the fanneth

Chapter Notes

Whoooee this is a long one.
But I've planned out the ending and I want the whole fic to be 30 chapters so this and the next chapter are waaaaaayy longer than the rest because there's a bunch of shizzle to fit in.
So...yeah.
That's a thing.

The first thing Carmilla felt after the impact was her mother’s slick voice creeping through the speakers above.

“His kind brought this to your door darling girl.”

Then she was dropping again as a punch hit her ribs, as a weight shoved up underneath her chin and her spine was slammed into the floor for a second time; an acid constellation blazing through her skin raw and snarling.

The humiliation of the thing was almost as piercing as the pain itself and an involuntary growl burst from her mouth as she gripped Eifion’s head between her hands trying her best to shove it away, fingers pressing into the soft meat of his cheeks with rage.

Whatever the Dean had done to him was potent though; she should have expected as much. Eifion struggled inside her grip, ripping his ears out from under her fingers like a dog shaking water from its back. The force jerked Carmilla out of position on the floor, twisting her onto her right hip allowing her assailant to fully drag himself free, taking a step back to pull his body upright and steady himself. Gaining solid ground brought back confidence. With wrathful eyes Eifion swung his arm out and towering as he was above her, she couldn’t do anything to keep his knuckles from landing solidly on the left side of her jaw. The force of it made her skull judder all the way up to her inner ear and almost flipped her over onto her front.

“Please…you don’t want to do this. Stop; both of you.”

“That’s it Mircalla. Show him what it is to be a limestone masterpiece.”

A pair of competing voices swirled around her throbbing ear lobe and though she wasn’t aware of it consciously, her Mother’s glowing words stoked the fire in her belly more forcefully than Laura’s could put it out. Carmilla roared forwards taking her prey with her and they went down again, a few feet closer to the pool. But this time they both ignored the crash and the way it punched the air out of their lungs, concentrating instead on scratching at each other’s bared flesh. Laura could only watch in
horror as Carmilla and Eifion clawed at each other like beasts, worn fingernails trying to score skin, ripping short hairs out wherever they could.

In her red haze, somewhere under the sound and the fury Carmilla could almost feel her mother’s eyes watching them, imagine that lascivious grin urging her on as she pulled back onto her haunches and kicked out with her right foot, the sole of her boot catching Eifion right on the cap of his kneecap. He must not have seen the move coming because his legs splayed outwards underneath him and revelling in the advantage the brunette leapt on top, straddling his hips, using her weight to press him hard onto the floor; grinding his spine into every broken tile underneath.

And it felt good. Felt right. Wild and liberating.

“Carm, stop. Please, this is what she wants.” From behind her Laura threw up a hand that she couldn’t see. “This isn’t why we came here.”

Carmilla let out another growl.
Words. Always with the words.
As meaningless as the sound of the humming magicks circling the ceiling.
Carmilla unleashed another punch into Eifion’s hipbone, right where she guessed the sacro-iliac joint would be, enjoying the sound of cracking bone as it filtered through muscle and sinew. Muffled but satisfying in an old familiar way nonetheless.

Unfortunately, her sense of appreciation was just a little too obvious. Despite the roar at the base of his spine, Eifion was able to raise up both of his knees at the same time behind her, pushing against the small of her back, shoving her whole body awkwardly towards his chin. He skittered backwards as her equilibrium shifted until he was out from under her hips and far away enough to use both his feet to shove her away. Rolling onto his uninjured side, Eifion watched gleefully as she stumbled backwards then somehow, he was upright again and in her face, elbowing her hard in the stomach before she could gain any traction. For the second time the air in her body flew out of her mouth and Carmilla had to clamp her teeth together to keep from crying out.

Oh God.
Staring from the side-lines, Laura felt her stomach sinking as she watched embarrassment and fire roll across Carmilla’s angular face, her breathing ragged and wild. She could see all the pent-up rage and coiled tension in the vampire’s body begging her to let it out as the pair separated for a breath; see it in the way her fingers curled into her palms. Didn’t need to hear the roar of blood in her ears to know that it was buried beneath dark brown curls.

She was still watching when Carmilla finally snapped. Saw the very moment it happened. As if in slow motion, in front of Laura’s eyes Carmilla lowered her stance, curving her back then she sprinted forwards nails extended, her fist and calf muscles moving so fast that they looked like a blur to Laura who had only just begun to slowly drag herself to her feet near the wall; the room tilting and turning with every inch she climbed. Carmilla was on Eifion within a second and the moment her legs stopped moving, her shoulders took on their urgency, throwing themselves backwards then curling round. Her eyes obsidian. One punch. Her face red.

Then another.
Each one to a different part of the body, the knuckles finding the spaces between rib and vertebrae with absolute precision, slamming into flesh; the motion a blur of air and gritted teeth.

Laura’s gut contracted as the pale haze of punching fists quickly took on a queasy shade of carmine
and she knew instinctively that she didn’t want to know the reason why.

Pulling herself up onto her feet, her woozy unsteady feet Laura finally managed to stumble across to the two of them and trying to avoid the flying fists placed her hand gingerly on Carmilla’s shoulder. Hoping that her presence might cut through whatever trance her roommate was lost in. Whatever red haze burned those rims around her eyes.

Her mother’s taunts reverberating in her head.
‘When words fail you, actions have to take their place. Although perhaps, you had better just stick to words.’

Carmilla turned with a snarl, pulling her shoulder muscles away from the other student as if her touch was toxic. The feral glint in her eye made Laura want to step back but she held her ground as much as she could, and wrapped a hand around her roommate’s bicep instead.

For a moment, Carmilla’s eyes locked with her own, widening imperceptibly and Laura’s heart leapt at the moment of recognition but then as quickly as it receded the oily rage returned inside those pupils and the brunette savagely pushed her backwards, away from her.

Laura didn’t have time to feel the sting of it. Her already precarious sense of balance roiled at the movement and her knees buckled underneath her as she fell backwards, her ass taking the brunt of the fall but the back of her head smacking hard against a chipped piece of tile too. And all she could do was lay there in a heap as she screwed up her eyes at the stabbing pain needling the base of her skull.

Eifion forgotten, Carmilla suddenly moved like a panther, stalking towards Laura, fury evident in the feline way she moved; in the way her head bobbed from one side to the other. It was almost mesmerising, thought Laura numbly. Maybe that was the point.

“Carm, please this isn’t you,” Laura murmured.

She was just in time to witness something she hadn’t seen before- Carmilla sniffing the air; predatorial and voracious. She sauntered a step closer to Laura’s prone form, a gleeful spring in her step.

“Carm?...”

Panic began to bloom inside Laura’s gut. Maybe she didn’t mean as much to the vampire as she had thought. That was ridiculous though, wasn’t it?

Carmilla took another step forward.

Maybe everything they’d been through was just some kind of temporary distraction her brain whispered. Nothing more. Certainly, not some twisted fairy-tale love story with a happy ending where everyone went home safe and sound.

As the dark form of the former Countess Karnstein reached the soles of her sneakers, Laura dragged herself by her palms an inch backwards.

The malicious laugh that followed the movement cut right through her to her soul. To her credit though the small blonde refused to meet the eyes crowing above her.
Carmilla glanced down at the cowering human below with a cold sneer.

“There’s my child,” murmured her Mother, though she couldn’t tell anymore whether the voice came from the tannoy above or from inside her own subconscious. “The wild beast I loosed upon this world.”

Carmilla stalked forwards, moving up alongside Laura’s legs, her hand reaching down to pull the girl up by her shirt to face her. To look her dead in the eye. But as her fingertips closed around the fabric of Laura’s top, her burning limbs intent on doing something beautiful and awful, something her conscious mind couldn’t even begin to describe an arm wrapped itself around her middle dragging her away.

If rage had a countenance it was the one that Carmilla turned to Eifion who held her against his body, streams of blood pouring from the cuts and soft puffed up flesh of his cheeks.

“You…you don’t want to hurt her.” Eifion panted, his free hand grabbing at his forehead; a mass of red rivulets and open gashes.

“Had some epiphanies in the midst of all that concussion, did you?”

A malicious grin lit up Carmilla’s face as she felt him digging the heel of his hand into his forehead an inch away. She kept still however, allowing him the small victory for now. Curious as to what he could possibly have to say. Impressed that he was even able to speak at all, actually.

“I guess head trauma and internal haemorrhaging have a way of clearing the mind,” he said softly.

“Is this your way of saying thank you?”

“She isn’t the enemy,” he declared firmly.

“And neither are you I suppose?”

Eifion tightened his arm muscles against her stomach, “A threat and an enemy aren’t always the same thing. You don’t want to do this.”

Carmilla went quiet. A deadly silence; her body cold in his grip.

Then she craned her neck around. “You all take so much pleasure in telling me what I want.” Her tongue snuck out to lick the edge of a fang. “And you would know what that is, would you?” she hissed.

The left-hand side of his messed-up face fell.

“More than your Mother would I’d wager.”

He seemed to sink into himself for a moment, pain overwhelming him though his grip around her waist didn’t weaken.

“She’s the one who did this to me. Who turned me into this. She’s the one who did this to you. And Laura.”

Skin burning up, the insects in her bloodstream screaming at her for release, Carmilla shrugged her shoulders, the movement disguising the subtle way her fingers began to pry their way under his forearm. “She’s an expert at worming her way into people’s heads. Like a tick, burrowing into grey matter. It’s what she does.”
He clamped his muscles down with a groan as her fingernails dug into his weak flesh.

“If you know that then why the hell are you letting her win?”

A hint of that same fang protruded down pressing against her lower lip and her gaze hardened.
“T’m not. This is who I am. For all of her faults my Mother understands that.”

He shook his head but she wasn’t done.

A cruel gleam lit up the inside of her eyes. “And you should take a good look because I’m about to burn this place to ashes. With her and everyone else in it.”

“This is who you are?”

She pinched the skin underneath his wrist viciously. “Yep.”

“I’d beg to differ,” he replied gritting his teeth.

“Oh, you’ll be begging soon enough, don’t worry.”

Eifion let out another moan as his body shuddered against her nipping fingers and he chanced a glance over at Laura’s shivering form on the floor then back at the slender girl struggling in his arm. At the mania at the corner of her eyes. Daring him to contradict her one more time. Daring him to take a swing.

And he knew then. That nothing he could say was going to change anything. His whole skeleton ached, the muscles clinging on in their limp and watery state. His head was burning from the inside but he had to do something. Or they were all lost.

So, he took a gamble. Unclenching his fist, he slowly, unthreateningly pulled his arm from around Carmilla’s stomach and held it up next to his other in submission. Her surprised leer was enough to make him want to slump to the floor and for the first time he was aware how much of his weight had previously been supported by her small frame.

The urge to sink to the floor and let fate have its way was unbearable but he couldn’t do it. His brother wasn’t going to burn for nothing.

His brother…the smell of charcoal and skin filled his nostrils for a moment and he retched instinctively. But then he remembered how it felt to be strapped to a chair. And taunts. Slick, disdainful taunts that were whispered right into his ear. Uncovering all of his dark secrets. All of his fears.

And that’s why he did the only thing he could think of to get through to the vampire.

“Ok.” He acquiesced wearily. “That’s your plan? To raze this place and everyone inside to the ground? Then let me help you with that. It’s the least I can do, right?”

Focusing his breathing Eifion turned his back to Carmilla for a moment. Waiting for her to take advantage. Waiting for the killing blow. But nothing happened. Not at first. And not after ten seconds had passed.

So, he took the advantage for himself and moved, taking ungainly strides over to where Laura lay, her eyes wide at his approach and the second he got to her Eifion reached out a trembling arm.
Her hand lifted off the floor and slipped into his gratefully. Together, even with the caterwauling in his muscles and her growing vertigo the two of them managed to get her to her feet and in response Laura threw her arms around his neck.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her soft hair brushing his shoulders.

That alone almost stopped him in his tracks. Almost threw off his entire plan.

But it only took one look at the lascivious gleam in the vampire’s eyes to convince him to keep going, to give him the impetus he needed even with Laura clinging appreciatively to him. With that pair of thin arms still around his neck, Eifion pushed off the floor with his shaky left foot and the two of them staggered forwards. Though her grip tightened to keep her from falling, Laura moved with him, one step then two like a pair of drunk lovers intertwined.

It was before she even had a chance to realise what it was he was doing that the edge of the swimming pool hit the back of her sneakers.

She frowned, “Eifion, what…”

He was glad that she didn’t get to finish the question. Flailing suddenly, he used all the remnants of his energy to heave himself and the girl holding him over the lip, into blackness. The greasy liquid closed over them and its natural warmth threw him for a moment. Everything was so dark and toxic and gelatinous. He couldn’t open his eyes and kicked wildly in the direction he hoped was something approaching upwards. Thrashing through the waxy fluid Eifion’s head finally broke the surface and he dragged in a breath. With the back of his hand he wiped the slime from his eyes and looked up.

Carmilla was standing where she had been. Her feet were obscured by the side of the pool but he could see the turbulence in her gaze and stance from here. Popping up next to him Laura’s head appeared coughing and spluttering and with one last nod at her supposed roommate, with a grim expression Eifion silently begged for forgiveness and took both of his palms plastering them onto the wet crown of her head.

He pressed down.

And she sank beneath the waves, arms and legs floundering beside her.

He could feel her trying to push against his hold, turning her head this way and that, ever the fighter and he wanted to be sick in his own mouth, but instead he clamped his lips together and put the weight of his upper body into it.

Pushing her further under.

Away from the precious air she was fighting for.

And he begged specifically for her forgiveness in silence.

She had no idea what was happening. Laura’s pupils blew wide as her airway constricted and she tried with everything inside not to suck in a painful breath. Instinctively drawn to those in her hair, her fingers batted at Eifion’s, trying to pry them loose. The problem was that there was no light there in the blackness and the digits suckered to her seemed to be made of marble, her small hands unable to gain any purchase at all. The strength of his hold made it feel as if she were trapped under an ice floe; an immovable ceiling resting against the top her head.

Laura forgot her own rules for a moment and opened her mouth to scream. Lukewarm liquid surged into her throat and she snapped her lips shut again; the substance slipping
down into her lungs.
Infecting her from the inside.

Her head began to spin as Eifion tightened his muscles, the murky depths in front of her tilting into some kind of hellish whirlpool. Odd intricate patterns danced in front of her retinas.

And she couldn’t understand why he was doing this. Whether those were his hands on her, slimy and impenetrable or that this whole thing was just some fever dream she was having.

Strange. Floating there in the darkness it really didn’t seem to matter quite so much anymore. Because an odd calmness seemed to be flowing through her limbs, sucking all the energy from them. Telling her to relax. That everything was all right.

That the burning in her throat was receding.
That maybe, she should just unwind her muscles and give up for a while.

To Hell with that, she thought and made one more superhuman effort to reach the surface. Her brain struggled for oxygen and as it did, slip sliding all over the place she wondered briefly if this was how Carmilla had felt all those years ago, trapped in the coffin of blood, desperate to escape. Desperate for life and air.

But there was another shift in the tide above her and then down she went again, shoved further into the depths. A mile from where she wanted to be.

It was almost a relief truth be told; the sinking. Not to have the weight of the world on her shoulders; to not be a disappointment anymore. Her lips fluttered.

To not have to pretend that Carmilla and her hadn’t been some kind of fantasy she had thrown herself into headfirst.

And after everything, that it wouldn’t be Carm who finally put her out of her…

Just as her mouth went slack and her lips fell open, Laura felt something around her collar; a jerking motion that seemed ill at ease in the soft, warm world she was caught in.

She flew upwards with a spluttering moan and then somehow sweet, sweet air poured across the desert of her tongue and throat. And she drank it in hungrily, coughing, choking; hair plastered to her ears and throat. Unconsciously her hands flew to her head as if to check that she wasn’t hallucinating and they found no fingers there, no pressure at all apart from burning sensation of pulled hairs on her skin. The five elliptical marks she could feel on her scalp without needing to see.

“Laura, Laura I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

A dark form pressed itself to her side and scooped her up into its sodden embrace, drawing her face gently into its neck. And still she wasn’t quite sure. That this wasn’t some crazy dream her brain had concocted as it shut down from lack of oxygen.

Despite the disgusting stuff coating them, her mind had the smell down, she had to give it that. The scent of pampas grass and orange trees mixed together in her dripping nose, making her bury her face deeper into those damp curls to discover the origin. The comforting spiral being drawn hesitantly on her shoulder blade achingly familiar.

“I let her in my head. I wasn’t angry at you…” Carmilla’s soft broken voice faltered near her ear. “I didn’t even know who you were… I didn’t care…”

A choked sob stopped the flow of words pouring from her and Laura had to give herself credit.
Man, her deathbed hallucinations were on point.
Even if they felt as if they were replaying on an old shaky projector.

“Don’t apologise, Carm,” she murmured. “It’s all right.”
Was it weird that she was placating herself? Or some twisted part of her subconscious that was writing this? If it was, she didn’t really care. The way her roommate’s shallow breaths reverberated against her chest made her want to wrap herself against her even tighter, to let her know that she didn’t hold a grudge.

“It’s not even close to being ok, cupcake. This whole situation is a million miles from the land of OK.”
Laura became aware of those comforting fingers moving away from her shoulder and sliding upwards into her waterlogged hair. The tickling sensation on the back of her neck caused a tiny smile to form on her face though no-one but her could see it. And it felt so amazing that she didn’t even question it.

“Even if it’s not real, I’m glad I get to be with you at least once more,” Laura whispered.
And then cold fingertips cupped her chin where it lay against Carmilla’s chest, dragging her face out into the harsh light. They skirted over the pressure marks like ice dancers.

“What do you mean? You planning on going somewhere, Sundance?”
Sucking in a breath, Laura let her eyes briefly adjust to the harsh strip lighting above then screwed up her courage and looked into the anxious pale face hovering an inch or two away.

She didn’t know what she had been expecting. A faceless version of Carm, all the details and lines ironed out by her memory.
Or a perfect rendition of her smooth skin, irises flecked with gold inside their dark depths. A portrait too beautiful not to remember. An image too perfect not to stain on her skin. To take with her.

But the haggard, penitent girl opposite with bedraggled curls suckered to her neck and skin two shades too pale to be healthy was neither of those things.
She looked…too real. Too haunted.

“Wait…” Laura swallowed and wished she hadn’t because the taste in her mouth was repulsive. “…this is real?”
Carmilla stared back at her, clearly unsure how to answer that.
Without admitting any more or sending Laura right over the edge.

So, she did something else.
She surged forward creating a small wave around them and with tender hands cupped her roommate’s confused face, her thumbs resting against the shell of each ear. And she kissed her.
Softly at first, simply pressing her damp sour lips against Laura’s, pressing them to the corners in turn.
But then relief and something else overcame her and she kissed her a little more hungrily, opening her mouth wider; giving Laura time to process what was happening, giving her time to respond while trying to contain her own trammelling emotions.
Laura seemed to freeze briefly but then as if a switch had been pressed suddenly melted into her, matching her eagerness. Letting her tongue tentatively slip into Carmilla’s mouth.

It was borne out of nothing but instinct.
And tasted like survival instinct. Gratitude. Respite and apologies.
Realisation and a million other things.

Pulling back to allow the human a moment to get herself together, the brunette sniffed. “I thought I lost you there…” whispered Carmilla sorrowfully. Laura blinked up at her.

“Thought I might have lost myself too,” she said in quiet reply.

Laura’s lips quirked up at the admission and unable to control herself Carmilla pulled her in for another needy bruising kiss; the feel of Laura’s drenched skin driving her wild. Interrupted only by a hacking cough that sounded from a metre or two away.

Carmilla stared pointedly at the man across from them.

“I don’t know whether to kiss you or kill you right now,” said the brunette her tone gravelly. He nodded. “I think your roommate might have something to say if you did either of those.”

Laura locked eyes with his. “Maybe…” Her gaze flattened. “Might not be what you’re thinking though.” She paused then. “I do like that you’re shiny.”

Confusion overtook him as Laura pointed to the water around him. Unlike the rest of the dark liquid they were standing in, a pool of shining fluid seemed to float around him bumping up against his chest. As if someone had snuck in and dropped a chemical dispersant into an oil spill. His gaze dropped. And Carmilla frowned briefly at the strange sight.

She didn’t get to wonder anymore about it however because all of a sudden Laura’s body jerked underneath her and the tiny human’s brows drew together as if the movement had surprised her. She opened her mouth as if she was about to say something but her throat seemed to narrow before she could and without warning her eyes rolled back in her head.

Carmilla was close enough to grab her and keep her from sliding back into the liquid surrounding them but she didn’t know what else to do as Laura’s whole body began to convulse, writhing and bucking wildly in her arms.

“What is this?” She shouted across to Eifion. The horrified expression on his face was enough to tell her it was nothing good.

“It must be this stuff.” He said wading urgently across to them. “I didn’t think…The patient’s doses were always closely based on their weight and muscle mass.”

He pressed a hand against Laura’s forehead as it jerked. “She must have swallowed some when she was…” He flinched at Carmilla’s response to that. “And just standing in it, I mean, Christ, osmosis would probably do the rest. It’s…I think it’s an overdose.”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

He recoiled at Carmilla’s hiss. “I thought she’d keep her mouth closed. That you’d snap out of it quicker than…”

“So… what do we do?” yelled the brunette, keeping Laura’s head and shoulders above the surface, panic threatening her vision as much as the drips rolling down her forehead.

He fell silent as he took some of Laura’s weight on his shoulder and the pair of them began carrying, floating her towards the edge of the pool.
At the wall, she didn’t want to but without any other choice the vampire begrudgingly allowed Eifion to take Laura’s full weight and without any kind of grace hauled herself up onto the tiles. She then reached her arms down and once the fairie had positioned her there, hefted Laura’s shaking body up towards her, laying her down flat as best she could with her legs twitching like that.

“Laura, Laura?”

There was no obvious response from the other girl and the slightly blue tinge that was now showing on her lips made Carmilla’s blood run cold. Wiping at her reddening eyes, she slipped her hand into Laura’s, “Tell me what to do, medicine man.”

Pulling himself up, kneeling beside them he froze. “I…I’m not a doctor.”

“You work in psych wards. You’re telling me you’ve never had to deal with a situation like this?!”

“There’s never been a situation like this!”

She sucked in a breath, “Please…she was doing ok, she was fighting this…”

Laura’s words reverberated in his mind.
I like that you’re shiny.
Staring back at the patch of glossy liquid marking the place that he had stood, a realisation hit him square in the chest.

“Blood,” he muttered.

“What?”

He grabbed his forehead. “I mean, usually the treatment is…is gastric lavage. Pumping out the stomach to mechanically remove any unabsorbed drugs.” He looked up sombrelly. “But we don’t have that kind of equipment. And the likelihood is if she was already infected intravenously and this stuff has gotten into her lungs, it’s not in her stomach. It’s in her bloodstream.”

“This is a fascinating seminar but I don’t need a lecture. I need a solution.”

He ignored the cutting tone in her words and stared at her mouth.

“You…You’re the solution.”

Carmilla gripped Laura’s wet fingers.

“He grabbed his forehead. “I mean, usually the treatment is…is gastric lavage. Pumping out the stomach to mechanically remove any unabsorbed drugs.” He looked up sombrelly. “But we don’t have that kind of equipment. And the likelihood is if she was already infected intravenously and this stuff has gotten into her lungs, it’s not in her stomach. It’s in her bloodstream.”

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Carmilla gripped Laura’s wet fingers. “You should know by now that’s never been true.”

He shook his head frustratedly. “You know what I don’t need? Your self-pity right now! You’re not listening. The solution is a blood transfusion, fresh clean blood to replace hers but we can’t do one here.”

Carmilla balked at the idea of more needles, more pieces of sharpened metal sliding into her roommate’s veins.

“But you. You’re a vampire, aren’t you?” He raised an eyebrow at her though the painful motion tugging at the gash on his forehead made him grimace. “When you bite your victims, you drain their blood. You literally take it out of their system.”

Carmilla held Laura’s shoulder flat as another seizure racked her body. “She’s not one of my victims, Eifion. She’s….”

The end of that sentence eluded Carmilla as she glanced down at Laura’s white, damp face.

“…Besides, less blood won’t help, it’ll just weaken her immune system and let this thing run wild.”
“It’s already running wild. And that wasn’t what I meant.”

He paused then slowly glancing at the undulating liquid in the pool held out a shaking wrist. “Blood. It’s the key. And it seems your mother, all powerful as she is missed the fact that Caerwyn was my brother. That we shared that in common at least.”

He blinked. “I’m no genetics professor but the way that liquid is responding to my blood means I must have some kind of immunity. And if my brother’s blood was the core ingredient in this shit then logically mine should be able to counteract some of the effects.”

His veiny wrist hovered in Carmilla’s eyeline and a strange vinegary taste entered her mouth.

“What are you asking me to do? I don’t bite people,” she responded shakily.


Guilt flashed across her face, “I didn’t know you then.”

His expression softened. “And you don’t really know me now. But I’m telling you, the only way to save her is for you to drink my blood, rid Laura of some of hers and then let her drink from you. The perfect transfusion.”

As in responding to the horrifying suggestion Laura’s body suddenly fell still and Carmilla’s fingers flew to check the pulse in her neck.

It was thready but still there and she sighed in relief.

Her gaze returned to his. “She could drink it directly from you…”

“She’s a human, I’m a Cael. Her body would reject it, the antibodies attacking it as an invading force. When they give transfusions in a hospital the donor blood goes through a complex filtration system to make sure it would be compatible. Do you see one of those hanging around in here?”

“No, but…” Carmilla slapped a stinging hand against the floor.

“Countess, you are a filtration system. It might not be a gift your mother intended to give you but you are nonetheless. You can drink from almost any creature because your body breaks down the blood into its component parts and eradicates the defects.”

He sunk back sitting uncomfortably on his heels. “Once my blood flows through you, it’ll be clean enough for her to absorb.”

With tears stinging her eyes the brunette reached down and touched the spot where a pale freckle should have been sitting on Laura’s nose. “I can’t bite her. And I definitely can’t feed her my own blood. I promised her I’d never do either of those things without her permission.”

He closed his swollen eyes. “And it’s a noble pledge. But would she ask you to stick to it if her life depended on it? Because I’m afraid right now it does.”

Carmilla lifted her hand again trying not to feel how clammy to the touch Laura’s cheek had been and hesitantly touched Eifion’s arm. His almond eyes opened up again.

“You’re a mess.” She said gently. “If I drink from you, I don’t know if you’ll survive.”

He gave a wan smile, placing his own hand over hers; glad that she didn’t start at his touch. “You don’t need to worry about that Princess. You just concern yourself with her. That’s your priority.”
Turning his forearm over he held it up again. “I want you to, ok. More than that, I need you to. This is how I can help. So let me? Please?”

Her whole body went cold as she stared at the bluish veins in his wrist; heard them pumping and singing inside those tiny channels.

She glimpsed at Laura. At the pale version of her headstrong roommate splayed out on the floor beside her and screwed her eyes up as some kind of internal battle raged beneath her chest bone; two beasts full of fear clawing at each other as they figured out what to do.

A touch at her wrist brought her back to reality.

“You have to decide. Time’s almost up,” Eifion said insistently turning his wrist over once more.

With one last look at Laura Carmilla made her decision. The only one she could.

Lowering her head slowly, feeling his thumb softly run along her jawline she used her fingers to place Eifion’s wrist in front of her lips and slowly, hesitantly bit down with her fangs. The taste was different to the chilled stale blood bags she was used to buying from the clinic in town; sweet and earthy. Not off-putting exactly but more fragrant than she would like.

She drank deeply nonetheless, blocking out the sounds of his hissing, swallowing mouthfuls of the aromatic warm blood, letting it coat the insides of her throat as it went down. With restraint at first. Delicately.

And then more urgently. Hungriely, devouring the stuff; consuming the buzz that came with it.

At one point, her stomach groaning she went to pull away but a hand cupped the back of her head and held her mouth firmly to the wound. And against her better instincts she took another draw, sucking hard at the ragged flesh once more. Twice.

It wasn’t long before she felt full and bloated but still she kept drinking because it was for Laura. She felt disgusted at herself and the curve in her back as she crouched there but she kept drinking. Because it was for Laura.

She drank and she drank and she drank.

Until the hand in between hers fell limply away from her mouth and she looked up to see Eifion slump backwards, clutching his wrist as he took shallow breaths laid out on his spine. He looked deathly pale, his skin almost translucent in the overhead lights.

He coughed. “I’m…I’m all right.”

Carmilla backed away a little wiping her mouth with the back of a hand; her gaze caught on the slow rise and fall of his chest as he lay there.

“You…you did good,” he croaked without opening his eyes and she was glad of it. Glad that she didn’t have to see the pain in them. Of what she’d done.

Her own body was rebelling; shaking and grumbling beneath her skin. Though whether it was from the sheer volume of blood she’d consumed or the reasons behind the act it wasn’t clear.

“How long do I have to wait?” she said in low tones.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” he murmured. “But you strike me as a straight to the point kind of
girl so I’d say your body is good to go anytime.”

She pulled her knees up to her chest, feeling the muscles of her thighs press against the fullness in her stomach.

She fell silent wrapping her arms around her knees.

“What is it?”

Carmilla remained stoic and silent; filled with questions that sat on the blood inside her like foam. Questions she had no intention of saying out loud. Questions like what if it didn’t work? Or what if it did and Laura couldn’t forgive her for breaking her promise?

She wanted to throw up. Warm coppery liquid sat at the base of her throat but she refused to let it out. Not when it could save Laura’s life.

That tiny denial, the most ridiculous of rebellions against her own body pushed her to move in the end.

Nodding once, more to herself than anyone else, she unwound her arms from around herself and dragged her heavy body up crawling the metre or less over to where Laura was laying on the floor, her body too weak to even hold a tremor anymore.

She looked brittle and small; more like an injured bird than anything.

And the sight broke Carmilla’s heart.

If she even had a heart anymore.

Kneeling down gently next to the blonde’s hip, she slid a hand under the small of Laura’s back, keeping her fingers away from the spot where she remembered a purple bruise flourishing. A purple bloom, like the one she wanted to get for Carmilla.

She shook the thought away and raised Laura’s top half up, sliding behind her to cradle her tenderly in her arms between her knees. If she hadn’t been so terrified, she wondered if this might just have been one of the best moments of her life, holding Laura against her. The two of them skin to skin caught here in the depths of a nightmare.

Though it hadn’t been conscious, and as awful as it was her mind had already decided on how to do this. Her first thought had been to cut her wrist and let the blood pour into Laura’s mouth. But the idea of doing to her roommate the same thing that her Mother had done to the girl upstairs was too terrible to bear. Besides, with her ability to heal she couldn’t be certain that it would let out enough blood in time.

The femoral artery on her thigh was another option but the intimacy of that and the difficulty in raising it above Laura’s head was enough to rule it out.

The carotid artery then.

It had to be.

Which didn’t help with the intimacy thing but she supposed beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“Time’s up cupcake. We’ve got to get this over with, ok?”
She didn’t expect an answer of course, and busied herself moving Laura’s limp hair away from her face before brushing her own from the side of her neck.

Her heart pounding against her ribcage.

“I’ll be gentle, I promise.”

Sucking in an acid breath, she nuded her nose against Laura’s neck. It smelled so achingly familiar
that she almost stopped herself from going any further.
But then she stepped over that line.

Letting her fangs descend, she let them scrape against Laura’s skin to let her get used to their
presence. To the feel of them; solid and deadly.
Then swallowing hard, she slid them delicately into Laura’s neck, Carmilla’s eyes held open to see if
there was any reaction registering on her roommate’s face.
Nothing.

Was that good? She couldn’t tell anymore. At least she wasn’t in pain.
That was something, surely.
Sinking them in deeper, letting her fangs pierce the pulsating artery underneath, she froze
momentarily before drawing in a mouthful of blood.
Warm, delicious blood that tasted better than anything ever had before.
She should have known.
It might as well have been a drug.

She wasn’t here to enjoy herself though; not that there was much chance of that with the nerves
thrumming so hard in her forehead, resting against the back of Laura’s hair.

Carmilla knew what she had to do; as monstrous and uncouth an act as it was.
There was no room in her stomach for any more blood anyway screwing up her face she took the
next mouthful of Laura’s wonderful blood and spat it out onto the tiles next to them; leaving behind a
splatter of crimson on white.

Then she leaned in again, took another long sensual draw and leaning back hawked the red liquid
out onto the same spot the floor.

It was grotesque. Boorish.
Disgustingly vulgar.
But she kept at it, her right hand keeping their balance on the floor, her left placed firmly on Laura’s
stomach muscles. She drank deeply and she spat.
Drank and spat.
Again, and again until her neck muscles ached with the constant twisting and turning involved.

After what could have been the tenth or hundredth time, she checked Laura’s wan cheek with her
hand for a moment.
Her skin was feverish where before it had been cold and clammy, the expression on her closed face
vacant.
And the pool of her blood on the floor was creeping inwards towards her left knee, seeping into the
cracks, turning the white porcelain crimson. It looked like a crime scene.
And Carmilla felt like a murderer sat there, watching the fruits of what she was doing flow towards
her.

She couldn’t do it anymore.

It had to be enough now.
If she drained any more Laura wouldn’t have the energy to fight anything.
And the idea of that made her want to curl up in a tight ball next to her.
She’d come too far for that though. Cowardice be damned.

Cradling the limp body next to her Carmilla gave in to her instincts for a moment and kissed the back
of Laura’s head, whispering encouragement next to her ear; faking confidence as best she could.
Then she inched a little to the side so that she was no longer directly behind the blonde but kind of sideways on; her right knee against Laura’s back, her left resting on the blonde’s.

“Now it’s your turn, cutie,” she whispered. “Time to pull up those hero britches, right?”
And with that before she could talk herself out of it, she found her pulse, pressed her index finger to her own neck and let the nail slice deep into the flesh, wincing at the flash of pain and the tight pull of the skin.

Something warm and sticky began sliding down her neck and that meant she had to act quickly. Scooching round so that the wound was as pressed as close to the lower half of Laura’s face as possible, Laura’s mouth squeezed tight against the gash, she pressed the pad of her thumb into the artery further down her neck.
Hot foaming blood pumped out more vigorously immediately; spilling onto Laura’s lips.
Using her bloody fingers to hold Laura’s mouth open a little wider, Carmilla stared wildly at the delicate ear in her eyeline as she felt her own lifeblood pour on her chin and down into Laura’s throat.
Praying that she wouldn’t choke.
Wouldn’t go into convulsion.
For her to simply stay still.
And drink.

Not something she had ever thought she’d ask of one Laura Hollis.
Until now.
Until this.

Oh, God what am I doing?

 Feeling the blood flow already slowing, the clotting already beginning to kick in Carmilla forced her body into motion again, counting down the seconds- ten to hold Laura’s jaw open and against her so that the blood hit her tongue more than her jaw and five reaching up to press her artery whenever the flow began to slacken; fingers painful and rigid.
Everything felt sticky and way too silent.

Her own anxiety fluttered at the edges of every motion. Every time she caught a glimpse of Laura’s red stained chin the sight threatened to overwhelm her but she wouldn’t let it.

At least she hoped it was anxiety.
It was a long time since she’d let anyone else feed from her. For all she knew her body was fighting back. Her body could go screw itself though.
All that mattered was Laura being ok. Carmilla not being ok wasn’t any kind of deal breaker.

As she went to wipe Laura’s mouth the next moment a ragged cough suddenly burst out of Laura’s throat and Carmilla jerked in response; gritting her teeth as she inadvertently pulled the cut on her neck open.
The girl in her arms threw up a little blood then slumped backwards a little into the vampire’s side. And Carmilla was frozen.

Wondering if that was just some unconscious mechanical response or something more.
Hoping that it was something more…
But the tiny human had stopped moving against her skin and seemed to be completely out of it again.

“Laura?” she said querulously, her eyes flicking down her whole languid body for a moment.
No answer.
Shaking her a little, she whispered her name again but the results were the same. So reluctantly, wearily the brunette went back to the ritual. Pressing Laura to her ragged neck, feeling the pressure of her lips, the sting of them. Trying to ignore the clenching in the joints of her fingers as they gripped the blonde’s jawbones. Then, pulling back, holding Laura’s lips and nose closed to force her to swallow. Hating every second of it, repressing the urge to stroke that face, to whisper apologies to her while she kept doing it. Hating it but doing it all the same.

She kept it up as a wave of lethargy rolled over her and she had to put a hand out to keep from falling back. Carmilla kept it up as the tips of her fingers went numb. Kept at it until another cough burst out, and the pinpricks floating in front of Carmilla’s eyes swum away.

“Laura?” she said trying to keep the hope out of her voice again. Laura’s nose twitched and fell still and Carmilla’s arms moved of their own accord to wrap around the girl, cradling her as best she could.

“Cupcake?”

Laura stirred again, her eyes flickering open but only for a second; the invisible freckles on her nose wrinkling slightly against the dark circles above. It was enough to get Carmilla’s hear pounding against her ribcage.

And seconds later when a moan followed it and she watched Laura’s fingers begin to tentatively curl in on themselves, her unco-ordinated arm seeming as though it wanted to move towards the wound on her neck, her roommate almost whooped with sheer relief.

“Eifion, Eifion… I think she’s waking up. I think it might have worked.”

Turning her head with a giddy half smile that she was kind of glad no-one could see Carmilla stared across at him. Or at least where he had been when she’d last looked. She’d been so caught up with Laura that she hadn’t even noticed him moving but the serrated smear of blood on the tiles following where he had dragged himself along the floor gave him away. Tracking the smear, she finally saw him, arms out pulling himself along, wincing with each small movement as his bruised muscles protested.

“…Eifion?”

Though he was laying almost flat on the ground he cricked his neck to the side, cheek on tile and locked eyes with her, a thin melancholy half-smile of his own showing.

“That’s one hell of a job, Duchess.”

She looked at him with confusion evident in her pupils as she clutched Laura to her. “What are you doing?”

He sucked in a dusty breath, wheezing with the effort. “Taking care of the rest.”

He didn’t let her say anymore. His head turned back around and with superhuman effort, his fingers gripped the floor in front of him, his biceps straining as he pulled himself forward. One inch. Two. The tracks behind him darkening as he went. Marking more of the off-white tiles until with one final effort he made it right to edge of the curved
lip of the pool.

Carmilla fumbled for words as she felt Laura try and turn her head blearily in the direction she was facing, but she didn’t have the time to celebrate that particular victory. All she could do was stare at his forlorn form. Remembering the sensation of knuckles against bone. Feeling the palpable sense of dread that seemed to be building in the pool of her stomach.

“Eifion, you don’t have to…”

Make any grand gestures.

He took a rest, breath heaving, forehead resting on cool ceramic. “I do. You want to end this nightmare? This is the only way- you know that.”

The room fell silent.

A bark of a laugh flew out of his grimacing mouth then. “I would say it’s been a pleasure Your Ladyship but…” he paused and she swallowed waiting for the end of that…

“…actually, it has in a strange way.” He lifted his head one last time, a cock-eyed quirk at his lips. “I think…I think I might finally understand what she sees in you, Duchess.”

Her eyes stung at the twisted compliment. “Eifion, we can find another way.”

His expression darkened a little as he lay there. “I meant it when I said blood was the key. It…it was the origin and it will be its end. Not everything is about your girl.”

“And not everyone gets a happy ending is that it?” she replied wretchedly, instinctively smoothing a patch of hair on Laura’s scalp

He nodded. “This can’t happen to anyone else. Not because of my family. I couldn’t live with that.”

“You’d be surprised what you can live with if you try.”

A wry laugh this time burst from his lips. “Maybe I would. I don’t need to ask you to take care of her, right?”

She resisted the urge to bristle at the question.

“You don’t but…” Carmilla’s ability to speak floundered, so incredibly torn as she was at that moment. Sensing that same heaviness in the air but unwilling to let Laura go, she surreptitiously shifted the semi-conscious girl onto her right side a little, in an attempt to get up, to move over there, to do…something but before she could Eifion nodded and in an ungracefully movement of his own reached awkwardly down his own length towards his ankle, pulling out something dull and metallic that she couldn’t quite see. Firmly gripping the object, he swept his legs over the edge of the pool heaving himself up into a sloppy sitting position; his back bowed over his knees.

His back to her.

Carmilla struggled to see what he was doing, what he seemed to be cradling so tenderly, so hesitatingly. Struggled to work out what the sound of air being sucked sharply in through his nose meant.

Carmilla opened her mouth to call his name again but before the word could fall from her tongue, Laura nestled against her neck diverting her attention for a millisecond. And when she looked up again, she could only watch as his thin depleted body, it’s back still facing her began to sink in on
itself, the edges contracting as if that last portion of energy had finally escaped. His body fell forwards graceful and unwieldy at the same time. The metal clink of a small knife blade hitting the curved edge of the pool sounded a half-second before Eifion’s flaccid body hit the water, the right side of his body submerging first. And then he was gone. A rippling wave all that was left behind to show he had ever been there.

Without even thinking about it, acid and nausea burning on her tongue one of Carmilla’s hand moved to cover Laura’s eyes. Not wanting her to see, not wanting her to figure out what he had done and have to watch the horrible and beautiful ways the trails of blood spurting from his body turned the water pale around him. Not have to watch his body surface again, his face underneath the waves as he drifted in a halo of light blue. Not have to see the corona of light diluting the concoction he was floating in. The lives he had just saved.

She choked out a sob; she couldn’t help it. Carmilla tried her best though to hold her body still so that the girl in her arms wouldn’t feel the shaking. Not even caring about the irony of that at all.
Let me rain over hell

Chapter Summary

Confronting the monster never comes easy...

Chapter Notes

Ok so this is the penultimate chapter, guys.
Hope it doesn't disappoint. Only one more to go then this story is done so enjoy...

He had that knife in his boot the whole time.
And he hadn’t pulled it on her. Not in their fight.
Not even in the throes of whatever her mother had done to him.

Carmilla sucked in a shaky, burning breath as she sat there on cold tile pulling Laura closer to her, gripping her rigid spine and the wet clothes plastered to the pair of them. Resting her chin softly on the crown of Laura’s head. The only place that had ever felt like home. And now...

She felt trembling fingers pulling at her own as if from miles away and batted away another flashing image of that undernourished girl outside the carriage window. The one with jealousy and awe in her eyes.

“I…what?”

A familiar small but utterly confused voice barely pierced the air around them.

Laura.

Laura. Awake.
Alive.
In her arms and alive.

Letting her hand drop down from Laura’s neck into her lap Carmilla pulled her roommate closer to her if that was even possible, eyes torn between keeping their vigil on the water and wanting to roam across the tiny human’s skin, every inch of it; every follicle. Every puncture wound.

Every scar and scratch.

Steeling herself, she peered down only to find Laura’s gaze tracking the dark form floating on the surface of the water the same way hers had been. Not looking at her at all. And she cursed herself.

“L…Laura?” said Carmilla gently. “Are you…ok?”

Any other time she would have been mortified by the tremor in her own voice but right now that didn’t even begin to make the list of things that mattered. Instead Carmilla reached out to touch Laura’s left shoulder blade, facing away from her as she was. The vampire held her breath as slowly,
too slowly to be considered normal, Laura turned to face her, skin pale and eyes rimmed with red.

“Why…” Her eyes began to gleam dully as Carmilla searched them for any kind of recognition. Hoping that those were tears and nothing else.

God please let them be tears.

As terrible a wish as that was to make.

“Why …why would he do that…”

She didn’t really have an easy answer for that.
The pulse racing through her at the tiny blonde’s question, at her blinking eyes and the disorientation in them seemed to make logical thinking almost impossible.

She squeezed her shoulder consolingly. “Guilt I guess.”

Laura took that in as Carmilla’s eyes darted across her skin, trailing along its byways; from the nape of her neck to the tips of her fingers.
If her roommate found it invasive she didn’t say and for her part Carmilla was unapologetic as she lifted Laura’s limp wrist and pressed the pads of her fingers to the veins underneath their surface. She almost lost it when Laura’s nose wrinkled in that old familiar way at the touch though she tried her best not to get her hopes up.

The unnervingly bovine look greeting her however drenched them in brine.

“But why…”

Carmilla swallowed. Of course, Laura wasn’t going to let this go.

“I think when his brother started this…”
Deliberately not looking at the floating body across the room she tried to untangle her thoughts, though it was hard with the blankness of her roommate’s gaze. “This nightmare might not have been his fault…but I can see how he might figure it was his responsibility to fix.”

Her chin dropped a little back onto the crown of blonde hair below though not enough to hurt Laura. “He was a better man than I gave him credit for.”

Carmilla frowned, at the scent of apple and cinnamon wafting so playfully around her nostrils. She couldn’t fight the urge anymore, being so close to Laura without knowing…. without being sure that she was…

That she was…

Unwilling to finish the thought the brunette selfishly slid her hand down to thread her fingers firmly through the blonde’s, waiting anxiously for a reaction. “…I would have thought you could appreciate the sentiment…”

A wary smile broke across her face for a moment. “…with what some might call that almost pathological need you have to mend things.”

As she sucked in a breath, a glimmer of a quirk of Laura’s lips below caught her attention and that small pool of hope turned into a stream again.

Laura’s pale and clammy face tilted a little.
“I…that’s…not true.”

Carmilla blinked pulling back to look her full in the face. “Cupcake, I know you’ve got a lot going on up here,” she pointed tenderly to her roommate’s forehead, “but that’s one hundred per cent true.”

Oh God.

Carmilla tensed up as she realised exactly what she had said. But it had been so easy to forget in that brief moment that this wasn’t Laura, her Laura she was talking to that it had slipped out. She wanted to backtrack immediately. In fact, she couldn’t believe what had fallen out of her mouth but unexpectedly the flickering upturn at the corner of Laura’s mouth grew a little even as she berated herself.

“…Take it back.”

Carmilla froze. “Uh…nope?”

Laura frowned. “Take it back.”

“Not gonna happen,” came the response. “You can’t make me.”

The thin moist film covering Laura’s eyes almost seemed to clear a little at the complete childishness of that reply and the human’s gaze fell to their interlocked fingers as she squeezed them experimentally.

“Carm, can I ask something?”

If hearing that well-worn nickname fall from Laura’s mouth made her heartbeat double in the space of a millisecond, the thought of the infinite number of questions she could ask doused it immediately sobering Carmilla in an instant.

She nodded motioning her to ask.

“Whose blood is that on the floor?”

Laura reached a small hand over to try and touch the pool of clotting dark liquid but Carmilla reached over to stop her before she could get any on her skin.

“And why does my neck hurt?”

Carmilla flinched, the question burning her skin. She wanted desperately to say that it was from the needle they had stuck in her. That the blood was someone else’s. That this was all just someone else’s fever dream but Laura had called her Carm, hadn’t she? That had to mean something.

“You don’t remember?” she said carefully.

There was that frown again but this time it was one laced with confusion rather than anything else.

“I don’t…everything’s kind of hazy. I was in a room and then…you were there. And…I think we were floating…and now we’re here.”

“That is some storytelling at its finest, cutie.”

Carmilla hoped that the fondness of her words cut through any callousness they might have contained. “But, to be honest…I…uh…”

Now that the time for her confession was due, all the words and reasons for what she’d done caught
in her throat like fishbones.

“I gambled that giving you filtered blood from Eifion would counteract what my Mother…”

All of a sudden, her hand clenched of its own accord at the memory of what she had done, crushing Laura’s fingers and the blonde yelped in response, prompting her roommate to pull her into a tight hug unwilling once again to look her in the eyes; her dark hair floating at the side of Laura’s eyeline.

“I just didn’t know what else to do. You were convulsing and you wouldn’t wake up. And…doing nothing wasn’t an option. I know I promised I’d never bite you without permission …that I’d never hurt you, I know we had a rule and it was a good rule for a good reason but I…”

She didn’t know what the end of that sentence was. It hung in the air around them heavy and dense.

The exact combination of words didn’t seem to matter though because after a brief hesitation she felt Laura turning inside her grip and a thin pair of arms circle her, pulling tight against the small of her back.

A whisper curled into the shell of her ear. “Thank you Carm. For whatever you did and however you did it.”

She almost passed out. Hell, Laura’s arms felt like the only thing holding her up right then.

A weak, hiccupping cough escaped from her mouth. “Oh God, Your welcome cutie... Anytime.”

“Oh well maybe not anytime. I’m not sure we should make this a regular thing. No offence.” Said Laura tiredly.

Carmilla smiled nestling closer to her until she was interrupted by a muffled sound.

“And do I want to know why my mouth tastes like I’ve been sucking on a bag of quarters?”

Oh.

“Uh…probably not?”

If Laura felt her cringing against her she chose discretion and nodded against the side of her neck. “We’re going to have to talk about all of this, aren’t we?”

“Yes we are, Laura.”

The seriousness in Carmilla’s tone was new and on instinct Laura pulled back to scrutinize her expression but it gave nothing away. Her cool skin on Laura’s palms was enough to provide some reassurance though.

“But…just to…my face is still my face, right?” she mumbled. “The same one I had this morning?”

A relieved laugh answered her as much as the fingers that moved to cup her cheek. “Like I said, infuriatingly cute and irrepressible. Check and check.”

She didn’t say that it was still rounder than it had felt back in their room. Paler. Haunted. A little lost looking. Things that she hoped would change with time and rest.

Leaning in, Carmilla breathed warm air a centimetre from Laura’s lips then delicately, with every
inch of restrain still left in her pressed her lips to the blonde’s for a moment.

“One hundred per cent Hollis charm,” she said instead as she reluctantly pulled back. And she meant it.

“But…”

The frown seemed to have migrated from Laura’s face to her own and her roommate paused.

“…We’re not done yet. As much as it’d be nice to sit here and celebrate, right now we need to put an end to my mother’s plan and burn this damn place to the ground.”

Though she appeared a little deflated by the idea that there was more of this nightmare to endure, one look at the blackening blood on the floor seemed to convince Laura that her roommate was right. And despite the rubberiness of her legs and the tilting of the floor when she moved Laura let Carmilla help her up onto her unsteady feet.

When she was sure she’d gained some of her equilibrium back Carmilla brushed hair from Laura’s forehead, took her hand and slowly pulled the smaller girl towards the pool; the oily slick of Eifion’s blood doing its best to paint swirls of pale blue on the dark noxious surface.

“We can’t just leave him there, can we?” Laura said sadly, staring at his damp back, his hair floating like upturned weeds on the surface.

“He’s gone somewhere dignity can’t reach, Cupcake” Carmilla replied quietly. She was staring intently at the fluid lapping against his corpse with a strange expression on her face. Then her hand was in her pocket pulling out something square and metal.

Lifting it up, she flicked the wheel and the Zippo lighter burst into life, sending gloomy shadows scudding across the pool.

“She knew I kept this thing for more than the aesthetic,” she said emotionlessly.

“Uh…Carm?”

Before the full brunt of the question fell from Laura’s lips, the decision was made and Carmilla had thrown the lighter into the liquid. Its maw swallowed the heavy object as if it contained the weight of the world and a volcano of flames burst from its ripple, dancing across the surface of the foul stuff, surging over Eifion’s back and lapping over the edges of the pool.

Where the magic leaked down from the metal strut above, those ferocious flares jumped from below using the miasma of dripping spells to shoot upwards through the air, clinging to the droplets before screaming across the metal platform above and all its intricate pieces.

The heat of it singed Laura’s skin as she stared dumbfounded at the inferno before her and she took a quick step backwards though it did little to combat the bone-dry air circling around in front of her face.

Carmilla however was standing still where she had been, either oblivious to the heat or simply enduring it.

Punishing herself perhaps.

A painful groaning sound erupted as the fire wound its way up the metal canopy towards the chain holding the entire thing in place; licking black marks over everything it touched. Metal and magick
no match for its hunger.

“Carm, what the…you’re going to destroy any evidence of what she’s done!” shouted Laura over the whooshing roar.

“She wouldn’t allow any evidence to survive either way creampuff. Caerwyn was proof of that.”

It was said with finality, with a bitterness that Laura felt eerily familiar with though she could quite say why. But that didn’t change the facts, did it? That didn’t give them license to do whatever the hell they wanted.

“So, we just scorch this place from the earth?! Carm, there are still students upstairs. And even if we …” Laura tried to sort through the worm like thoughts in her brain twisting over and under each other as if trying to escape the heat, “…even if we somehow get them out of here, there are going to be other students that need this place. Not because of infections or spells but…because they’re struggling and they need help.”

The firelight reflected in the black pools of her eyes giving Carmilla a strange monstrous visage but the apologies underneath softened them a little as she turned and taking a step forward ran her free hand through her roommate’s limp hair.

“Laura listen. Eifion made sure that my Mother won’t have her elixir anymore. But even without a stock of the Cael’s blood there’s no way she didn’t give samples to her little science minions upstairs to try and synthesize. She doesn’t just have plans, she has back up plans and back-ups for her back-ups.”

Carmilla sighed. “Her hold on this place is absolute and with all the medical and lab equipment here, with what it can do, she could be back in a position to spread this thing within weeks. Eif’s sacrifice would have been for nothing.”

Laura sniffed, searing air surging up her nostrils. “But what about the people who need it?”

That hand wove its way to the back of her neck. “This is a government registered institution. In the short-term students could be referred to local council facilities. Outsourcing’s all the rage these days, right?” Carmilla gently leant her forehead against Laura’s and the smaller girl felt the barest hint of teeth against her skin.

A smile.

She was smiling.

“Ok, what?” said Laura apprehensively.

Carmilla’s smile grew. “Nothing. It’s just…every time I think I’ve lost you, you do something to remind me that you’re far too stubborn to let that happen.”

Laura smiled a little herself at that. Before a brief coughing fit overtook her.

“They can rebuild, you know. They’ve done it before. It’ll go down as a random case of arson,” added Carmilla.

“Yeah. Or…”

Laura had a glint in her eye that caught the vampire’s attention, drawing her back. “Or, cutie?”

She bit her lip. “Or maybe someone could make an anonymous call to the Styrian Herald offices
implying that it wasn’t boring old arson. That the Dean of Students was somehow involved in this.” She pursed her lips. “I mean there wouldn’t be any evidence but the suspicions might shine a spotlight on her right when she’s trying to regroup. Force her to go on a media offensive so that she looks like the kind and caring administrator she’s supposed to be.”

Gauging her roommate’s reaction, she was thrown a little when Carmilla laughed fully this time and planted a kiss on her cheek before retreating. “Fighting through all that bureaucracy and publicity would keep her busy for months.”

“And by the time this place is redone maybe your Mother will have moved onto another project, one that isn’t squarely in the glare of the media?”

“Cupcake, you’re a genius.”

A blush suffused her cheeks. “Not really. But thanks.”

She chanced a quick glance at the blackening, disintegrating shell of Eifion’s body and didn’t feel quite so pleased with herself anymore.

Carmilla seemed to notice the change in her demeanour though and grabbing her hand in solidarity, led them firmly to the exit away from the hot silted air. The heavy fire door took all of the vampire’s strength to open but as soon as they were through, she propped it to keep it from closing then they retraced their steps, grateful for the cleaner untainted air in the corridors.

Neither of them spoke as they moved, each taking a wall but their shared intentions were clear. There hadn’t been anyone on the lower levels when they had come down before but just to be sure, they checked each lab and office window for signs of habitation as they staggered past; neither willing to accept anymore deaths on their conscience.

So far, there didn’t seem to be a soul around though. Maybe luck was on their side this time. Just this once.

The next set of stairs waited and Carmilla held the door open for Laura to head upwards. They cleared the middle floor in record time despite Laura’s obvious tiredness, checking as they went then moved upwards again to the main floor.

Laura pulled up next to the wall for a moment, breathing hard.

“You doing ok?”

Laura nodded. “Just catching my breath. I think maybe I should try doing some cardio next semester.”

She licked her lips. “There’s no sign of your Mother though so at least that’s a…”

“You really should be careful what you wish for Miss Hollis.”

A slender figure stalked out of a side door blocking the corridor in front of them and Carmilla instinctively stepped in front of her companion.

“Way to jinx us Cupcake,” she murmured.

“I didn’t realise she was the freaking Candyman,” Laura whispered back.
The Dean glared at the pair of them causing them to fall silent, her long fingers tapping against her hip.

“I’m very unhappy Mircalla. I thought we had an understanding on the concept of futility in this situation.”

“What can I say, I’m an eternal optimist.” She growled back.

As they stared each other down, curling wisps of smoke began seeping under the stairway door behind the two students and a roaring sound followed by exploding glass indicated the rush of flames somewhere below.

“It seems you’ve cost me a pretty penny with all your firebug theatrics.”

“Something tells me your bank balance can take the hit.”

The Dean didn’t reply but a languid flick of her wrist sent Carmilla careening into the nearby wall where she slumped heavily to the floor, neck cracking loudly enough for everyone to hear. Her human roommate gasped and moved as if to go to her but another wrist motion warned her to stay securely in place.

“Let the adults talk, Dear. We wouldn’t want you getting hurt before your allotted time, would we?”

Carmilla pulled herself up to her feet and launched herself at her mother, the patronising tone in her voice kindling the rage and fear inside her veins but before she could swerve she was sent flying into a locked door, the metal handle punching its way into her kidney. The pain was intense but the sensation of warm metal also registered groggily in her brain; the fire below seeping through the floors and ceilings getting closer and closer.

“And where do you think you’re going my Sweet?”

Laura could only watch as Carmilla’s mother sauntered towards her daughter, a cold smile cut into her features.

“Mircalla, Mircalla. You were supposed to be the most intelligent of my progeny but look at you. Even a puppy knows not to attack when it’s been kicked enough times. And yet you keep on coming.”

Carmilla held her side. “Points for tenacity?”

A stony expression took the place of the smile. “No more points for you my shining girl.” Reaching down, her spine curving delicately she grabbed Carmilla’s injured side and forced her upwards.

Laura couldn’t just stand there and watch. Taking a single step forward, she focused on the brunette’s pallid skin.

“Carm, isn’t there anything we can do to…I don’t know bind her or something?!”

The Dean turned to her for a moment, one eyebrow raised. “You do know it’s rude to talk about people as though they are not there, don’t you?”

Carmilla took the opportunity her Mother’s divided attention afforded her and peered at Laura. “Her magicks are too powerful to contain without an amulet or object to draw them into…. You have anything like that on your person?”
Laura looked at her askance. “Gee I must have left my charm collection in my other jacket.”

The Dean simply shrugged and returned her attention to her daughter.

“It makes no difference how deeply seated may be the trouble, how hopeless the outlook, a sufficient realisation of love will dissolve it all. Emmet Fox.” She intoned with a sly amusement. “The man for all his praise was an idiot. You see that now, don’t you?”

Carmilla’s face hardened at the slight, more for Laura’s sake than her own not that the tiny human would know what her mother meant by that dig. The insolent look on her face must have antagonised the Dean though because suddenly an ice-cold hand was wrapping itself around her throat, closing it off with expert precision.

The act and the pain etched into Carmilla’s face made Laura want to retch. She fought the urge because she was the only one who could do anything. And at that realisation her hand gripped the wall and her mind tunneled in on itself, searching for any spells or incantations she had read that might help them out. Despite the fact that everything in her brain right now seemed to come back fractured and incomplete.

She remembered a woodcut image she’d seen in the library depicting the thumb of a hangman boiled in a handful of lake-water at high noon.

Helpful.

Or there. Some Latin calligraphy proclaiming Adiuro vos…Adiuro vos…something sprung into her mind’s eye. A vision of yellowed parchment that talked about distrust and defence of the self.

The Dean meanwhile leaned conspiratorially towards Carmilla’s ear. “You’re so interested in all my plans? Then let me tell you what is going to happen now. First, I’m going to sink my teeth into your neck and ignoring the undoubtedly terrible taste I’ll find there I’m going to drain you until you can’t even stand. Then I’m going to take your little pet there and drink her dry, while you watch; unable to do anything about it. You’re going to watch the life flicker out in her eyes knowing that it was all your fault. And next? Oh, I have such wonderful tortures lined up for you with the fires you’ve started, my artless girl.”

Laura shut her eyes and screwed up her face, willing her mind to just think in straight lines for a moment.

There was something. Something about burning a jar of black candle-fat on Samhain on sacred ground. No.

Something else about frayed rope tied around the ankle in three knots…nope, that didn’t help at all. That was for holy men not vampires.

She was ready to scream in frustration when something, some small kernel of information flickered in the recesses of her mind. Something about the cinders of duplicity…

The fragments of disloyalty…
She inhaled sharply and stared over at Carmilla.

Could it work…

It was a long shot.

But what other choice did she have?
Laura wrung her hands as she peered across the corridor. “Carm, do you think you could take your shirt off?”

Carmilla’s eyes bulged behind her mother’s grip. “Not really… the time, Cupcake..” she croaked.

Silencing the critical part of her brain, Laura went into action reaching down to grip the edges of her shirt instead before pulling it up and over her head, leaving her standing there in just her white bra and jeans.

Carmilla gaped at her from out of the corner of her eye but she ignored it as she turned the shirt inside out and ripped into its seams. Tearing the thing into rough strips took some effort especially at the collar but she managed it just about and clutched the ribbons of material in her fist.

She looked up. The Dean still had Carmilla in a chokehold, her fangs bared and her back to Laura so she tiptoed forward. Everything inside her begged her to prise those rock-hard fingers away from her roommate’s throat but she choked down that instinct and with burning eyes slowed so that she could kneel down next to a pair of glossy delicately edged heels.

Then she laid the first strip on the ground. The second was arranged so that it was just touching the other and snaked around in a curve. She kept placing them so that they were touching until they formed a ragged unbroken circle around the Dean’s feet then she stood up backing away.

It was the sound of her sneaker squeaking on the floor as she moved backwards that finally caught the Dean’s attention and her head twisted around to glance at her.

“Is there something I can help you with?” She said archly.

“Why don’t you come over here and find out? Unless you’re too scared to ruin your outfit with the blood of one puny human.”

Laura couldn’t believe those words had come out her mouth without her voice breaking. Neither it seemed could the Dean who was looking absolutely astounded with a side serving of complete effrontery.

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “What did you say to me you little insect?”

Laura put her hands on her hips. “I said come and pick on someone your own size, bitch.”

That did it.

Carmilla felt the pressure on her oesophagus release as her Mother turned around. Sliding clumsily to the side, she massaged it wincing.

And she watched as her Mother tried to take a step forward and found herself thwarted, unable to move even a toe beyond the circle of material at her feet.

“What…what is this?”

Laura didn’t move. “Nothing special. Just some cotton. Polyester. Maybe a little linen…coated with the ashes of someone you betrayed.”

The Dean’s face paled.

And Laura took a step closer. “You know I was kind of pissed when Carmilla blew what was left of Caerwyn all over me. And I really wished I’d had the time to shower before everything here went to hell. But turns out she did us both a favour. Because correct me if I’m wrong, but even in death, disloyalty to those you’ve made a pact with lives on. In their skin. In the dust of their bones. And it
clings on, existing only to pay that debt back. That’s what the books say, at least.”

Carmilla moved painfully from her spot until she was standing next to Laura. “You always said the Cupcake here had an earthy kind of charm. Looks like you were more right than you knew.”

As realisation sunk in and her Mother struggled rather unbecomingly to move in any direction with a series of most unlady-like jerks and kicks, a single stream of flame burst through from underneath the lino to their right and surged up the wall. The cardboard-like porous material in the ceiling tiles ignited almost instantly and the fire clawed joyously across the entire roof of the corridor, thick grey smoke billowing behind it; small burning bits of polystyrene dropping onto everything.

Carmilla drew Laura to her as she covered her mouth with her hand but shook her head at the Dean. “Looks like someone’s been using cheap materials in her construction projects, Mother.” She tutted loudly. “What would the health and safety board say about that?”

A strip light shattering a few metres away interrupted her taunting and Carmilla turned to Laura, quickly unbuttoning her shirt, shucking it off and pulling it around the girl’s shoulders. “Put this on and cover your mouth with the sleeve, ok?”

Laura took it gratefully, trying her best not to stare at the thin vest top it left her roommate with.

“We have to get the other patients out,” she said in a muffled voice and Carmilla nodded.

“It seems we’ll have to bid you adieu then Mother. Do enjoy your warm and carefree retirement, won’t you?”

Carmilla felt Laura grab her wrist and with a complicated mixture of emotions coalescing in her gut she let her pull her around, the pair of them turning away to walk quickly towards the far rooms.

“Mircalla.”

The plea went unanswered.

“Mircalla…”

They kept walking.

“Carmilla, wait.”

It was only when she heard that name that Laura felt herself pulled to a stop.

“This won’t kill me or even hold me for long. You know that.”

At that Carmilla turned and gave her Mother her full attention. “I know.”

She returned the hard gaze looking at her. “But now you’re going to feel what it’s like to be trapped. In a space, too small to contain everything you are, everything you’ve been while fire and hell rain down on you. That’s enough for me.”

She pivoted around but then turned back quickly. “Oh, and just so you know. That wasn’t the last of the ashes. I stopped by your apartment on my way here to pour myself some liquid courage from your fine wine collection. I left you a little present in one of the bottles. I’m not going to tell you which one. I’m sure you’re smart enough to figure that out for yourself, right?”

That said, Carmilla turned her back to her Mother for the final time and left her there, surrounded by clouds of smoke and rivulets of flame.
As they burst into the double doors of the ward, Laura nudged her.

“Did you really put some ash in her wine?”

Carmilla grinned. “Nope. But she doesn’t know that. And just to be sure, she’ll have to clear out the contents of her entire wine cellar. Her very ancient and expensive wine cellar.”

“You’re kind of evil.”

Carmilla’s grin wasn’t so convincing this time. “So, they tell me.”

Damn.

Laura hesitated. “Carm…I didn’t mean…”

“Bigger problems, Cupcake, don’t worry about it.”

The vampire turned her attention to the six occupants of the room who seemed to be milling around in a small tight knit group next to the window, whispering to themselves in the place that was furthest away from the smell of burning and the clouds of smoke that now blew in from the open doorway.

“You got any tips on how to corral them out of here?”

Laura gritted her teeth and wandered to within a few feet of the other patients.

“Hey, we have to leave guys, it’s not safe to stay here.”

Their muttering didn’t even gutter at her words and none of the patients even gave her a second glance.

She took another step closer. “Seriously. You’re in danger. You know what danger means, right?”


“Nineteen fifties TV show hosted by Dick Sharp,” added the girl with her black hair tied up in a plait.

Carmilla rolled her eyes. “Fantastic, well at least we’ll all have learned something before we burn to death.”

Laura slapped her arm. Taking the plunge, she grasped the raven-haired girl’s elbow. “You have to come with us, ok?”

The girl screamed and jerking her arm away covered her ears with both of her hands as she shrank back into the corner of the room.

“That’s just great,” said Carmilla. “You got any other ideas up your sleeve, Zombie Whisperer?”

Suppressing her irritation at the comment and the way her thoughts swam about in muddied streams Laura tried to put herself in their place, tried to think back to how muddled her thinking had been when she’d woken up here. How she had only been able to cling to certain words or images in order to ground herself. How she’d felt like nothing more than a child.

A lost kid.

She had to find something they’d all understand.
Something basic. Instinctive.
Like the purple flower that had consumed her thinking.

She remembered sitting under the oak tree dejected and ashamed playing with the petals between her fingers, the smell, the texture sending her mind wandering back to…

Wait.

Reaching out slowly with no real idea if this might work she pinched a small piece of the chubby boy’s shirt between her outstretched fingers. The boy who had been kind enough to unstrap her from her restraints.

She hardened her face. “Why are you still wearing this mucky thing?”

The boy stared at her placidly and a bolt of guilt flashed up her spine. But she had to do this. It was for his own good.

“You know stains like this don’t come off, don’t you?” She suddenly lifted her hand and ran her fingers through his messy hair, pulling the tips as if trying to rip something out. “God it’s everywhere. All over you. Did your Mother raise you in a barn?”

Watching from the side-lines, Carmilla’s gaze pivoted between the door and Laura’s theatrical little show with confusion.

Laura didn’t notice however and simply smacked the boy’s shirt cuffs with annoyance. “Aren’t you supposed to be a medical student? Does infection control mean anything to you? Bare below the elbow and all of that?”

She spied a bottle of water on the bedside cabinet nearby and striding over picked it up before coming back and throwing the water all over the front of his shirt.”

“You need to clean yourself up. How are you going to inspire confidence in your patients if you look like you just wandered in from a homeless shelter?”

He stared down at his own chest then his bottom lip began to quiver.

“Not…not homeless.”

The silver haired girl who had been watching took a step closer. “Homeless. Hobo. Migratory worker or homeless vagabond.”

His eyes widened as if that had been an accusation. “not…not vagabond?”


The boy sniffed shaking his head as the five other patients focused their attention on him.

“Grime from Germanic root meaning mask.”

“Dirt, grease or soot.”

“Commonly characterised by amorphous particles of carbon and tar.”

“You’re covered in it.” Laura frowned, doing her best to channel the disappointed anger she’d fought against all her young life then looked around her. “All of you. It’s everywhere. All over you. Don’t you see it? How can you not see it?”
The others fell silent and she pointed a finger at each of them. “You and you and you. Especially you. Look at yourselves. Aren’t you ashamed?”

A sea of stricken looks emerged as they each realised they were included in her indictment and one or two began brushing their hands over their clothes.

“Well that won’t do any good!” Laura stayed in character as best she could at their child-like antics though she felt like a monster doing it. “Look it’s all over you.”

She clapped her hands together as another thick cloud of smoke obscured the air in the room. “The only way we’re going to fix this is if all of you come with us right now."

The silver haired girl shook her head but Laura stamped her foot. “Don’t shake your head at me young lady. You’re covered in the stuff and you’re too stupid to even see it.” Sneakily, Laura rubbed her hand on her jeans then grabbed the girl’s wrist before pulling her hand away again. She held it up in front of them, the layer of dust and ash on her palm clear for them all to see.

“And that’s just from touching you! You’re infected. It’s on you. In your bloodstream. It’s getting worse the longer we stand here debating this.”

The group let out a mishmash of moans as they checked their skin but Laura slapped her hands together again to get their attention.

“Everyone out now.”

They stared at her and she groaned. “Everyone outside now.” She stared into a series of wide fearful eyes. “Now! Before this gets any worse.”

Moving forward she snuck around the back of the group and pushed the boy in the small of his back.

“You want to get clean, don’t you? Disinfection units are outside.”

He stumbled forward two steps and she did the same to the silver haired girl.

The girl took a few steps and the boy did the same. One then another. And Laura worked her way around covering her mouth every few seconds with her sleeve as she brushed their clothes, screwing up her face before pressing them towards the door.

One by one they moved. Jerky and panicking. But moving.

As they crossed the threshold of the door Carmilla watched them pass with wide eyes but she said nothing. Wouldn’t risk breaking the spell.

And between the two of them, Laura nudging and instructing as they went, the vampire at the head of the line pulling them on, the two of them herded the group down the corridor; the flyers flapping wildly in the warm smoky air, keeping them packed into a tight formation as they made their way down stairs that weren’t built for groups of people to use at the same time.

The clean air that signalled they had made it outside was beautiful, invigorating but they didn’t stop. Didn’t stop prodding and bumping the stragglers forwards away from the groaning crackling building.

As they finally made it onto the soft grass lawn outside the building, Laura drove them even further back until they were a safe distance from the smoke and smell of burning emanating from the brick building they had just escaped from.
Nodding with relief she turned back to the brunette to find her pinning her with a curious gaze.

“What?”

“What was that in there?”

Laura shrugged a tad sheepishly. “I was trying to think of some universal thing that everyone has drummed into them as a kid. Something they’d get told off for. Get punished for. I suppose my Mom actually has her uses after all.”

Carmilla grinned at her. “You really are something else, Sundance.”

And she meant every word of it.

As the two of them stared at the glowing corona trapped inside the windows on the first floor of the building and listened to the creaks and groans of heated metal, their smiles slowly faded as the thoughts of everything that had happened in there filtered back.

The smell of charred cinders tainted the air now. Not that the small group of patients seemed to notice. However, the odd student walking across campus certainly seemed to, speeding away as they did in ones and twos as they pressed their cell phones to their ears.

“What do we do about them?” Laura said sadly staring at the infected students as they puttered about barely speaking, mesmerised by the small flowers that gave the landscaped bordered some colour.

“The fire service request EMT support as standard for a blaze of this size.”

Laura didn’t have the energy to ask how she knew that.

“They’ll be able to take them somewhere they can get some help in the short term.”

“And in the long term?”

Carmilla glanced at her. At her pale face and slumping shoulders. At the weight of everything she had been through. “If you’re up to one more needle today maybe we can get Laf to take some of your blood and take a look at synthesizing some antibodies. Send it by anonymous mail to wherever they end up.”

Laura nodded wearily at the thought, flinching as a scream of what could have been rage or pain burst from inside the building, just loud enough to break through the growing crackling.

“And your Mother?”

Carmilla frowned. Can take care of herself.”

Laura gave a wry smile. “You don’t feel guilty? Because if you do, it’d be totally under…”

“I feel a whole lot of things right now Cupcake.” Carmilla pulled her into a one-armed hug as she stared at the building.

“What do we do about us?” the blonde added in a smaller voice.

Carmilla blew out a breath. “We get out of here before anyone connects us to this.”

She crooked her arm, waiting for her roommate to slip hers through. “Are you… ready to go home?”
Laura sniffed, rubbing at her eyes. “God, yes.” She swallowed. “Lead the way Carm.”

So Carmilla did.
Aftermath

Chapter Summary

It's the conclusion bitches- take a bow!

Chapter Notes

A/N: Man oh man this fic is done! I just want to say thanks for every single person who read it on A03 or ff.net and double thanks to anyone who took the time to comment along the way- you guys are my absolute heroes and I never would have made it here without you. Anyways here’s the last chapter, hope it doesn’t disappoint. Feel free to find me on twitter or Tumbr if you fancy chatting (@Heligena) I’m always up for making new friends. And new stories hopefully coming soon. Vive La Hollstein y’all! *drops the mic- then picks it up and puts it back on the holder when the stage manager glares at me*

The last thing on Laura’s mind as she crossed the threshold was a bent screw. It jutted out from the door hinge in the corner and groaned unenthusiastically as her and Carmilla made their way inside, though, with everything that had happened lately, with the way they both felt right now, it could just as easily have been either of them that made that sound.

Carmilla’s arm gripped Laura’s waist as they moved inside, holding her weight up as she sagged against her and for her part Laura kept her roommate semi-steady with a pale hand that was wrapped around her wrist. The pulsating in the brunette’s kidney caused her to grit her teeth for a moment as they made their way past the moaning doorjamb and in sympathy, without even looking at her Laura nudged her shoulder tiredly.

And just like that the two of them staggered in, refugees from a nightmarish few days that were finally over; a small instinctive back-kick from Carmilla closing the door behind them and shutting out the world.

They were safe. Home.

Laura felt a bubble of relief build up underneath her ribs but unexpectedly it caught there when she peered around the shadowy recesses of their room. Because everything looked the same as she remembered. It all looked the same; a typical college campus room.

Except that it wasn’t.

The shadows- they were slanting too much. And the windowsill. It seemed as if it were balanced higher up on the wall than it had been before.

Carmilla’s thick duvet, the one that was still heaped up in a messy lump on the bed where they had left it called to Laura dead on her feet as she was, even without the brunette curled up inside. It
looked warm. Comforting. But even that wasn’t quite right. It was too big. Piled up too high. Too ridged and unkempt.

…Not that she even wanted to assume that’s where she was going to sleep there….had no reason to think that she’d earned any kind of right to crawl in there whenever she wanted and … after everything…

Great.

Now she was rambling.

Awesome.

Laura stared down at the floor, at the threadbare carpet she’d been pottering across for months without even thinking about and carefully scraped it with the toe if her sneaker.

The noise it made sounded different too.

Too distorted, too muffled to be right.

It was only when she felt Carmilla move hesitantly away from her side that that feeling of displacement swelled up out of control, overpowering her but still she didn’t say anything, didn’t complain and instead chose to keep her thoughts to herself, peering around the room for signs that someone might have been in there, might have moved everything around just a centimetre, just a millimetre.

As ridiculous as the idea was.

It was unfortunate that her roommate, pragmatic as she always seemed, wasn’t immune to the sensation either. With her senses on overload and the smell of ash and asbestos still assaulting Carmilla’s nose, not to mention her mother’s screams ringing in her ears, everything she looked at felt… off.

Off kilter. Off balance.

And the relief she’d hoped would come when they made it back just wasn’t there.

Frowning, suddenly overcome with a strange sense of inhibition that any other day, any other week she would have lambasted herself for, Carmilla stopped moving, loath to disturb anything. Her head was woozy in the way she imagined Alice’s must have been after landing at the bottom of the rabbit hole and drinking one of those small labelled vials.

She felt as if her body was two sizes too big and couldn’t understand why the familiarity of the room with its stained wood and mass produced angles wasn’t providing any comfort.

Why instead it was more alarming than anything.

Jarring and unreal.

It’s just adrenaline flushing through your system you idiot.

It wasn’t an unconvincing argument. But when she glanced around at all the everyday things she found herself exposed to without even thinking about it- the desk with ginger crumbs scattered around Laura’s laptop- Laura’s yellow pillow lounging on Carmilla’s bed, clashing wildly with her covers- her own pair of knee knee-high boots leaning up against the wardrobe too straight, too neat-it was all wrong. Too haphazard... Or too perfectly placed.

Something.

Something… wrong.

She couldn’t let Laura see that though.
She’d been through enough, been through more than any college student should ever go through in
their first year; hell, in any year.
She had to be strong.
Comforting.
She owed her that at least.

To cover up her rising discomfort Carmilla cleared her throat, a sour trick she remembered her mother teaching her in the receiving rooms of a local duke and turned around to find Laura staring at the room around them with wide eyes and a turbulent look on her face.

Because of course it wasn’t just her feeling this.
It hadn’t just been Carmilla feeling anything since she’d been dropped into this room, this place- a pawn in her mother’s endless game. Since Laura Hollis had come rip-roaring into her life.

That was a comforting thought at least.
Complicated and dangerous. But comforting nonetheless.
So she took the initiative.

“Cupcake?” Carmilla said questioningly from a few feet away.

Laura didn’t reply; simply scuffing her sneaker against the lino.

Deliberately ignoring the lack of response, not wanting to spook the other girl Carmilla kept her movements slow and telegraphed, crossing the carpet towards the human. Reaching her, she paused.

“What is it?”

Laura blinked distantly. “It’s not the same …”

Carmilla was about to ask her what she meant when she spoke again.

“…The room.”

Ah.

The vampire stepped in front of her, the movement not invasive, but resolute enough to draw Laura’s charcoal pupils up to hers.

“Why isn’t it the same?” said Laura quietly and Carmilla gave a half smile, a thousand glib answers sitting on her tongue that she refused to say.

“…Because we see things as we are not as they are, cutie.”

At the burst of nervous frustration that bloomed in Laura’s eyes, her hand lifted up into an act of submission.

“I know, I know you’re done with platitudes but- I think-in this case it might actually be true. I don’t think it’s the room that’s changed.” She sucked in a breath. “It’s us.”

Laura processed that for a moment, turning her head this way and that as if she were trying to find evidence that Carmilla was wrong. Coming up blank, it seemed.

“But we’ve fought your mother before…we’ve faced Hell like this before and it didn’t…."

The little finger on Carmilla’s raised right hand smoothly reached out and rested against Laura’s pale cheek. “You’re resilient, Laura. Your body’s just trying to keep up right now. You’re tired and you’re fighting off a bunch of stuff in your bloodstream.”
"But you feel it too, right?"

Carmilla nodded tiredly. An admission perhaps, that they were more alike than she would ever have admitted out loud. An admission of something.

She lowered her voice. "I’m sure it’ll wear off when we’ve had some sleep. Had a chance to regroup and recover."

"And she definitely won’t come for us?"

Carmilla couldn’t help herself, at the smaller girl’s panicked expression her other hand moved to cup Laura’s face.

"Not a chance. You saw all the SLTV trucks out there. Once she gets free, she’s going to be tied up for weeks with this. You’re home now…I promise no-one’s going to find us here."

Laura tilted her face so that her right cheek leaned into Carmilla’s hold and without thinking hmmmed lightly; a thousand splintered emotions rushing through her. A large portion of the relief she had been hoping for a moment ago. Appreciation for Carmilla’s concerned gaze, for the tremor she was trying so hard to mask at the place where her wrists met their palms. Guilt- at the memory of hurt in Laf’s eyes when they had told her at what had been going on and the reasons they hadn’t wanted to bring her into things. Pride.

Huh. That one she didn’t expect but it was there all the same- fledgling but still burning. That she had gotten everyone out of the building before the fire took over. That she hadn’t let the haze in her mind take over completely.

The sensation of that same little finger skimming her cheek moved a little, drawing her out of her thoughts as it grazed her ear and moved cautiously down to her neck.

"Does it hurt?" said Carmilla.

A look of tired incredulity flitted across Laura’s shadowy face as if to say ‘which part’ and in answer her counterpart’s fingertips hesitated again but began to run across the small bump on the right side of Laura’s neck where Laf’s sterilised needle had taken vial after vial of blood from her.

"It’s ok. I guess maybe I’m getting kind of used to feeling like a pincushion…” She bit her lip. “And if it helps those others…”

Carmilla nodded, unwilling to relinquish her delicate hold on Laura’s chin. Her skin might have been pallid but it had lost none of its warmth and she allowed it to infuse her fingertips even as the sticky coating on its surface tried to intervene.

"Hey, how do you feel about showering and changing into your pj’s? she asked in a whisper.

The idea of standing under a fountain of hot water and letting it wash everything away was like a glorious dream to Laura but just as she went to answer in the affirmative her posture stiffened, taking Carmilla by surprise. Fingers suddenly plucking at a loose thread on the thick shirt cuff hanging over her right wrist Laura sucked in a bashful breath and stared up at the shadowy wall to the right of Carmilla’s face.

"Um a shower sounds great but…I…Is it ok…would it be all right if I kept your shirt to sleep in?"
Carmilla’s chest puttered at the request, despite the fact that her face didn’t betray the sensation. She stared at the smaller girl instead with questioning eyes and Laura, in typical Laura fashion seemed to take her lack of a response in a different way.

She took a step backwards.

“I know that’s weird… It’s weird and gross, right?” she stuttered. “To put it back on after getting all cleaned up. And I mean, you were just being all gallant and gentlewomanly giving it to me when everything was crazy back there and it probably reeks of ash and smoke and and I don’t know, burning insulation or something…I mean there’s probably stuff on it that I don’t even know by now…but it…”

She quickly wrapped it around herself looking like little more than a small child.

“…it’s kind of the only thing that makes me feel …safe?”

It was a question, not a statement.

“…The…the only thing?” Carmilla asked quietly then.

Laura lifted her chin with wide eyes when she realised the implications of her words.

“No no no Carm…that’s not, I just didn’t want to assume that you’d want to…I know what they say about assuming, it makes an ass of, well not you that would be rude after everything you’ve done for me but…anyway I figured it might help me sleep later if I was in my own bed… by myself, you know. Which is totally fine because it is my bed. And there’s a lot to be said about not falling into co-dependence. And it would be healthy…I guess.”

Carmilla’s eyes softened at the rambling mess of an answer and she unconsciously stepped forward sliding her hands under the smaller girl’s flailing elbows.

“Take a breath Laura.” She smiled. “Weird and gross or not, I have no problem with that. You can sleep in my shirt anytime you want.”

Laura’s heart sang at the small grin on Carmilla’s face. Right up until she realised that the vampire hadn’t said anything about the sleeping arrangements she mentioned. And she knew she’d overstepped again.

Of course she had.

Cheeks burning, Laura pushed a matted strand of hair behind her ear, remembering the internal debate she’d had last time she’d snuck back into this room and just like then, somehow she managed to school her expression into something approaching detachment.

“Ok I’ll…just…go grab that shower then. Thanks.”

Grabbing the towel that was shoved underneath the satchel at the end of her bed Laura scuttled into the bathroom and shut the door before leaning back against it.

After an eternity, she somehow found the energy to drag her spine away from that solid piece of wood and tiptoed across the room to stare dolefully at herself in the bathroom mirror. To take in the whiteness of her skin, how luminescent it was in the electric lighting, to realise how ridiculous her hair looked sticking to the side of her head. To notice the beads of gel collecting at the corners of her eyes.

Laura grimaced.
God, she wished Carmilla hadn’t seen her like this.

It was a stupid thought, she was aware of that. Carmilla had seen her at her worst after all. When she was yelling at her in the middle of the library and had walked out of there without giving her the chance to explain. When she was halfway to another planet on sedatives and wound up being carried out of the psych ward in a strong pair of arms…

When everything had gone dark and Laura’s lungs had stretched and burned…

When they had almost …

The memory of clawing at those fingers pressed against her head forced a single raw sob to escape her mouth and she clamped it down unwillingly, unable to deal with what might follow. She stumbled away from that messed up image of herself, turning the shower on instead, turning the dial as hot as it would go and shucking her clothes off climbed in, letting the powerful blast of water hit her parting and trickle down onto her face. She let streams of it pour through her eyelashes and down the bridge of her nose, holding her breath as she did so. Testing herself. Forcing herself to do it just to prove that she could and still pull in a long breath a few seconds later. That she wasn’t still in that pool.

Still trapped under there and this was all another of her fever dreams.

Laura didn’t know how long she stayed in there but the water was lukewarm at best when she gropingly turned the tap off and her eyelashes finally cleared. Stepping down onto the damp mat, she pulled a hand through her hair and gripped the ends to clear the excess water before wrapped herself in a towel. Then paused staring at the door.

She could just dry in here and slip Carmilla’s shirt back on along with her dirty underwear. The thought of that wasn’t quite so appealing as it had been though.

Should she saunter out in just the towel? But what message would that send? That today was just another day? Business as usual? Or that she was expecting her roommate to see her, all pale and bruised skin and expect her to disregard everything they’d talked about and fall at her feet? Neither option filled her with anything but mortification.

Smearing her hand along the misted-up mirror she stared into her own confused eyes. God, she was too tired for this kind of debate.

For hiding in here

Because Carmilla was out there. And so were their bedsheets and mattresses. Along with the memories of everything that had happened over the last few days. It was all there, ingrained in that room. Waiting for her to face those demons.

Wrapping herself in a towel, Laura paused one more time and finally, as steadily as she could opened the door, billows of steam escaping around her as she did so. Then she padded into the bedroom and stopped almost immediately; the guttering candles placed all around the room and the low light blazing from them halting her in her tracks.

“Uh, am I interrupting something?”
Carmilla looked like the kid who got caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Turning slowly from her place by the mirror where a collection of candles burned fitfully, she blushed a little.

“I… I thought maybe with all the stuff still circulating in your system you might want the lights down a bit and since my mother’s too cheap to put dimmer switches in the dorms….I figured I’d go…. old school.”

If that was an attempt to sound casual or suave it wasn’t the most successful. The attempt, Carmilla’s awkward efforts however more than made up for that and Laura giggled quietly; the worms inside her skull quieting for the first time in what felt like forever.

“You sure? I wouldn’t want to get in the way if you’ve got a hot date planned that you haven’t told me about.” She asked with the hint of a smile.

Carmilla looked up cheerlessly. “You think I would do that?”

Laura felt her stomach clench and quickly shook her head.

“I think if you did, that might be the thing that actually killed me dead.”

The room fell into silence for a moment and a hundred regrets swam through the blonde girl’s brain at her thoughtless words but somehow her jaw remained still momentarily.

“Carm…”

Carmilla stared at her, waiting for the end of that sentence. And Laura swallowed self-consciously.

“I didn’t mean…that came out wrong. I’m sorry. I just…shouldn’t be allowed to talk to people right now and I guess I’m more tired than I thought- I mean I must be for something like that to…”

Her words faded away.

The brunette might as well have been a statue the way she kept staring at her.

Right up until something snapped in her and she was moving, crossing the room, striding across it towards Laura. Still wearing only her towel Laura took a frantic step backwards, one hand holding the fabric against her and she wasn’t even a little prepared for the hands that landed on her hips holding her gently. Reassuringly.

Before she could ask any more questions, Laura found herself being pulled forwards, Carmilla’s gleaming eyes asking her to trust her as she drew her onwards then softly swung her around to face the full length mirror she had been standing next to when Laura came in. Stepping behind her so that her dark hair hung next to Laura’s neck in the reflection, Carmilla kept her hands resting on her roommate’s hips and motioned to the image of the two of them.

“How could I want anyone other than you?” she said gently.

It was Laura that blushed this time. “Carm, I look like Hell.”

Carmilla shook her head, fire in her eyes and the fingers on Laura’s hipbones squeezed slightly.

“Cupcake, you look like someone who conquered Hell and made it home.”

Carmilla didn’t say anything else as her arms moved to criss-cross Laura’s stomach, her warm body
pushed up against the smaller girl’s spine. Her chin almost resting on the uncovered crook of her left shoulder blade. The familiarity of the position sent a wave of something hot through Laura’s abdomen but she kept peering at reflection of the two of them with curiosity.

“My face…” she began but Carmilla cut her off.

“…is the face of a fighter.” There was a movement in her throat and then Laura felt the softest of kisses being placed underneath her ear. Her eyes fluttered shut.

“Is the face of a girl who took all the harsh words her mother threw at her and turned them into something that saved lives.”

Another feather-light kiss touched her skin.

“Is the face of a warrior and a saint.”

A soft sound escaped from Laura’s throat as Carmilla pressed her lips further down her neck.

Her own lips quirked upwards. “You think you might be overstating things a little?”

“No.”

The vehemence of that response caused Laura’s pupils to flick to the reflection of those behind her.

“Hyperbole’s not my thing, cutie,” she said with a serious expression.

Laura returned that grave gaze with one of her own.

“You realise all those things you just said apply to you as well, right?”

Carmilla shrugged but it was easy enough for Laura to see the way her whole body shook at her words and she smiled at the effect she had on the usually stoic vampire.

“You can deny it if you want, but it’s true,” she whispered leaning back a little. “You said it. We’re quite the pair.”

Carmilla caught her. Of course, she did and the pair of them stood there, in front of that shared mirror image in the glass; the dark blonde mesmerised by the intermittent breaths that tickled the back of her neck and her roommate squeezing her wrists against Laura’s abdomen as she took each breath one at a time.

“Yeah, we are, Laura.” She mumbled. “We really are.”

They stayed that way for so long that Laura couldn’t have put a time on it if she wanted to. They stayed that way for so long that her eyes began to flutter closed of their own accord, lost in Carmilla’s strong embrace and the heat next to her vertebrae.

It was only when she felt the pressure at her back lift a little that she snapped fully awake to find Carmilla’s image receding in the mirror. Not moving, not sure exactly what was happening Laura watched as Carmilla’s reflection wandered away behind her, eventually obscured by her own image in the mirror.

“Uh, Carm what…”

“I thought of a compromise,” said the voice from behind her.

Laura tried to see what she was up to in the glass but her eyes kept being drawn back to her own
undernourished silhouette in the mirror; pale and out of place without Carmilla’s presence to hold her up.

“A compromise for what?”

Carmilla stepped to her left for a moment and showed up in the mirror again. Her amused reflection pinned Laura with smouldering eyes and that alone was enough to send heat shooting once more through the smaller student’s core.

“How about…” Carmilla deliberately stepped back again so that Laura’s body hid her in the mirror.

“…instead of you putting my kind of gross shirt back on, undoing all that good work you did in the shower…”

Laura craned her neck around to try and see what was happening but Carmilla tutted at the movement and she reluctantly turned back to the mirror.

“…how about you wear this instead?”

Laura saw a disjointed likeness of Carmilla’s arm jutting out from behind her, something dangling from her grip. Something dark grey, that looked oddly familiar- like she’d seen it before. Recently. Like she’d seen it-uh….

On Carmilla. Like a second ago. Her vest top, the one she’d been wearing since giving up the shirt she’d worn over it.

“What do you think?”

Laura’s jaw dropped and her body swung around of its own volition before she could stop herself, her hands clinging to the edges of her towel.

To find Carmilla standing ram rod straight, her arm still clutching the vest top, the rest of her tucked neatly inside a long black tee that fell down to her thighs.

“Uh…I…. ” Laura stammered as the mental image of a naked Carmilla still reverberated inside her brain.

“Having a little trouble with vocabulary there, Hollis?”

Carmilla, all black material and pale legs stalked towards her.

“I thought…”

Carmilla grinned in an almost predatory way although the gentleness of her movements took any threat out of the situation.

“You thought what?” She stepped into Laura’s personal space with a lascivious grin. “I believe Mother might have some objections to students running their own private strip-shows from their dorm rooms.”

She leaned down so that her lips hovered near Laura’s right ear. “Although that alone would be worth giving it a go,” she whispered.

Pulling back, her hungry eyes grew tender as she held the tank top out to Laura.
“It’s yours. If you want.”

Grateful tears began to collect at the corners of Laura’s brown eyes as she reached out and carefully took the piece of clothing from Carmilla, letting the fabric slide through her forefinger and thumb.

“Thank you,” she managed to get out.

The brunette inclined her head in acknowledgement and just like before moved her hands onto Laura’s hips; resting there briefly before pulling her slowly forwards at an angle, careful so as not to cause Laura to stumble, until they stood next to Laura’s bed. Laura gulped as they came to a stop and glanced wistfully over at Carmilla’s own bed a few metres away.

Oh. Obviously. Laura had known really. That the shirt had been Carmilla’s way of telling her that it was better for them to sleep alone tonight. That she had been trying to be kind. Compassionate. Rational. That she was giving Laura a chance to heal and rest without any complications to keep her awake.

Of course, she was.

She watched with a sinking stomach as Carmilla padded away for a moment and opening their shared chest of drawers rifled through, pulling out a set of Laura’s sleeping shorts and some new pink underwear. Bringing them back she pressed them into Laura’s hand then with a bashful smile turned away, giving Laura some privacy to change.

The sweetness of the action hit Laura in the stomach, it was thoughtful and considerate so somewhat mechanically, lost in her own melancholy thoughts she took one last glance at Carmilla’s rigid spine then forced herself to drop her towel, pulling on the clothes quickly.

When she was done, she swallowed. “Uh, you can turn around now.”

Carmilla did so and surveyed her modestly with shining eyes.

“Much better,” she murmured and Laura shyly tucked a damp sheaf of hair behind her ear.

“So I guess we should both get some sleep huh…”

Turning back to her duvet, unwilling to let Carmilla see the deflated look on her face Laura’s fingers skittered across the plane of material covering her mattress.

A few feet away she could hear Carmilla’s boot scuffing against the carpet so it came as a complete shock when a second later, a hand touched her shoulder.

“Hey hey, you ok?”

Laura looked up to see a pair of concerned eyes looking back at her.

“Yeah. Yeah. I just…”

A line appeared between Carmilla’s brows as she took in Laura’s dejected posture and without warning, the brunette stepped backwards, one foot then another. When she reached her own bed, never taking her eyes from Laura’s shivering form Carmilla bent down and flattened out her duvet, pulling the top edge of the covers back before straightening up again.

“Laura Hollis.” She said with a soft glint in her eye. “I was wondering…” She hesitated. “…would
you do me the honour of sleeping in my bed tonight? Maybe…maybe every night …if you wanted?”

Laura sucked in a breath but in the time it took to reach her lungs her roommate had moved forward again and taken her left hand in hers.

“Laura, the shirt wasn’t a hint that I wanted…” She squeezed her fingers as Laura’s eyes filled up again. To be honest I don’t think I can sleep if you aren’t next to me. Not after everything that’s happened. How close I came to losing you.”

She pulled their intertwined hands up to her chest, her curls draping over their paired knuckles.

“Is that ok?”

Totally overwhelmed, Laura laughed and coughed at the same time and she wasn’t even embarrassed by the sound. She was just happy. Unbelievably unexpectedly elated.

“Don’t we still need to talk though?” she said.

Carmilla’s smile dimmed a little. “Yes we do.” It soon grew again though as the pair of them moved in synch over to her side of the room; caught up in a kind of inadvertent dance.

“But we have plenty of time to figure out a cure. And you heard what Laf said- how they have contacts in the local authorities who could get it to the infected students without raising any alarms.”

Laura blushed. “Is it terrible that I was actually kind of talking about us?”

Carmilla’s smile turned into a full blown grin. “We have plenty of time to figure that out too, if you’re willing.”

The pair shared a look of something small, something optimistic and hopeful and when Carmilla motioned to the bed Laura squealed as she dove in between the covers, scooting back to allow room for the brunette to clamber in in a slightly more graceful motion.

They stretched out then, turning to face each other, hands at their sides, taking the time to watch the rise of fall of each other’s chest. Feeling each other’s breath ghost against their lips.

“I’m going to make your pillow all damp,” said Laura in a hushed tone as the light from the candles flickered about the room.

“Well.” Replied Carmilla. “Technically it’s your pillow so I don’t really have a right to be mad about that.”

Snuggling a little closer, Laura let her toes gently touch Carmilla’s.

“Laura?”

Laura looked up with wide eyes wondering if she had overstepped again.

Carmilla was staring at her with such reverence that it was hard not to look away but she did her best, waiting for what was coming next.

“Can I kiss you now?” Carmilla said with almost silent wonder.

Laura’s heart almost convulsed in her chest and with a muffled nod she said, “Yes please.”

She was expecting Carmilla to hesitate, to take her time but before the words had even left her
mouth, Carmilla’s soft lips landed on hers.

Pressing herself against the small student, Carmilla gently grabbed both sides of Laura’s neck, her fingers unconsciously finding those unmarked spaces between her wounds and she kissed her. Softly. Humbly.

Passionately but still worshipping at the same time. And while Laura may have initially been thrown it didn’t take long for her instincts to kick in and for her to kiss her back, moulding her lips to Carmilla’s as if they’d always known them. As if they had been waiting for them her entire lifetime.

Rolling onto her back, Laura felt the weight and comfort of Carmilla’s body pressing down onto hers, her hair pooling against her chest and she responded hungrily, kissing her mouth with every inch of desire that blew through her like a tornado.

And oh God, it was the most amazing sensation. The other moments they’d shared had been incredible but this- this kiss that contained no hesitation, no buts, no caveats was as intense as anything Laura had ever felt.

And Carmilla’s low moan at the back of her throat when Laura put a hand on her hip did things to her lower down that she could barely contain.

Carmilla’s mouth smiled against hers, as if she knew exactly where Laura’s thoughts had gone and the tiny human blushed in response. Breath on breath, the heat of their skin sliding up against each other, legs intertwined she got her own back however when Carmilla opened her mouth to say something and Laura took the opportunity to feed off her roommate’s lack of inhibitions letting her tongue slip up against the brunette’s. And the second groan that escaped from Carmilla, the gravelly tone of it vibrating up into her teeth sent a shiver right down Laura’s spine.

Carmilla kissed her hot and ravenous, and Laura kissed her back with the same fervour, the pair of them so close that there wasn’t a millimetre of space between them.

It was only when Laura needed some oxygen in her lungs that the two of them eventually parted, their foreheads still together, eyes closed. Breath stilted.

“…Wow.”

“I second that,” said Carmilla softly.

The reverent look on her face changed though when Laura smacked her shoulder.

“Hey! What was that for?”

Laura mock glared at her, breathing hard. “Why on earth haven’t we done that sooner?”

Carmilla had the insight enough to look a little chagrined. And feeling a little unkind, Laura reached over, pushing a dark curl out of the other girl’s face.

“I didn’t mean that. Besides that’s on me too, right?”

She leant up on her elbow and kissed Carmilla again, tenderly, with apology full on the lips but with a heat underneath the surface. And Carmilla eagerly received the kiss, nipping at her a little when she took control.

Then Laura snuggled back down onto the pillow and shivered a little as she felt a thin arm slide over
her hip, wrapping her up, keeping her safe as it pulled her into the groove of Carmilla’s neck.

The familiar scent and warmth of the vampire’s skin soon sent a wave of lethargy through her but fighting to keep her eyes open, Laura couldn’t stop herself from asking the question that was still on her mind.

“Can you still smell it on me? The blood? That stuff?” she asked in a sleepy voice.

Carmilla licked her lips as she stared blearily up at the ceiling. “Nope. Just you.”

Laura nodded against her throat. “Is…is that a good thing?”

“It’s a beautiful thing, cutie.”

She laughed drowsily. “You sure that’s not the kidney failure talking?”

Carmilla grinned. “I’m sure. And I have medical training remember, so I would know.”

Satisfied, the small human hummed contentedly and as Laura burrowed her way into her roommate’s clavicle and Carmilla’s arm hold tightened in response, the pair of them let sleep come finally. Wrapped up together, safe from the world as they lay there. Sure that tomorrow would bring more trials. More fights. But for tonight they had each other. And that was more more more than enough.

FIN

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