

Love Letters Never Write Themselves

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Love Letters Never Write Themselves

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Summary

Klaus Mikaelson causes a stir when he shows up at The Mystic Falls Academy. Assigned to help him with a mysterious task, Caroline finds herself intrigued. They grow closer and when Klaus leaves, she's left hurt and confused.

Later, assigned to be his apprentice, Caroline refuses to allow herself to be anything less than professional.

Notes

Don't worry, this is not another WIP! It's done it just got really long and I kept tweaking so I'm letting it free so I can get on with editing up the rest. More will follow, and pretty quickly! Big thanks to everyone who's been sending messages and reviews over the last months! It's kept me trying to write even though it's been sloooww going.

Chapter 1

Love Letters Never Write Themselves

Part One

Caroline usually avoids the library.

When necessary, she'll dash in and collect the books she needs, but she's never tempted to linger. The Mystic Falls Academy is home to the most extensive collection of magical journals and grimoires in North America, many priceless, all precious. The library is chilly and dry to protect the books; its handful of tiny windows don't even open. There are plenty of more welcoming spaces to study.

Plus, it's generally filled with Caroline's least favorite people, the clique of girls who care for nothing but their essays and experiments, who'd sneered when, years ago, Caroline had started organizing monthly sleepovers in the common room and study groups in the dining hall. Admittedly the purpose of said study groups is less educational and more social – the girls trade treats from home and chat about how they can make their uniforms less tragic. *Some* people object to that.

Caroline decides to take a trip to the library once she hears that there's a *boy* there.

She'd been under the impression that a male wouldn't be allowed to pass through The Academy's gates. Caroline's certainly never seen one on the grounds in the entire eight years she'd attended the school.

It's easy enough to think of an excuse; she can totally use another source to polish up her essay on umbrakinetic regeneration.

Caroline takes the maximum amount of weekend trips allotted. Visiting her mother is nice but she also *thoroughly* enjoys associating with the friends she'd had to leave behind. She'd dreamed of being a cheerleader until it had become clear that the Forbes genes hadn't passed her by (though Sheriff Liz *might* have wished the magic had skipped her only child).

Still, Mystic Falls is a small town, and new faces don't often appear. The boys who ply her with warm beer at parties are the same boys who'd hogged the crayons in elementary school. There's something to be said for *novel* boys.

When Caroline pushes her way through the library's heavy wooden doors, she realizes she needn't have bothered with a cover story. She barely recognizes the room. It's generally dim and roughly as lively as a funeral. Today it's brightly lit because every lamp is turned on and every table is full. There's a hum of conversation, the occasional giggle, and the ancient librarian looks especially pinched, viciously shushing the room whenever the noise level threatens to rise.

The rumors hadn't been entirely true because sitting smack dab in the middle of the commotion, seemingly oblivious to it, at a table piled high with books, is most definitely a *man*.

Which isn't to say he's old. Caroline would guess he's a novice, maybe a practitioner, probably only a few years out of school himself. She can also immediately see the reason for all the fuss. Any man would have warranted attention, and this one looks as if he'd stepped off the cover of one of the romance novels the girls pass around (some of the more traditional instructors incinerate those books on sight). His hair's a bit mussed, and a dusting of stubble only emphasizes his strong jaw and full lips. He's bent over a text, undisturbed by the many eyes on him. Upon studying him for a few moments, Caroline decides it's an act. The visitor hasn't adopted the posture that one truly engrossed would have.

She feels kind of bad for the guy.

The excitement in the room strikes her as silly now. It's a little embarrassing that she'd been eager to gawk as if she's a virginal princess who'd spent her whole life locked in a tower.

She's eighteen, an adult in her mother's world, nearly one in her father's. She just needs to graduate. To that end, Caroline tosses her hair back, making her way towards the stacks where the books she'd been thinking about should be.

She has to walk by the table where The Academy's newest guest is seated. She keeps her shoulders straight, eyes fixed forward, refusing to give in to the temptation to give him a once over to see if he's as attractive up close as she thinks he must be.

Caroline doesn't notice that *his* eyes lift as she passes, startled, and follow her until she disappears behind a wall of shelves.

Two years, three months, and a handful of days later, Caroline stands impatiently outside of a sprawling country house in Wales.

The house has seen better days. Its stone façade is faded grey, a few of the wooden shutters look crooked, and they all need a coat of paint. The land is beautiful though, green and hilly, with a thick forest in the distance. The trees stretch high into the sky, and she's looking forward to investigating; it probably holds a treasure trove of valuable ingredients. She can even hear water running nearby, a stream, or a small river.

Caroline's donned a proper cloak, despite the abnormally warm September day, in deference to the fact that her final apprenticeship will be spent with a gifted alchemist from a very old family.

In Caroline's experience, very old families are sticklers for the rules, however outdated, and the norms, however stupid.

She hears the horse first, the patter hooves on the grass. Caroline walks until she can see around the side of the house, lifting a hand to shade her eyes.

For a second, Caroline wonders if she's hallucinating because Klaus Mikaelson, of all people, is coming her way. On *horseback*.

She quickly realizes that she's firmly planted in reality - her heels are sinking into the grass, and she's sweated off her foundation. If Klaus were a figment of her imagination, she'd appear flawless and collected to make him regret how he'd left things.

He's wearing a white shirt, sleeves rolled up, *again* managing to look like he'd be right at home on the cover of a romance novel.

God, he's the worst.

Why had no one had bothered to tell her that the gifted alchemist was *Klaus*? She might have had time to worm her way into another apprenticeship placement. And she definitely wouldn't have bothered with the cloak.

He appears to notice her, moving to slow the horse. His expression doesn't indicate recognition. Caroline's going to chalk that up to how she's dressed, how neatly her hair is pinned up. Klaus is used to her in her school uniform, had seen her a few times in casual clothes when they'd snuck into the woods around the school so they could talk without dozens upon dozens of prying eyes following them.

He'd even seen her best bra once, had gotten a peek of the matching lace panties before he'd abruptly rolled off of her and fled with muttered apologies.

He hadn't bothered with another sorry when he'd left the school.

That night, Caroline had taken a couple of minutes to process, a couple more to overthink, then a few to make herself presentable. By the time she'd found Kat and made the trek back to The Academy, Klaus had disappeared. Rumors had flown afterward, Caroline hadn't known what was true and what wasn't, but Klaus hadn't returned or bothered to send her a letter of explanation.

There'd been a significant period of moping before she'd settled into being *really* pissed off.

She's pushed that feeling back, buried it in work. She'd thought time had extinguished its intensity. It turns out that her anger is quick to bubble up again. Caroline takes a deep breath and exhales slowly, wonders how screwed she'd be with The Guild if she were to run away screaming.

If only that were possible.

The cab she'd taken from the airport had disappeared in a cloud of dust shortly after Caroline had tugged her overstuffed suitcase from the trunk. Caroline hadn't minded the rudeness, is well aware that traces of magic are usually off-putting to those who don't know it exists. Her

mother had grown used to it after years of exposure, but Caroline had always been careful not to bring any of her non-Academy friends home.

This country house, Klaus' country house, *hums* with magic. To the very human cabbie, it must give off distinctly haunted vibes.

So Caroline has no immediate means of escape.

She hadn't bothered to bring her phone as she'd been warned that she'd find neither cell reception nor wi-fi at this placement. She's stuck, but she refuses to appear anything less unbothered and completely over any feelings she may have thought she had for Klaus Mikaelson.

The horse slows to a walk as it nears. Caroline hears Klaus murmur soothingly to it, a remarkable contrast to how testy he sounds when he calls out, "This is private land."

Caroline smiles, in the most practiced and polite manner she can manage (even though she'd *love* to snipe back), "Good afternoon! The Guild sent me. I'm here for the alchemical apprenticeship? *So* pleased to make your acquaintance."

Klaus stiffens, his eyes widening. He leaps from the horse, and Caroline swallows a yelp, her toes curling in her very professional pumps to curb the urge to reach out and make sure he hadn't hurt himself.

Not because of any lingering feelings. It's just a natural instinct when a person flings themselves off a huge moving horse right in front of you.

Klaus is unfaltering and apparently uninjured, suddenly *right* in front of her. "Caroline," he says, eyes wide. He reaches out tentatively, his face showing a soft mix of surprise and pleasure that she absolutely will not be charmed by.

Once upon a time, before the Forbes genes had kicked in, Caroline had wanted to be an actress. She calls on those skills now. "Oh wow! What a surprise..." she pauses like she's searching for a name. "How have you been, Klaus?"

If Caroline's honest, she's genuinely interested in his answer. This is her third and final apprenticeship. She *may* have made an effort to subtly fish for information about Klaus with the magicians she'd been assisting and any visiting guests she'd been able to engage in conversation.

Hadn't gleaned even a whisper about Klaus' whereabouts or activities, much to her annoyance.

If he'd run off because making out with her had led to an epiphany, a stunning, world-changing discovery, her ego would have been *slightly* assuaged. But nope, he'd left her lying on the forest floor, half-naked and achingly aroused, for reasons she still cannot understand.

She takes a step back, grasps her suitcase, using it as a barrier between them.

Klaus doesn't try to encroach on her space again. He rubs his hands against his thighs, begins unrolling one of his shirtsleeves. "I've been well enough."

It's a vague answer, unenthused. Caroline wants to press, possibly needle, but she won't. "That's nice," she replies, her tone equally bland.

Klaus sighs, and Caroline can't deny that she takes a healthy heap of satisfaction in the edge of annoyance she hears. "I suppose I should show you to your rooms."

The thought of staying in an isolated home with Klaus, massive though it appears to be, for a whole *year*, is still panic-inducing. Caroline manages to remain composed.

She'll indulge in a proper freak out once she's got a closed door.

Caroline's rushing, having been on the receiving end of a *very* pointed glare when she'd entered the library. The librarian is a total hardass, has never let a curfew violation slide. Caroline has no desire to spend her weekend dusting shelves. She has to verify one teeny thing for an assignment, and then she'll hightail it back to her rooms.

"There you are," she mutters, stretching up to grab the volume she needs. Caroline pulls it down, tucks it into her bag, moving quickly down the aisle. She glances up as she turns the corner only to jump back and yelp, a hand coming up to press over her suddenly pounding heart. "Lord, you *scared* me."

The *boy* whose arrival has caused such a commotion (and it's only died down slightly, the library still experiencing way higher traffic than usual) smiles, his head dipping slightly. "Apologies. I wasn't expecting anyone to be here."

"Wow," Caroline says, "he speaks." She cringes immediately, curses her tendency to speak her mind. A *lot* of the girls in Caroline's grade, and some below, are miffed that their visitor seems to be determined to keep to himself. That he's been brusque and always manages to excuse himself after exchanging the fewest words possible.

There's been a serious uptick in wardrobe infractions, and Klaus Mikaelson is solely responsible.

He's got a reputation now as rude and snobby – though that only makes sense, considering his family name. The Mikaelsons are wealthy, powerful. They hoard spell books, own far more than their fair share of enchanted objects. They're selective about with whom they associate.

There's still a lot of giggling about his lips and his forearms after lights out, though. Caroline hasn't participated, still feels ashamed for her initial urge to gawk at him as if he was a zoo animal.

He doesn't appear offended by her comment, might even be amused if she's reading his expression right. "I speak often under normal circumstances. Too often, some complain. I'm Klaus."

She hitches her bag higher on her shoulder, “I’m Caroline, and I really can’t judge. The word chatterbox has appeared on many a report to my parents.”

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Caroline.” He sounds like he means it, and she finds she enjoys the way he says her name. She’s met plenty of musty old warlocks from England, acquaintances of her father’s. The accent is *much* more compelling from someone young and attractive.

Klaus’s eyes flit to the crest on her blazer, quickly rise again. “You’re in your final year here?”

“Yep. Last semester, then on to the glamorous grunt work of apprenticeships.”

He smiles, takes a half step closer. “It can be a long few years. What area are you planning on specializing in?”

“Alchemy. Or Possibly Enchantment.”

She’s expecting judgment. Caroline gets plenty of pursed-lip disapproval from her instructors – one of whom she’d just met with - regarding her waffling about her career path, the one she’ll begin walking very soon. She’s not expecting his brows to rise. “Interesting. The Forbes’ tend to stick to Abjuration.”

She gets enough passive-aggressive comments about her choices from her dad and Granny Forbes. She doesn’t need it from a guy she’s just met, even if he’s got dimples and hair that curls enough that she’s wondering about running her fingers through it.

Caroline bristles, “Which is why it’s boring. Why would I spend the next three years of my life doing thankless tasks just to learn things I’ve heard about since birth?”

She yanks another book from the shelf, not caring that she doesn’t need it, and whirls away.

He calls after her, laughter in his voice, “It was lovely to meet you, Caroline!”

Later, when she’s tucked in her bed, seconds from falling asleep, she realizes she hadn’t told him her last name.

Klaus greets her at the door of his lab, probably because he’d heard her squelching down the hall.

Caroline had left her boots outside to dry, and she’d considered stripping the rest of her clothes in the entranceway but hadn’t been willing to risk getting caught creeping around in her underwear.

Klaus appears concerned *until* he gets a good look at her. His eyes widen, and his generous mouth begins to curl. He’s smart enough to catch himself before he smiles. She knows she looks a mess, that there’s mud splattered from her toes to her thighs. She’s gotten caught in the rain on the way home, adding to the water that had already soaked every item of clothing she wears, but at least it had washed away the pond smell.

Caroline glares at him for good measure, fumbling with the clasp of the bag she uses to collect ingredients.

She takes a calming breath before she grabs the jars of leaves and flowers she'd carefully collected. Her magic tends to go wild around Klaus, even when she's not in a temper. No need to waste all her hard work with a flare-up that will shatter glass. "Your Orontium Aquaticum, as requested. I'll clean and dry it later."

After a bath and a meal.

Klaus takes the jars, "Did you run into trouble?"

Well, duh.

"Do me a favor and pay a little more attention to the growing season of the ingredients you absolutely *have* to have, will you?"

He has the grace to appear apologetic. "Right, it flowers in..."

"August. And since it's late-*September*, I had to scour every bog in the freaking forest."

"I'd forgotten."

Caroline looks for hints of a lie, finds none. That doesn't mean Klaus is being entirely truthful, of course. She'd once thought she could read him. She'd been wrong.

She decides to trust him now; there's no benefit in assuming malicious intent. Not when she's stuck here for an additional eleven months and twelve days.

That first week she'd furiously tried to find a way to be somewhere else for her final apprenticeship, knowing all along it was futile.

When no miracle placement had materialized, Caroline reached deep and did her best to find the positives in her predicament. Klaus *is* brilliant, not that she'd admit it to his face. The conversations they'd had tucked away in the darkest and draftiest (and therefore most private) corners of the library at The Academy or on their walks in the woods had helped Caroline immensely her final months of coursework. She'd graduated first in her class, had been smugly pleased about it, even when she'd been nursing a bruised heart.

Not a *broken* heart. An important distinction.

Klaus has provided her with a lovely, spacious room. It has a gorgeous bathroom, with a deep claw-foot tub and a skylight. Caroline had heard horror stories about apprentices who'd been made to sleep on cots tucked into a corner of a lab, with only a few minutes of privacy a day to wash up and change clothing. Of being made to work all hours of the day, without time off or any opportunity for leisure. Her previous two placements had comfortable-ish - single beds in tiny rooms - but she's practically living in luxury now.

Klaus doesn't work her to the bone; she's not only doing the meaningless scut work of scrubbing cauldrons and sweeping floors. Klaus had informed her early on that Sundays were

her own, that she was free to wander wherever she pleased, and Caroline's taken him at his word. She'd explored the house thoroughly – save the locked rooms she assumes are Klaus' – along with the grounds. Last week she'd packed a picnic lunch on Sunday, had lazed in the sunlight by a small lake, and written letters to her friends and family.

He's letting her assist in his experiments, actually listens to her ideas. Has allowed her to take over a corner of his lab with her own things. She has free reign over his equipment and stores, even the ingredients that are costly and difficult to find, the ones she'd rarely been able to lay her hands on at school.

All in all, the optimism she'd forced herself to feel has proven quite prophetic. Is it a bit awkward? Sure. Does she find herself sometimes slipping, watching Klaus work, forgetting that she's *just* his apprentice now? Annoyingly often, but Caroline's working on it.

It's only because she's lonely, but that's unsurprising. She's in a foreign country, on an isolated estate. Her first apprenticeship had been in the middle of New York City; her second had been with an alchemist who worked at a school in Italy. Before that, she'd grown accustomed to dorm life. She misses noise, camaraderie, friends who'll listen to her rant or provide distractions as needed. Here there's only Klaus and a small staff that are freakishly adept at melting into the walls.

She and Klaus had been close once, had shared space and confidences. She'd seen him bleary from spending too long on research, hangry from skipping lunch, and annoyed when the librarian lectured him (repeatedly) about the proper care and treatment of first editions.

There'd been intimacies, too. Caroline knows how strong his hands are, the heat of his mouth. She's felt his body tremble against hers, has heard how hoarse his voice can get when he's aroused. It's only natural that she's tempted to let him in again. But, as she keeps telling herself, she cannot seek out his company. Even *if* she'd been willing to thaw, Klaus wouldn't welcome her presence.

He'd been the one to leave. Hadn't bothered with an explanation or a goodbye. Caroline might play the vapid blonde when it suits her, but she's far from stupid.

They'd had their fling. It's over. She's just got to get through this apprenticeship. Then, chances are, her path and Klaus' won't often cross.

At least, that's what Caroline's hoping. She figures she's due for a little good luck.

Two weeks into Klaus Mikaelson's visit and three days after their first conversation, Caroline is pulled from class and told that the headmistress wants to see her. Over tea and weird lavender cookies, she's informed that Klaus Mikaelson has requested her assistance with his research.

Caroline is less than thrilled. She fakes excitement, of course, since the headmistress acts as if she's bestowing a great gift.

She considers her options as she walks out of the office. She *could* wait for Klaus to come to her, but Caroline's never been very good at delayed gratification. She's got questions.

She knows where he'll be because he barely leaves the library. Rumor has it he's not bound to any sort of curfew and usually stays late into the night. She helps herself to a chair at his table, does not attempt to hide that she's highly suspicious of his motives. He smiles like he's pleased to see her, and Caroline crosses her arms, leans back in her chair. She ignores the uptick in whispers and the librarian's exasperated shushing.

She's totally going to get grilled before lights out.

"Caroline Forbes, reporting for duty, as ordered. What am I doing?"

This close, she can see he looks older, tired, with distinct purple-blue bruises under his eyes and thick stubble along his jaw. "Geez, have you actually been sleeping here?" she blurts, momentarily forgetting he has stalker-ish tendencies that she's mad about.

She's also forgetting basic manners, but he doesn't call her on it.

Klaus huffs out a laugh, a hand coming up to rub at his eyes. "Some nights, if I'm being honest. I'm afraid my project has become rather urgent."

Hmm, that's potentially interesting. "Hence why I've been drafted?"

"Your instructors provided glowing recommendations."

She leans forward, twisting a pile of books so she can read the spines. "Obviously. I'm battling for the top of the class, and I will win."

"I also thought your... familial affinity for protection spells and dispel magic might be useful."

Just what a girl wants to hear. That she's *useful*.

His words, and his general air of contrition, snap a few puzzle pieces into place. "Let me guess. You wrote to my dad requesting access to the Forbes Library, and he said hell no."

He does not attempt to deny it, "I also attempted to visit in person."

Caroline grins, "Couldn't even find the driveway, could you?"

Klaus nods, and Caroline gives him credit – a minuscule drop of it – for not attempting to bluster his way through an excuse for his failure. She's heard it from associates of her father's (with varying levels of outrage) many times.

Caroline's not entirely sure about the origin of her father's distaste for the Mikaelson family, but she's aware it exists. It could be personal or due to their unsavory reputation. William Forbes has very particular ideas about the morality of wielding magic. Klaus' family hoards knowledge and thus power. They believe that the old families should be wary of outsiders, contrary to her father's beliefs.

“So you’ve been stalking me for a while then.”

He shakes his head, “I picked The Academy for its collection and its proximity to your ancestral land, yes. *You* were a pleasant surprise. I was only vaguely aware that there was a Forbes heir before I arrived.

She considers him, looks for any hint of a nervous tick. He’s calm and steady and meets her gaze without any telltale shiftiness. So he may be telling the truth, but he might just be an above-average liar. Her father isn’t exactly the life of the party. There are many places he’s not welcome. Some, because he’d had a child with a woman who lacked magic. Others, because he’d gotten divorced and married a man, eliminating the possibility of a *proper* heir. He also travels extensively, and Caroline’s rarely joined him, so plenty of people may know that the Forbes line continued but not Caroline’s age, gender, or description.

She decides to believe Klaus. For now.

“Tell me about your suddenly urgent project.”

“I want to develop an elixir to break a curse.”

Caroline waits, expecting more information - it’s not readily provided.

“What kind of curse?”

“Generational.”

Very interesting. She finds it hard to believe that she doesn’t already know about a curse to the Mikaelson line as they’re not particularly well-liked. It’s the sort of gossip that would have been eagerly and widely shared.

“Matrilineal or patrilineal?”

“Can be either. In this case, patrilineal.”

She drums her nails on the table, finding it difficult to resist the temptation to dig too deep. Klaus has answered her questions matter-of-factly so far, but Caroline’s not an idiot. He’s giving her the bare minimum for a reason.

“You’re not going to tell me what the curse is, are you?”

“It’s best if you don’t know.”

“Patronizing,” Caroline mutters. But she grabs a book, flips to the table of contents. “This curse, passed from a father, are all of his children afflicted?”

“As far as I know, this father only had one child.”

Score one for subtle digging. Caroline knows Klaus has a bunch of siblings, and he’s not the one cursed. She ignores the relief she feels upon hearing he’s unafflicted by something

potentially nasty. It's a bit humiliating considering she *just* met him, and he's admitted to using her for her family connections.

She's way too old for instant crushes, damn it.

"Okay, I guess I'm in. On one condition."

"I'm listening."

"You give me your notes and leave the library. I'll review them. We start tomorrow."

A small smile curls his lips, and he begins to shift things around on his side of the table. "I suppose I can agree to those terms."

Caroline slips off her shoes under the table, shifts until she's in a more comfortable position. She'd made a deal, and she'll honor it.

Klaus rises and leans over the table, notes in hand. He must be aware of all the ears straining to listen to their conversation because he speaks softly. "I am gratified that you're concerned for my well-being. Does that mean you'll not hold my mild deception against me?"

Caroline snatches the offered sheaf of papers from Klaus, begins leafing through, carefully *not* looking at him. "Don't push your luck," she grumbles.

"I'm afraid that's a character flaw of mine. I just can't help myself."

Delivered another way, Caroline would assume that's a threat. She refuses to think he's flirting. Caroline makes a noise, hoping it's appropriately nonchalant.

Klaus straightens, stretches. She does *not* watch. "I'll see you in the morning, love."

She keeps her eyes on the notes but strains her ears to hear his retreating footsteps.

Usually, to a degree that tends to annoy even those that love her, Caroline is relentless when given a new project to tackle.

Instead, she finds her mind won't easily focus. It wanders, always ending up with Klaus. She hopes he's obeying her implicit demand that he get a good night's sleep. Racks her knowledge of the buildings, trying to figure out where the headmistress would house a male guest.

Idly wonders if the area would be warded and how heavily.

She might be in trouble.

A strategic retreat – claiming overwork, perhaps – would be the intelligent thing to do. Unfortunately, Caroline has at least one thing in common with Klaus.

She just can't help pushing her luck.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

So glad people seem to like this, thanks so much for reading and especially for commenting! This next part's a little longer and hopefully explains why Caroline's not quite figuring out what's going on.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Caroline's focused on a distillation, humming absently to herself when Klaus enters the lab. She glances at the clock on the wall, notes that it's nearly noon.

Which is *weird*.

She's not a natural morning person – like at all – but by necessity, she's trained herself to be alert-ish by 8 AM (though it takes longer and a ton of coffee for her to be firing on all cylinders). Klaus, on the other hand, seems like he barely sleeps. She's been working for him for nearly a month, and before today, she's never once beat him into the lab.

She checks the temperature of her cauldron, eases to flame down a touch. "Morning," she ventures, wondering if it's crossing a line to ask if he's okay.

"Good morning," Klaus replies absently, voice hoarse. He's not looking at her, flipping through his mail. She hadn't been worried when he'd been late, figuring everyone indulges in an occasional day to sleep in and that Klaus probably needs it more than most, given his habits. The full moon had been last night, traditionally a celebration in certain circles. Granny Forbes always marks it. She's aware that Klaus is, or at least was, estranged from his family, but maybe he still partakes in some kind of ritual. Now, though, Caroline wonders if she should have gone to look for him earlier. He's pale, and his eyes are bloodshot, with prominent dark circles.

He's never chatty, but he usually asks her what she's working on. Today, he doesn't, appearing preoccupied. He walks by Caroline and opens one of the closets, dragging out a trunk.

The trunk.

It's one of the more magical items in the room. She's been desperately curious about it, surreptitiously hovers for a few moments whenever she ducks into that closet. The energy it radiates is cold, and repellant, its magical signature the equivalent of voice rasping '*abandon hope, ye who enter here.*'

"Do you need help?" she asks, rising from her stool. Klaus' movements are stiff and halting, he leans heavily on the trunk for a moment before straightening. *Technically*, it's her job to

help him. And her concern increases the longer she observes him.

He hides it quickly, but Caroline spies a flicker of pain.

Klaus offers a faint smile, and she's not the least bit reassured. "It's probably best if you stay back a bit."

He crouches, both of his hands pressed to the top of the trunk. His eyes close, and his breathing grows labored even as his lips form words. The trunk's magic pulses, like it's angry, and Caroline takes an involuntary step back.

Klaus' attention remains on taking down whatever enchantments he's laid, and Caroline knows she *probably* should return to her work.

Except she's *fascinated*. She's made some educated guesses based on the runes scratched into the trunk. Caroline is incredibly tempted to inch closer. Klaus is distracted; it would be easy to peek inside and see if she's right.

She resists because that would be both a giant violation of Klaus' privacy and a step over the lines she'd carefully drawn to get through this rotation.

But she's pretty sure he's built a self-sustaining void, and that's *awesome*.

Klaus moves too quickly for her to make a decision. He flips open the top, flings the letters inside, then slams the lid shut. He wavers, his balance off, and Caroline lurches into action, no longer able to resist the urge to help.

She snags a chair, sets it down next to Klaus with a purposely pointed clatter. He blinks up at her blearily. Except for that first day, Caroline's maintained a careful bubble of personal space, even when it would have made more sense to get closer. He looks even worse, exhausted, and her worry grows. "Sit," she says firmly. "You look like you're going to pass out."

"I need to..." he doesn't finish his thought, wobbling again. Instinctively, Caroline reaches out to steady him, gripping his right shoulder. Klaus stiffens, his jaw clenching, and she catches the pained noise he tries to hide.

Immediately, she loosens her grip.

"Crap, sorry!" She shifts and hopes his injury is only on one side. Caroline tentatively eases his left arm up so she can duck underneath and help him into the chair. He makes another noise, softer but still filled with discomfort.

He doesn't fight her, which might be the biggest clue that he's weaker than he appears.

When Klaus settles, Caroline doesn't move away, accepting that it'll bother her if she doesn't make sure that he's okay. When she looks closely, she can see bruising edging out from under his collar.

She slides her hand under his clothes without thinking about the consequences.

His skin is hot, and his breath leaves him in a pained rush. “Sorry,” Caroline murmurs, easing his shirt aside, so she has a better view. The bruises are fresh, still red in many places, just beginning to deepen to purple-blue in others. They cover a large area, at least from his collar bone to his upper arm. “What did you *do*?” she asks.

“Fell down the stairs.”

“Liar.”

Such a blatant fabrication *should* deeply annoy her, but she’s more focused on what to do next. She tries to remember what she’s learned of healing magic (so not her strong suit). Her mind runs to catalog Klaus’ stores because she knows she can at least whip up a competent poultice.

“I’m fine, Caroline. I need to...”

He’s looking at the trunk, and Caroline glances over at it with some wariness. As Klaus had managed to latch it shut, she judges that it’s not an immediate threat. But, from the way he’s looking at it, she half expects it to begin vibrating or to see smoke drifting from the seams.

Caroline can faintly feel its magic warning her away, but she can block that out. “What, is it going to explode?” The lab contains a wide array of delicate objects and flammable materials. Klaus far from stupid, so she’s reasonably confident he wouldn’t be storing the trunk in the lab if it were dangerous.

“Of course not,” he says, sounding offended.

“Well, I appreciate it, given it lives six feet from my desk.”

She’s joking, even smiles, but Klaus isn’t looking at her. “I’ll move it to my rooms if you’re worried.”

Caroline sighs and uses her free hand to direct his gaze towards her, skimming his jaw with her fingertips.

He leans into the touch but, for her sanity, she’s going to forget that.

“I’m not, honestly. I know that you and I are...” Caroline can’t quite find a description that is both appropriate and neutral; she lets her sentence trail off. She shakes her head, focuses on his injuries again. “I just mean, I don’t think you’d do anything that would put me in danger.”

“I would never hurt you,” he says, low and earnest.

It sounds like a promise, and it takes a great deal of self-control for Caroline to swallow her scoff.

Klaus *had* hurt her.

If she mentions that it will be so much harder to re-establish boundaries. She’ll need those back once she’s assured herself Klaus’ injuries will mend. Without distance it’s possible,

likely even, that he'll hurt her again.

She turns away, not wanting to risk him reading her expression. Caroline decides she needs more space to work, grabs the trunk's handle to shift it.

Klaus says her name urgently, alarmed.

He grabs her wrist and yanks her back, pulling her off balance. He catches her when she half-falls against him, even as he gasps out at the impact. "Careful," he scolds. "You shouldn't..." he pulls her palm towards him like he expects to see burns or blood or some other wound.

She's fine, unmarked save for the stains from the leaves she'd been prepping and a few callouses from where her knife rests.

Klaus' eyes go wide, mystified.

Ordinarily, Caroline would question his alarm and complain about being pulled practically into his lap. Pressed against him, it's apparent that it's not just Klaus' abused shoulder that's warm. He's a furnace, his core temperature far higher than it should be.

She takes her hand back, touches him as minimally and gently as she can when she pushes away. Caroline steps back but glares when he makes to follow. "*You* stay right there," she says, in the tone she'd always used to instill fear in the younger girls at school. "Do you keep pain elixirs on hand?"

The stash she'd brought is gone, making more is on her to-do list. Klaus shakes his head, "I don't bother with them."

She makes a note to double the batch she'd planned on brewing.

"Okay, then we'll lean on medical science. I'm going to get you some water, an ice pack, and Tylenol." She glances at him, questioning, checking for confusion. Kat's family had been ultra-traditional, and she'd never ventured outside sorcerer circles before being sent to school. She'd been clueless about a fair number of the items Caroline thought of as commonplace.

The Mikaelsons are even more hardcore.

"After I was sent to school, I avoided going home as much as possible. I spent most of my holidays in less strict homes."

Caroline nods wishes she could ask about his friends. So far, he's not had a single visitor, and as he hadn't bothered with outfitting the house with any sort of communication technologies. She can't help but wonder if he's still in contact with them. "That's good, wouldn't want you to think I was trying to poison you."

"I trust you."

Yeah, she's going to need to leave that statement alone. "Tylenol doesn't work instantly, but it should help. I'll mix up something topical that will take down the swelling and speed up the

tissue repair.”

“You don’t need to go to the trouble, love. I’ll be fine in a day or two.”

She can’t help glancing skeptically at his shoulder. The bruising looks deep. “It’s no trouble.” She’ll feel way better if she *does* something. She turns away to gather supplies. “Take off your shirt,” she tells him briskly. It’s only practical.

She does *not* check to see if he’s doing it.

Caroline’s mother tends to send useful care packages; she’s well-stocked in basic first aid. She retrieves an icepack from one of the refrigerators, then a clean towel, a bottle of Tylenol and a tensor bandage. When she returns to Klaus, she means to focus on his injury, not on the newly bared expanse of skin that she’d briefly gotten *very* familiar with back at school.

She fails, but only because the bruises are far more extensive than she’d realized. His right shoulder is the worst of it, probably why he’d reacted when she’d touched it. There’s bruising on his left shoulder, more decorating his ribs, disappearing into the waistband of his jeans. “What did you *do*?” she asks again, forcefully this time. Caroline approaches slowly, afraid to touch him now, her hand extended uncertainly.

Klaus’ lips press together, and he averts his eyes.

At least he’s not attempting to lie again.

The urge to ask questions is nearly unbearable. It perturbs Caroline greatly that she has to swallow them. She recognizes that demanding answers it’s not her place. She’s here only because she’s Klaus’ subordinate, and The Guild had mandated her presence in his home. She may have thought they were friends once but, given how Klaus had left and hadn’t bothered keeping in touch, she’d been wrong.

“Okay then,” she chirps, too loud and obviously falsely cheerful. She lays the towel over Klaus’ shoulder and then the icepack. He doesn’t flinch or complain, but she’s as delicate as possible, directing him to lift his arm so she can wind the tensor bandage around his torso to keep the ice in place.

She’s fairly sure he won’t stay sitting much longer, her hunch proven correct once she pins the bandage in place. His movements remain careful as he drags his shirt back over his head. She doesn’t assist, though her fingertips practically itch with the urge. “Any allergies I should know about?” Caroline asks, once he’s on his feet again.

She half-expects him to argue with her plans now; he’s technically within his rights to forbid her from making anything else to help him.

Caroline would ignore him. Maybe he knows that.

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

Rude.

She's just about to say something less than polite - because he *deserves* it - but Klaus continues before she can. "What I meant was that I don't keep anything I react poorly to in the house."

"Oh," Caroline says, mollified. "I guess that makes sense."

He reaches for her but stops abruptly, his hand just brushing her arm before he steps back. "Thank you, Caroline. For everything."

"It's no trouble. Might even be good for me to brush up since you're apparently *very* clumsy."

It's bait, but Klaus doesn't take it. He merely smiles faintly, again bending to examine the trunk.

Caroline doesn't try to hide her annoyed sigh, and she *might* stomp just a tiny bit on her way back to her workstation.

She's not nearly annoyed enough to go back to her regularly scheduled work, however. She's got a few ideas, but she figures a quick trip to the library is now on the agenda.

Once she's mixed up something for Klaus (and convinced him to use it), she'll take a closer look at the store cupboards.

Something is up with Klaus; perhaps there's a clue to be had in the stockroom, something standard that's missing. Caroline senses a mystery and knows Klaus won't solve it for her.

She also knows it's absolutely none of her business.

She's still going to figure it out.

Caroline has a weekend routine.

She wakes up at precisely 9:40, throws on something comfortable, then hustles down to the dining hall before breakfast is cleared. Years ago, she'd discovered that staff eats as soon as the breakfast hours are over, so when Caroline shows up, there's a fresh array of food and very few students to share with.

Then, she makes herself a plate and finds a table near a window, scrolls through her phone because the rules around electronic use are relaxed on weekends, and she does her best to seem normal to the friends she'd maintained outside of The Academy.

Her mother will never leave Mystic Falls, and Caroline would rather not have people tossing around wild speculations. Her Instagram feed is carefully curated to present her 'boarding school' as boring, academically demanding, and perfectly mundane.

The first weekend after she'd been assigned to work with Klaus, she'd considered deviating. *Maybe* getting up earlier to make herself more presentable or skipping her usual comment spree in favor of getting to the library earlier.

In the end, she'd stuck to her routine Saturday because primping and schedule changes seem like things a girl does for boys she's interested in dating. Klaus Mikaelson so isn't in that category. Besides, she's well known for being a creature of habit. If she gets dolled up, people will notice, and she'll be subjected to even more nosy questions.

It's super creepy how many times she's been asked to describe Klaus' scent.

So she wears old jeans and comfortable sneakers, strolls into the library just before 11. The crowd of gawkers looks to have thinned though that may be because plenty of girls go back to bed after breakfast on weekends.

She spots Klaus at the table he's commandeered, but he's not alone. Kat's talking to him, seated on the table, and Caroline *again* experiences a rush of emotion that's far too intense for such a dreary room.

At least there are fewer witnesses this time.

Katerina Petrova is Caroline's best friend, a fact that would have shocked her ten-year-old self.

To say they hadn't gotten along initially would be an understatement. Caroline had resented being sent off to boarding school. Kat had been raised to view people outside her own family with suspicion. Neither of them are inclined to shyness or willing to back down from conflict.

They'd each needed an outlet; naturally, they'd found one in each other. The first day they'd fought over bed assignments in the dorm, then over what games to play outside, what music to listen to before bed, and a myriad of other things.

Honestly, it was impressive that they hadn't gotten in more trouble. Girls still joke about the couch they'd set on fire.

In Third Year, they'd found a common enemy (a transfer student, Bethany Altree, who took pride in being a tattletale extraordinaire), and by the end of the spring term, there'd been a grudging détente.

Over the course of Fourth Year, they'd discovered they had more in common than they thought and became a team rather than adversaries.

Bethany must have transferred again because she hadn't shown up for Fifth.

They've spent time together on breaks - Kat's come home with Caroline and Caroline's made the trip to Bulgaria - so she's seen Kat interact with people she finds attractive. Kat's got a distinct flirting posture (though flirting's probably too mild a term - when Kat decides she wants someone, it's more of a hunter/prey situation), and she's clearly deploying it on Klaus.

It's a cliché, but ripping Kat's fantastic hair out from the roots would be *so* satisfying.

Caroline had plenty of unkind thoughts about Kat when they'd been adversaries but nothing quite so vicious as the ones currently racing through her mind. She's angry, irrationally so, has to take a deep breath and count down because she's well aware that if she walks over

there now, she'll probably make an ass out of herself and say something to Kat that will never allow her to live down.

Klaus notices her first and appears relieved though maybe that's wishful thinking. He's not Kat's usual type, but Kat's just about everyone's type from what Caroline's observed.

Caroline smiles because it's a habit and makes her way over. Kat's out-of-uniform wardrobe is dark, tight, and slinky. She's making the most of the sheer plum blouse she's wearing, the lace of her bra visible because Kat has unbuttoned even farther than she usually does – and Kat is only passingly familiar with modesty because she gets bored in detention.

Caroline's teeth hurt a little from clenching.

Kat looks up (probably miffed that her audience isn't as enthralled as she thinks it should be), and her expression sends new alarm bells ringing through Caroline's head.

It's smug, a touch condescending, suggesting that *Caroline* and not Klaus is the prey.

Kat hops from the table, leans a hip on it, smirking. Caroline's steps slow, and her anger begins to cool.

She's been successfully deflecting questions about Klaus, what he's working on, what she thinks about him. Caroline just hadn't noticed that *Katerina* hadn't asked questions, which is wildly out of character. The Petrovas firmly believes that knowledge is power. She's a font of information about all the prominent magical families and is always eager to store away new tidbits, just in case they come in handy one day.

It's part of why they get along so well; Caroline respects anyone who can play a long game.

"Hey, Care," Kat drawls. "I've been looking for you."

That's definitely bullshit. Kat's aware of Caroline's standing weekend plans.

Calling her out with a witness will only antagonize her. "Well, you found me," Caroline says, glancing at Klaus, trying to gauge just how abrasive of a conversation he may have endured. "Did you need something?"

Kat grins, a distinctly evil tinge to it. "*I* don't need anything, but I've decided to do a good deed."

Caroline's not sure what that means, but it seems ominous. "Why?" she asks suspiciously.

Kat's expression only sharpens, and she latches on to Caroline's arm, tight enough that she can't be shaken off without making a spectacle. She addresses Klaus breezily, "I need Caroline for a few minutes. I will return her in more or less the same condition. Thanks so much for the... *enlightening* conversation. Tell your brother I said hi!"

Kat's deceptively strong, and despite her height disadvantage, she manages to drag Caroline away and into one of the smaller rare book rooms. She releases Caroline once she's shut the door, leaning back and blocking the exit. She crosses her arms, "Looking a little green there,

Cupcake. Don't worry, I recognize that you've called dibs even though you didn't have the ovaries to *actually* call dibs."

Caroline is tempted to play dumb, but she respects Kat too much. Plus, it'll only drag this out. "He's not a peanut butter cup."

Kat beams, "But you're dying to lick him, aren't you?"

Caroline sighs, closing her eyes and letting her head fall back. "Is there a point to this?" She refuses to give Kat the satisfaction of confessing to the *slight* interest that has kindled. It's not like it has a shot of going anywhere.

"My good deed is the point of this. Or do you not want to know what I know about Klaus and his messed-up family? I know dear old Pa Forbes frowns on gossip."

Damn it, that's tempting. "Do you know them or something?"

"Some of them. I've never met the two oldest. Twins, totally the golden children. I forget their names. I have met the next brother, Elijah. Hot, well-dressed, thinks he's too old for me. He seemed to have a stick lodged somewhere unmentionable. If he asked me to assist in removing it, well..."

She wiggles her eyebrows, and Caroline has no trouble filling in the blanks. "*Is* he too old for you?" Caroline asks.

Though Kat's usually unconcerned with those sort of details.

Kat shrugs, "Probably. But if we happen to cross paths in a few years, it'll be another story."

"Poor guy," Caroline mutters. She hops up on the table behind her, figures she might as well get comfortable because Kat is clearly just warming up.

Kat's eyes narrow, and she flips her hair over her shoulder. "Hey, be nice. I'm doing you a favor here, remember?"

Caroline's not yet sure if that's true, but she'll be magnanimous for now. "I'm listening."

"Now, I'd met Klaus once years ago – I think I was seven or eight. At this big Beltane thing near Naples. Generally, though, he seemed to get left behind. Rumor had it he was sickly, but he looks *fine* to me." She pauses suggestively, but Caroline merely stares back, refusing to provide the desired reaction. Kat pouts briefly but returns to her monologue. "There's Kol. He's a year or two older than we are. He's fun but talks too much. Thinks *really* highly of himself."

"Yes, that *can* be annoying."

Kat ignores the sarcasm. "Then there's Rebekah, a bit younger than us." Her nose wrinkles subtly.

“I take it you’re not a fan?” It’s an easy supposition – Kat doesn’t like very many people, and she tends to like girls their age even more rarely.

“Ugh, Rebekah Mikaelson is the opposite of fun. Spoiled, snotty, stuck up.”

It’s a struggle to keep a neutral expression. “You realize that many people would apply those adjectives to you, right?”

Her eyes narrow in annoyance, “No one worth talking to.”

“Obviously.”

“I’m delightful and you know it. Though Klaus didn’t seem to think so.” Kat extends a hand, examines her nails theatrically. Caroline swings her legs, grits her teeth again when her temper flares.”

She *will not* give Kat the satisfaction.

“Didn’t even look down my top and I am wearing a *great* bra.”

Caroline will not take the bait. She *will not* take the bait.

“So, six kids? That’s a lot for magical families these days.”

“Seven,” Kat corrects. “There’s a baby. Henrik, I think.”

“Wow, that’s an age gap.”

“Not an actual baby. He’s like 12.”

Ah, Caroline should have known. Kat’s distaste for the first years is legendary, and they’re usually terrified of her by the end of week one.

“Now, the parents are the most interesting. Rumor has it they hate each other, and from what I’ve observed, that’s accurate. Esther doesn’t seem to say much, rarely mingles. She manages always to appear like she’s judging you. Klaus’ dad is notoriously strict. He arranged his oldest son’s marriage like it’s still 1647. And he’s very proud of his family’s legacy, despite it being *sickening*.”

“Legacy?” Caroline asks.

“Yeah, their connection is glossed over in the official history books, which must have cost a fortune. The Mikaelson family was largely responsible for The Purification.”

Caroline’s mouth falls open in shock. “That’s... wow.”

“Yeah,” Kat replies grimly.

The Mikaelsons aren’t popular or well-liked, but they’re powerful. More powerful than they should be if they’d orchestrated prolonged, targeted, mass murder.

Caroline's a sorcerer from a long line of sorcerers. Granny Forbes claims they're descended from Valkyries, but that's impossible to prove, and her grandmother's always been fond of hyperbole (and gin).

It could be true - sorcerers often to mixed with and married members of other species up until about two hundred years ago because they could also practice magic. Not always – from what Caroline's read, the ability was sort of a recessive gene. A few kids would be born every generation with an aptitude for sorcery in a werewolf pack or a nymph line or amongst the selkies. They would have attended the same schools as Caroline's ancestors and accepted into the same society.

Some sorcerers had always resented that. Sirens could lure with their voices, and Dryads were nearly indestructible. Werewolves were stronger, faster, had heightened senses. Most species had gifts and abilities that Sorcerers didn't. Was it fair then that they could also wield magic?

Some decided it wasn't and that magic should be reserved only for sorcerers. Those who'd led the movement had called themselves The Purifiers. They'd killed thousands and terrorized many more.

After about a century of the murder of any non-sorcerers who could use magic, the ability of other species to practice had been snuffed and has never been recovered. Sorcerers no longer associate with outsiders, and they're generally viewed with suspicion by other species - certain areas of the world are too dangerous for them to enter.

Caroline can't claim they don't deserve it.

She'd once visited a memorial in The Petrova's village. Kat had pointed out the names; succubi wiped from her family tree a few generations ago. There'd been so many names, even in a sleepy corner of Bulgaria.

"Suddenly, it's making a lot more sense why my dad refuses to associate with any Mikaelsons."

Kat's taunting façade drops when she pushes off the door. She sits on the table next to Caroline, softer now. "I was just messing with you because it's fun."

"I know."

"You should be careful."

Kat reaches over and hooks a finger in the chain Caroline always wears around her neck. There's a single charm on it, a septogram her father had crafted from iron at her birth. Each point holds a tiny stone that her grandmother had selected and imbued with her considerable power. Caroline's always worn it, and it's heavy with protective magic. "Don't take this off."

Kat's rarely serious, and it's unnerving. Caroline tries to reassure her, "I'm just writing notes, researching. He'll be gone in a few weeks. It's really not a big deal."

“But you like him.”

There’s no point in denying it – Kat *knows* her. “I’m just a sucker for a pretty face.”

Kat bumps Caroline’s arm. “He better be on his best behavior; I’d hate to I have to mess that pretty face up.”

From Kat, that’s an ‘I love you.’

It’s her Sunday off; usually, Caroline would spend it outdoors. Unfortunately, a storm has her trapped in the house, ominous thunder crackling and rain coming down in thick sheets. Klaus had shoed her out of the lab, joking that he didn’t want to be accused of unfair labour practices.

As if The Guild would even care.

She’s restless, physically and mentally. It’s been a few weeks since Klaus’ mysterious injuries, and despite Caroline’s best efforts, she’s growing more and more comfortable with him. They talk more, touch more. Nothing prolonged or even intimate, but she no longer avoids his side of the lab. They’ll often work together on a single task where before they more often alternated duties.

Caroline reminds herself to keep her distance constantly, but her usual tenacity is failing her. She catches herself laughing and revealing more than she should in conversations, hopelessly drawn to him.

They’re not friends, not even coworkers. She’s technically his assistant.

It just doesn’t *feel* like that.

She’s doing brisk circuits through the house, not quite enough to break a sweat. There’s an odd number of tiny tables and knick-knacks scattered in inopportune places, and Caroline would hate to break one.

She *is* moving fast enough that she almost misses the click and the creak of a door opening.

Except it’s a door that’s she’s *very* aware of, one that is always locked tight—the door to Klaus’ room.

Caroline pauses, head swiveling, half-wondering if her imagination’s going wild.

The door’s still moving, slowly opening wider as if in invitation. The hinges are silent now, and the room is well lit. Caroline averts her eyes, knowing she *should* keep moving. There’s a reason Klaus’ door is kept closed and heavily warded. Caroline’s sensitive to protection spells, but even someone who’s not would be wary.

Caroline’s taken them as a big fat hint – a confirmation that Klaus desires distance.

The wards are curiously absent now.

She creeps closer, can't resist looking.

Klaus' room has the same worn stone floors as the rest of the manor but are covered in plush rugs. It's large, split into two halves by a short wall of bookshelves. Caroline has a clear view of a seating area, a velvet sofa, and a low table in front of a fireplace, large pillows layered on the ground. She steps closer, twisting her head so she has a better view of the rest of the room. He has a desk that looks very similar to the one in the lab, piles of parchment and books arranged in a way that *she* thinks is haphazard. Klaus, however, insists that his workspace is perfectly organized. His bed is large, a dark wood frame with elaborately carved posts, and draped in dark fabric.

Caroline takes another tentative step forward, having accepted that she's going to snoop a teeny bit, but her eye catches something odd.

She abandons subtlety. "What the..." Caroline mutters, crossing the threshold.

Why does Klaus have a *cage* in his room?

She approaches it warily. She'd guess it's made of iron, standing just a bit taller than she does and roughly six feet across, maybe three or four deep. The bars are as thick as her wrist, running both vertically and crosswise, allowing for little light to enter the interior.

It's also *pulsing* with power.

Warily, half-expecting to be forced back by the magic emanating from it, Caroline edges closer. She ducks her head, squinting into a gap.

Her hearts beginning to pound – what will she even *do* if there's a gory scene in there? The manor is isolated. Klaus hadn't even bothered to put in a landline when he'd moved in. She won't get too far on foot, considering the storm outside.

Her breath leaves her in a relieved whoosh when she gets a good look, sees that the cage is clean and mostly empty, with just a pile of blankets in one corner.

That does little to alleviate her confusion.

"What in the..."

"How did you get in here?"

Klaus' voice is sharp and Caroline whirls, biting back a startled yelp. He looks *livid*, standing in his doorway, jaw working.

"I..." she begins weakly, knowing there's no good explanation for why she's standing in his room. "I was just... passing by?"

"How did you get through the wards?" he demands, striding into the room. He's carrying a notebook, and he tosses it on the couch, uncaring that it bounces from the force and lands on the floor.

“There were no wards. I was just power walking through the halls since it’s raining and I can’t hike the grounds and I was feeling a little stir crazy. The door creaked open so naturally I glanced over and then, okay fine, I *looked* but come on, who wouldn’t?” She gulps a breath, cringes, because now’s probably not the time to be accusatory. She gestures to the cage, “I saw the... this and was a little alarmed and then my feet were moving and my brain was stuck on ‘oh crap, it’s a cage’ and then I was fully in your room and invading your privacy and I *am* sorry.”

Klaus inhales deeply, his head tipping back. “There were no wards?” he repeats, sounding strangely defeated.

“Did you set wards?” Caroline asks, unable to resist, even though she’s well aware that it’s probably not her turn to ask questions.

“Daily. Since you arrived.” There’s a tired note now as he bends to collect his notebook.

Caroline tries not to be offended – after all, hadn’t she just proven she kind of deserved the distrust? “I see. Well, again. I’m really sorry. It won’t happen again.”

She edges towards the door, giving Klaus as much space as she can. She’s almost in the clear when he speaks, stopping her hasty retreat. “That’s it? Don’t you have questions?”

Duh. But she’s not going to *ask* them.

She spins, still poised on the balls of her feet, eyes darting back towards the cage. “Nope,” she lies. “Absolutely none of my business. Especially considering the, uh, trespassing. What you do in the privacy of your own bedroom is totally your business. And I will forget *all* about everything I have seen.”

Another lie. She’ll just have to *act* like she’s forgotten. Caroline will likely think of little else for the foreseeable future.

“It’s not...” Klaus runs a hand through his hair, obviously frustrated. “It’s not at all what you’re thinking, Caroline. I promise”

She waits, wondering if he’ll explain though he owes her no such thing. Really, how many explanations *can* there be? Klaus doesn’t elaborate, shaking his head. He stalks away towards one of the closed doors, either a closet or a bathroom, his hand reaching back over his shoulder, beginning to tug at the collar of his shirt.

Caroline beats a hasty retreat when she realizes he’s about to strip, certain she’s invaded his privacy more than enough for one day.

It’s harder than it should be to leave.

Up next - in the past, Caroline and Klaus get out of the library and in the present, the awkwardness intensifies.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I've upped the chapter count. In re-reading I decided the ending was too abrupt. Thanks for reading!

Klaus is being annoyingly, and uncharacteristically, fidgety. He's been growing steadily more restless as the days passed, and Caroline's about three twitches away from threatening to stab him with a pencil.

It's time for a change of scenery.

She pushes away from the table, rising to her feet swiftly. She puts her hands on her hips and stretches her spine, moaning softly when it cracks faintly. She's been hunched over for *way* too long. Klaus drags his eyes away from his work, looking up at Caroline in confusion, not entirely focused.

Caroline leans forward, yanking his book away and shutting it with a decisive snap. "I'm going to change out of this skirt and raid the snack trunk in my dorm. *You* are going to walk out the northeast doors in fifteen minutes. I'll meet you in the trees. We're going for a walk."

Klaus eyes the book in her hands like he's debating grabbing it back, and nope, not allowed. She tucks it in her bag for safekeeping. "Do not make me confiscate more. I will do it."

"Caroline," he begins, palms up and tone placating. "I really can't. I feel like we're close to..." he cuts himself off, still reluctant to tell her exactly what they're trying to do. She's complained extensively, wheedled, and bargained (because wouldn't she be more helpful if she could dig in beyond theory?), but Klaus is impressively stubborn.

She's researched the history and effects of more generational curses than she has fingers or toes at this point, is growing a little miffed that she hadn't bothered to negotiate some extra credit.

She's only *slightly* in the lead in the class rankings. She'd been too annoyed in the beginning to think ahead.

"All the more reason to take a break! If you're close, you'll come back with fresh eyes. Then you're more likely to catch whatever you're looking for, right?"

Klaus tosses his pen down, and Caroline whirls away, taking it as a sign she's won. "Fifteen minutes!" she reminds him before she speeds away.

Caroline ends up running a little later. In her defense, she needs to take a roundabout route to the meeting place she'd set, mainly to avoid adding more fuel to the rumor mill.

But partially to avoid any questions from authority figures. It's not against any rules for Caroline to be outside as it's nearly two hours until lights out. There aren't even any regulations about going out with Klaus, she'd triple checked the student handbook. That's probably more of a technicality given how few men have visited campus, but if they're caught, she's fully prepared to argue her case.

Caroline finds Klaus leaning against a thick white cypress; his head tipped back. He looks more relaxed than she's ever seen him. She wouldn't have pegged him as an outdoor kind of guy. Watching him now, away from prying eyes, she wonders why.

He seems at home out here, bathed in bright moonlight.

She scrapes her foot against the packed earth deliberately, and Klaus smiles. "I know you're there, Caroline." His eyes drift open lazily, and he straightens from the tree. As she draws closer, Caroline begins to wonder if taking a walk had been a terrible idea.

There's always a table and at least two dozen books between in the library. They're usually watched by at least twice as many eyes. Caroline uses a Forbes family cloaking spell to keep their words private, but they're not invisible nor unaware of their observers.

And *many* of the observers have approached Caroline with nosy questions about things they've seen.

Out here, there's little supervision. Once she and Klaus enter the woods, they'll be completely alone, without any physical barriers.

Klaus has left his usual jacket inside, a thin grey t-shirt clinging to his arms and chest. The path is wide enough for him to walk beside her, and she can feel the heat of him, despite her heavy wool sweater. His hand brushes hers as he takes the backpack she'd brought.

"Snacks!" Caroline exclaims, much too loudly. She feels her ears burn, hopes it's too dark for Klaus to notice. "I mean, I brought snacks. Filched the finest of sweet and savory from the communal pile. We lucked out since the full moon's in three days..."

"Two," Klaus corrects.

Caroline shrugs; she only keeps track of the moon's phases when she needs to use it. "If you say so. There's a clearing with some fallen logs a little deeper in. We should be able to see without needing flashlights."

"Sounds lovely," Klaus says. "Lead the way."

Caroline strides forward quickly, runs a self-conscious hand over her hair. Should she have dressed up? The atmosphere *feels* romantic – moonlight, a meal, a boy whose attention is intent and undivided. She'd been in a hurry, had grabbed the first warm-ish non-uniform items she'd found, a pair of jeans and an old cardigan in a washed-out shade of yellow.

“Do you come out here often?” Klaus asks, mercifully distracting her.

“Kind of? I do ingredient foraging at least once a week. Students typically prepare the stores, and I don’t always like how other people do things.”

“I find that unsurprising.”

She glares at him, playfully, because he’d sounded amused rather than annoyed. “Then there’s the dorms. They get loud and crowded, so sometimes I sneak away and usually end up out here. Before I started school, it was mostly just me and my mom. I did *not* adjust well to sharing a room. I still don’t always love it.”

It would be the perfect time for Klaus to offer something of himself, a story about how he’d grown up. She’s disappointed when he doesn’t. “And when you’re not at school? Does your mother live nearby?”

“*Very* nearby. She’s the sheriff of Mystic Falls.” Caroline spins, walking backward, eyeing Klaus, this time with suspicion. “She’s not magical. Like, at all. Isn’t too keen on the whole thing but accepts it because she loves me, and it’s a part of me.”

She doesn’t spot any of the distaste she’d expected to find. “That’s nice,” Klaus says simply.

“Isn’t that what parents are supposed to do?”

He looks away, down at the ground, and Caroline regrets that some of his ease leaks away. “Theoretically, I suppose.”

Interesting.

Klaus’ eyes widen in alarm, and he lunges forward, hands grasping her upper arms and his body colliding gently with hers.

She leans into him instinctively.

“Careful,” he murmurs, grip loosening though he doesn’t move away. Caroline glances behind her and spots a fallen log she’d been inches from tripping over.

“Thanks,” she swallows, attempts to sound less breathless. “*That* would have been embarrassing.”

His laugh is soft, and she probably only hears it because they’re nearly pressed together. She drags her eyes away from his face, afraid of what he might read on hers. She knows she *should* step back, turn away, lead him the rest of the way to the clearing. “It was my pleasure,” he murmurs. His hands glide down her arms, Caroline’s skin heats, and tingles, even with the layers that separate them.

She seriously regrets the sweater.

A shriek rings out, followed by a few voices laughing. Klaus tenses and steps in front of her, scanning the thick trees like he’s looking for a threat.

“It’s probably the local kids. They won’t bother us. Couldn’t even see us if they wandered past.”

“Wards?” he asks.

“Yup. Granny Forbes actually comes by every few summer solstices to renew them.”

“It keeps anyone without sorcerer’s blood from seeing the school?”

“Technically, anyone with magic would be able to see it, I think. My grandmother has strong opinions about The Purification being a disgusting stain on our history.”

He glances back at her, “And do you share those views?”

“Obviously. *I* likely wouldn’t have had an easy time of it back then either, not unless my parents had been able to hide my abilities.”

The Purifiers hadn’t wanted *any* dilution of sorcerer bloodlines.

Klaus looks away, his shoulders stiffening. She hears him take a deep breath. “Do you know how the wards work?”

“I haven’t been taught them yet; my grandmother may pass them down eventually if my father decides he’s too busy for the duty. My understanding is that sorcerers can cross it freely, but any person, or being, I guess, without magic, would need to be escorted by a sorcerer whose blood was used to make the line. The headmistress has the ability to escort guests, for example. I imagine a few other instructors too.”

Klaus turns, and she recognizes his expression – he’s working out a puzzle. “Could it work with other populations?”

Caroline begins moving towards the clearing, somewhat reluctantly, though she appreciates the academic turn of the conversation, allowing her to regain her composure. She thinks for a minute as she leads the way, then sits down on one of the logs. She stretches her legs out, carefully hides her disappointment when Klaus selects a spot across from her. Obviously, she’s imagining things, inventing romance – there’s plenty of room next to her.

“You mean like keeping a specific group off of a property? Vampires, succubi, incubi, that kind of thing?”

“Exactly. Or perhaps keeping a group contained. Like werewolves, confining them into one area on a full moon.”

“Theoretically, yeah, I think so. Though werewolves or other shapeshifters might be tricky.”

“Oh?” Klaus asks, and Caroline resigns herself to shop talk. Maybe he’s doing it on purpose, having noticed her reaction when he’d gotten close. Her crush hiding skills are probably super rusty, which is embarrassing.

“The most effective wards are blood-based or keyed to a magical frequency. A magical frequency can only be used in situations involving sorcerers because of the whole, uh, Purification thing.”

“But if a werewolf could do magic?”

“Then they could be confined by a signature. Now though, it would have to be blood. The werewolf or shapeshifter have to be pretty committed to an area because a blood boundary wouldn’t differentiate between a human and non-human form.”

“How long does such a spell last?”

“It would depend on the strength of the caster. At least a year, probably a couple.”

He continues asking questions, and Caroline dutifully supplies answers, methodically working her way through a bag of peanut butter M&Ms, then another of gummi bears.

Totally *not* eating her feelings, thank you very much.

Caroline had *thought* the first few days of her apprenticeship with Klaus had been awkward. She’d expected the days that followed her invasion of his bedroom to be even worse.

Except Klaus hadn’t even bothered to make an appearance in the lab.

Caroline spends day one bent over her desk, working on restocking the most time-consuming ingredients. Anything that needs a minuscule dice, or has to be shaved whisper-thin, gets topped up. The shelves and cupboards are immaculate when she’s done. Day two, she works on filing the backlog of Klaus’ notes. His handwriting is neat and easy to read, which is a small blessing.

She makes a note to broach the subject of bringing his lab to the 21st century and getting a laptop so she can more easily cross-reference. *If* they ever get to an easy place again. She’d tried to talk up modern technology with both of the sorcerers she’d previously apprenticed. They’d swiftly (and sneeringly) shot down Caroline’s suggestions. But Klaus is younger and willing to prioritize efficiency over tradition, so maybe the third time will be the charm.

If Klaus ever speaks to her again. In her grumpier moments, she wonders if he’s even still in the house or if he’s done another runner.

On day three, she decides to work on her own projects to distract herself from noticing how the lab remains eerily quiet and empty. Lonely.

Klaus *finally* comes in on day four. Only briefly, sweeping in and packing a leather bag with jars and linen bags. He grabs a haphazard sheaf of papers and is again out the door. Caroline’s new apology, more well-rehearsed than the rambling one she’d managed at the moment, goes unsaid when he barely glances at her.

Then, Caroline’s annoyed. Angry, even.

Which is entirely unfair, she realizes, since she'd been the privacy invader and Klaus the victim. She's trying to be a freaking adult about it - how are they supposed to move past her totally accidental snooping if Klaus won't deign to be in the same room with her? They're still stuck together for the better part of a year; that's a *long* time to endure the silent treatment. Caroline can only subsist on letters and pleasantries with Klaus' employees for so long before she goes insane

As quick as her temper flares, it cools just as swiftly. By dinner time, she's morose and considering talking to herself aloud to break up the silence. There's a giant dining room, a table that must seat thirty, but apparently, Klaus never uses it and takes his meals at a small table in the kitchen. He's made it known that she's welcome to join him, but so far, she's declined and eaten in her room or the lab in the interest of maintaining distance.

Now, she's pretty sure that invitation has been rescinded.

Tonight, Caroline decides to eat outside. It's warmer than usual out, so she kicks off her shoes and rolls up the hem of her jeans before settling down on the grass.

It *should* be nice. Beautiful surroundings, good food, nice weather. Caroline's mood remains gloomy.

Once she's done with dinner, going back inside doesn't appeal. She sets her plate aside and lays back, watches the sunset and the stars come out. Caroline hasn't slept well the past few nights, her mind buzzing instead of resting. Squinting up at the stars, Caroline figures attempting to tire herself out might help her achieve a decent amount of rest.

There's plenty of plants that will be more potent if gathered under tomorrow's full moon. She'll be able to harvest more if she treks out tonight to see what she can find and leave markers near valuable flora.

She leaves Klaus a note in the lab because she's not an idiot. Caroline's grown familiar with the area now, is confident in her ability to navigate the forest, but she's never been out after dark. She might die of embarrassment if she gets lost, but she's not too proud to leave breadcrumbs.

"Not that Klaus will even care," she mutters petulantly, scribbling out her plans. "Not that *I* care that he doesn't care. Oh my god, shut up, Caroline."

She refuses to acknowledge that it's not a good sign that she's given in on the talking to herself thing.

"Caroline! Wait up!"

Caroline pauses and allows April, an underclassman who works in the headmistresses' office, to catch up.

"Thanks!" April chirps, just a little out of breath. She's got a beaten-up bag hanging from her shoulder, one that looks like its seams are close to bursting. April begins digging inside.

“You’re working with Kla...Klaus, right?”

Caroline ignores the stutter, how April won’t meet her eyes. A fair number of the younger girls still haven’t gotten over gawping at him. Kindly, in her opinion, Caroline avoids a sarcastic comeback about how everyone knows she’s working with Klaus. “Yep! Did the headmistress need him for something?”

“No, nothing like that. He’s just got letters piling up. I’m supposed to deliver them, but he doesn’t seem to like it when people interrupt his work. I saw you and thought that you might be heading in that direction?”

She is, coming from the dining hall. Meaning April would have had to pass the library, where Klaus is even more stubbornly posted as the weeks go by, to find Caroline.

Caroline wonders if she should tell him to smile occasionally, so the underclassmen aren’t so afraid of him. Then discards the idea; it will only encourage the girls in her class who follow him into the stacks and try to rub against him.

It’s incredibly annoying – Caroline *might* have made a new enemy or two in thwarting such attempts.

“I can do that,” she tells April.

“Thank you so much!” April passes over a thick bundle, tied with twine, and Caroline’s brows rise. She takes it, absently weighing the pile. “The headmistress said he could collect correspondence from her office anytime, but he must have forgotten. He seems very busy.”

Odd.

Klaus doesn’t seem to forget much, but April doesn’t need to know that. “Must have. I’ll remind him.”

April smiles, relieved, “Thanks, Caroline.”

Caroline smiles automatically, resumes her walk to the library, slower this time. A quick glance down shows nothing but Klaus’ name and the school’s, written neatly across a cream-colored envelope, one that’s probably much nicer than anything found at a standard office supply store.

Klaus has been tight-lipped about his family. He’s *annoyingly* unwilling to discuss anything remotely personal. He’s got no qualms about arguing with her about academic subjects, books, or even music and food. She knows he thinks the art the school displays is abysmal and depressing, that he hates cauliflower, and that he thinks scrunchies are stupid. He’s confessed a love of travel and a wish that he could sculpt. But Caroline has no idea where he’d been living before coming to the school, when his birthday is, or if he spends holidays with his family. It’s an awkward sort of limbo – she *feels* like she’s getting to know him, and she likes him more and more, but does she know anything significant about him?

Ugh, she's been romantically interested in people before, has indulged in flings while on break from school. She's never experienced this sort of stomach-churning, mind-messing confusion. It's exhausting.

Maybe she needs a distraction.

Kat's been bugging Caroline about trying to make a little gap in her grandmother's wards so they can sneak out to a party at The Falls – growing more insistent as graduation nears. Caroline's been refusing, but maybe she should reconsider. The Academy won't expel them when they're two months from graduating, will they? She could use a night of fun, away from The Academy.

Low stress flirting with someone from town might be just what she needs.

"Alright, love?" Klaus asks, and Caroline startles, is surprised to see she'd weaved her way through the library while she'd been deep in thought. Some kind of muscle memory has brought her directly to Klaus' table.

She shakes her head, "Same ol', same ol'," she says, dropping her bag. "April from the office passed these off to me. You've been getting mail."

Klaus takes the bundle when offered, slipping the twine loose. He sorts until he has two piles, the first containing only four or five letters, the second much taller. He tucks the small pile into the back of his notebook then stands. He glances around furtively before picking up the small metal trashcan from beneath the table. He dumps in the large stack of letters. Caroline feels a flare of magic, then heat, as Klaus lights a small fire.

"What the..." she rounds the table quickly and snatches the trashcan from the table, setting it on the floor where it's obscured from sight. "Are you insane?" she hisses, shaking her now slightly burnt fingertips and glancing behind her to check if the librarian had noted the pyrotechnics.

It looks like they're in luck – Caroline's reasonably sure the crotchety old librarian would consider starting a fire near the books to be an infraction worthy of death. Caroline, who's attended her seminars on poisons, knows the woman could make it look like an accident.

Klaus is unconcerned about the librarian and *very* concerned about her possible injury. He tugs her down until they're sitting, is bent over her hand, gently prodding the reddened pads of her fingers. "You should be more careful," he murmurs.

Caroline scoffs but makes no move to yank her hand away. "*You* should be less dramatic. Ever heard of good old-fashioned ripping? It can be cathartic."

"Most of those letters were from my mother and Mikael. I'm afraid the fire is necessary. I'm certain they sent along at least a few bits of nasty spell work along with their undoubtedly scathing messages."

Caroline blinks in surprise. "Wow. That's... extreme." Though not at all surprising given the Mikaelson's less than stellar reputation and what Kat had said about Klaus' father.

Klaus glances up, a brief smile flitting across his face, “You might say I come by my dramatics honestly.”

She can’t help but return the smile. “Can I ask what they’re upset about?”

He sobers quickly, brushes his thumb across her palm. “My recent choices have been disappointing. Though, if I’m being honest, my choices have rarely been judged positively.”

Another question is on the tip of her tongue, but the fire pops, flaring brighter. “Crap,” Caroline exclaims. She passes her hand over the flames, using her magic to coax them lower and forcing the smoke to dissipate. Then she concentrates, pushing the fire hotter until it glows white. If Klaus is correct, she wants to ensure nothing sent with the letters will cause him any harm.

He grabs her wrist and pulls her hand away, letting the fire return to a more natural state. “Stop,” he rasps, and Caroline glances over at him in surprise. His face shows strain; lips pressed together, eyes dark. He’s grown tense, practically vibrating with an emotion that hadn’t been there before, and he’s breathing slowly, like he’s counting the intervals between inhales and exhales.

“Are you...”

He pushes away before she can finish her question, circles the table.

Away from her.

Klaus sits down again, his movements careful. “I’m fine,” he says, his tone blander than Caroline’s ever heard. He pulls a book towards him and begins paging through it, avoiding further eye contact.

Caroline follows his lead, slower and more mechanically, trying to figure out what had happened. She’s never done magic in front of Klaus, she now realizes. Had *his* magic reacted badly in response? She’s experienced that on a mild scale with a classmate or two, an odd itch at the back of her neck, or an unpleasant scent that comes with their casting. She knows it can be extreme, repellent, though that’s incredibly rare.

She makes a mental note to do some research, namely – can the phenomenon be one-sided? She hadn’t felt anything negative when Klaus casts. Quite the opposite, though her rational librarian-fearing brain had overridden any instinctive reaction.

She’s pretty certain her tiny crush on Klaus will amount to nothing considering her looming apprenticeships and his still super-secret but important project, but Caroline’s an optimist.

Just because it won’t amount to anything now, that doesn’t mean it won’t ever amount to anything, right?

It’s totally possible they’ll meet someday in the future. Caroline may even have a thought or two about engineering such an event, given a few of their conversations.

But, if her magic repulses him, those hopes are entirely wasted.

If that's the case, Caroline's seriously going to reconsider optimism as a lifestyle choice.

"Oooh, you're pretty," Caroline says, crouching down next to the river. There's a patch of night-blooming water lilies about ten feet offshore, bright pink under the light of the full moon, tucked amongst a pile of boulders. They hadn't been one of the plants she'd scouted last night, but the carpals will be useful. She might as well grab a couple.

Last night she'd stayed out until nearly 3 AM, had slept fitfully afterward, and had dragged herself into the lab promptly at 8. She'd inhaled an excessive amount of coffee and had been decidedly off her game though there'd been no one around to notice or comment on her poor performance as Klaus had, yet again, not bothered to grace her with his presence. She's kind of exhausted, but she'd painstakingly tied dozens of ribbons to mark her finds last night; no way was she wasting that effort.

Maybe, once she returns to the house, she'll *finally* be able to get a good night's sleep.

She sets her lantern aside and digs out an empty specimen jar before sitting down and removing her boots and socks. She wades in, gasping when the water is far colder than she'd expected, instantly numbing her feet. Caroline grits her teeth and keeps going, her eyes on the prize.

A rush of water makes her sway, a current she hadn't anticipated. Caroline wobbles, her balance off. She drops the jar and takes a step back towards dry land, but she's pushed farther in the opposite direction. The toes of the foot she has planted curl desperately, searching for purchase. When her other foot comes down, there's nothing beneath it. Caroline shrieks, slipping off some kind of underwater ledge. Her head goes under the surface, and her jeans and coat quickly become waterlogged, weighing her down. She kicks hard, arms flailing for something to grab to stop from getting pulled downstream. She rolls with the current, trapped underneath the waterline. Her palms scrape rock, but it's too smooth to gain purchase. She claws at it desperately, nails ripping, her lungs beginning to burn.

Caroline screams when something slams into her from behind, water rushing into her mouth. Mercifully, she's pushed to the surface, choking and sputtering. She can't see anything, groping blindly until she manages to grasp the rocks in front of her, her back braced from behind. She pants, trying to catch her breath and gain a solid foothold. Caroline reaches behind her nervously, trying to figure out who or *what* is in the water with her.

Her hand finds fur, thick and soaked; she traps a panicked cry behind her teeth. Caroline snatches her hand back and moves closer to the rocks until she's pressed as close as she can get. She profoundly regrets dropping the jar. It would have been a crappy weapon against the ginormous *thing* in the water with her but a crappy weapon would have been better than her bare hands.

She *does* have magic. Caroline takes a deep breath, willing her heart to calm, preparing to draw on her power.

Then a snout presses against the back of her neck, hot breath briefly warming her, throwing her back into fight or flight mode. Caroline does neither, freezing and endures being prodded

and sniffed.

Once, her dad had thought camping was a good family bonding activity. There'd been a pamphlet with advice on how to deal with a bear. "Speak clearly, so the bear knows that you are a human," it had said.

She has no idea what's behind her, only some guesses. Still, what could it hurt?

She twists her head, squinting into the darkness. "Nice... beast... animal... thing. Wolf?" She murmurs, attempting a soothing, non-threatening tone.

It yips, oddly approving.

"Wolf," Caroline says, confident now. "Nice wolf. Pretty wolf. Wolf that doesn't eat people, hopefully."

It makes a noise, a low rumble of a whine, and crowds closer to her. Its head nudges at her hand insistently. Caroline's fingers flex tentatively, coming to rest on the back of its neck. A bob of its head encourages her, and she slides her hand lower, hooking her arm around the wolf's shoulders.

Weirdly, her fear has swiftly melted away.

Is that a symptom of hypothermia? Hopefully not because she's a long way from dry clothes and shelter, she'll need to keep her wits about her.

The wolf leans forward, carefully baring its teeth and grasping the sleeve of her jacket, tugging her other arm closer.

"This is insane," Caroline whispers, but she eases away from the rock, latching on to the wolf.

With a jolt, it pushes away from the rocks, cutting swiftly and powerfully through the water until Caroline's feet touch solid ground. She begins to shiver violently once she's exposed to the cold air, leaning heavily on the wolf as she staggers out of the water. She's about to collapse onto the grass, but a sharp bark rings out, then a low growl. The wolf's teeth snap near her thigh, and Caroline jumps away.

"Hey! That's not nice!" she tells it.

The wolf then headbutts the back of her thigh, another growl rumbling out. She's shivering and shaky but motivated, dragging herself a few steps forward. She hears a whine then, her hand is licked. "Gross," Caroline mutters, but she leans on a tree but keeps moving. The wolf stays on her heels, nudging her whenever she slows though it remains quiet, and doesn't flash its teeth again.

It herds her to the house, then *into* the house. She's freezing, teeth chattering, and her numb fingers struggle with the zipper on her coat once she's inside. Caroline's having trouble focusing, takes shaky steps as she's directed. She's beginning to wonder if she's hallucinated

the wolf because it's utterly ridiculous that a *wolf* is in Klaus' house and apparently directing her to the lab.

Either she's got excellent latent survival skills, or the wolf is a genius because there's a fireplace in the lab. Every night, after they finish working, one of the staff members tidies up and lays wood and kindling for the morning. Caroline's hands tremble, and half the matches end up scattered on the floor, but she manages to strike one and drop it in. Her breath rushes out in relief when the scraps of paper catch and glow. Her legs buckle, and she winces when her knees slam into the stone floor.

She breathes deeply, eyes on the fire, concentrating now that she's nearly safe. She pours her magic into the fire until it's barely contained by the grates and bathes her in warmth, and she sighs in relief.

She vaguely recognizes the wolf leaving, and she stretches her hands out, warming them. When she can feel her fingers again, she returns her attention to her clothes, manages to peel her jacket away, and get her sweater tossed aside. She rubs her arms, swiping the remaining water droplets away, crowding as close as she dares to the crackling fire and coiling her hair on top of her head.

She hears a clatter, and her head whips around. More lucid now, she reaches for a fire poker, watching the wolf warily. It's helped itself to a pile of bedding, has it clenched in its teeth and dragging along the floor. It appears to note that she's now armed and keeps its distance, leaving a pile of quilts just out of Caroline's reach before backing off.

"How did you..." she trails off, mystified. The wolf obviously can't reply. It backs away and shakes, water flying from its fur.

Caroline briefly fears for her notes because her desk is definitely in the splash zone, but it's a brief concern. She has more pressing issues. She turns her back to the wolf, now certain that it's not a figment of her imagination. She's equally sure that she doesn't truly have anything to fear from it.

Mostly because she's beginning to do some *very* interesting math.

She strips away the rest of her clothes and uses one of the sheets to pat herself dry before she burrows into the thicker blankets. It takes a few minutes for her to stop shivering, and once she does, she turns and puts her back to the fire, her attention on the wolf. It's pacing, eyes on her. She notices a bit of a limp, how it avoids putting much weight on its right front leg.

She's also thinking clearly now, recontextualizing the night's events.

Along with other oddities, like the mysterious injuries, she'd had to bully Klaus into taking care of.

She's alone with a wolf who'd just saved her life. She's wrapped in a blanket that hadn't been anywhere near the lab, a blanket that the wolf had somehow known how to retrieve. It's the full moon.

It's only logical to assume that her savior is not *just* a wolf.

Several pieces click rapidly into place. The research Klaus had been doing on generational curses, how neatly he'd dodged certain questions. How he's never referred to a father but always used Mikael's first name. The last night they'd spent together at school. The cage in his room.

She's even nursing a nagging suspicion that her magic hadn't ever repulsed him, but that's a can of worms for later.

First, she needs to establish some basic facts.

Caroline takes a deep breath, puts the fire poker away. "You're hurt. Come over here, let me look."

She's ignored, but that's not at all surprising considering how carefully Klaus had guarded this secret. Caroline heaves herself to her feet, tucking the blankets around her so they'll stay in place. She walks towards the door and turns on the overhead lights. "Klaus, seriously. Let me look at your arm. Leg. Whatever."

He stays where he is, sitting back on his haunches, head tipped stubbornly away from her.

"Alright, fine," Caroline mutters. She's about to do something dramatic but figures it's totally warranted. She swipes a pot of ink from a nearby shelf, dipping her fingers inside. She knows runes better than most, and she barely has to concentrate on what she's painting on the door. The wood grows warm, the ink dripping—her magic flares around them.

Klaus feels it, a rumble growl spilling from him. It's probably a warning, but it's Caroline's turn to ignore him. After all, hadn't he promised that he'd never hurt her?

Then the door melts, merging into the surrounding walls, and Klaus begins to pace anew.

Caroline applies the same runes to the windows; Klaus anxiously shadows her circuit around the room. The room grows warmer once it's near solid stone, and Caroline sheds the heaviest of her blankets, curls up on the chaise.

The spell is a Forbes family special. They won't be leaving the room until Caroline decides they can.

She imagines Klaus won't concede graciously, but that's okay. She's got a stash of snacks in her desk, bottles of water in one of the refrigerators, and the chaise under the window is reasonably comfortable. She can stay in this room as long as they need to.

She's got questions, and it's long past time that Klaus provided some answers.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Apologies! Life got unexpectedly busy and I neglected writing a bit - after I was doing so well! If it's any consolation, this chapter is longer and contains a scene that I **think** a lot of people were wondering about (and I begin to earn the E rating ;)) And, hopefully, a few more questions are answered.

About an hour after they dive into their work, Klaus remembers the letters he hadn't incinerated. Caroline hasn't been at her most productive, distracted by revelations she'd never expected to receive. She glances up when Klaus pops the first wax seal. She's curious about who he *wants* to hear from – friends, his siblings?

The confidences he'd offered have made Caroline even greedier to know him.

She tries to keep her observations unobtrusive, makes herself read two paragraphs for every glance. The first two letters seem innocuous, leaving Klaus amused and exasperated at turns. Occasionally, a smile curls his lips. Once, his shoulders shake with laughter.

Klaus' mood darkens as he reads the third letter. Caroline half expects the lamps to start flickering and thunder to roll in. He catches her watching, and Caroline freezes at being caught staring. "Bad news?" she ventures. She digs her nails into her palm, tempted to reach out.

He exhales harshly. "Yes. Though not unexpected."

"Sometimes that's worse." Caroline's a big believer in the sustaining power of hope. She's also familiar with having a lingering hope crushed and the bleakness that comes after.

His lips twitch, and he nods, "I just hadn't thought the news would come this quickly."

She makes a sympathetic noise. "Does it have to do with..." Caroline waves her hand, gesturing to their ever-growing pile of notes. A terrible thought strikes her, and she leans forward urgently, "Oh no, did the curse get worse?"

Her best guess is that the cursed party is someone close to Klaus. Maybe a friend or a mentor. She's entertained the thought that it's a significant other but hasn't allowed herself to dwell on it. How pathetic would she be, given how drawn she is to Klaus, if she were helping him to ensure his happily ever after with someone else?

She'd pretend like she was happy for him, of course. It might tax her acting abilities, and she'd have to figure out a way to avoid Klaus, probably for the rest of her life. Which might be a struggle, considering she'd already submitted her apprenticeship paperwork to The

Guild. She's officially chosen Alchemy, should receive info about her first placement before month-end.

With the same specialty, their paths will likely cross.

She'd written her dad and grandma, and they'd been reasonably good sports about her choice. Caroline half-thinks that's because she'd drawn out the decision-making process, wearing them down.

She's made a mental note of the strategy's effectiveness. Just in case another potential parent disappointing situation arises in the future.

Klaus shakes his head, "No, it's nothing to do with what we're doing."

She's relieved, but it's tough not to press. Caroline likes knowing things, and she hates when she can't protect the people who've earned her loyalty. Klaus has crept his way onto that list, even if it's TBD whether he wants to be on it.

He offers more information, surprising her. "My younger sister, Rebekah, writes of how she's terrorizing her school. My brother, Kol, of how he's certain he can seduce the sorcerer he's working with. Kol knows he shouldn't, but he's rather bored. And then there's Elijah, my older brother, who likes to consider himself our grand protector. He's written to inform me of the revival of Mikeal's political aspirations."

"He wants on The Concilium?"

"He wants to *lead* The Concilium."

Well. That *is* alarming.

"Does he have the support for that?" The Concilium remains a relic of the past – to get a seat, a person needs support from a select few. Caroline's not hugely familiar with current machinations though one day she'll need to be, though hopefully not for a long time. Her grandmother retains the Forbes seat, her father reluctant to take it over.

"At the moment? Likely not. He's made many enemies. In the future, I think it's a possibility. Mikael is exceptionally gifted at both blackmail and bribery."

"Gross," Caroline says and immediately wonders if she's overstepped. Family dynamics are prickly; just because Klaus' relationship with his parents appears to be far from warm and fuzzy, that doesn't mean there's no loyalty there.

Klaus smiles, and Caroline's relieved. "I cannot argue with your assessment." His gaze drops to the letter again, and she can tell his worry hasn't eased.

Maybe she can help.

"If you'd still like to speak to my father," Caroline offers, doing her damndest to hide her reluctance, "I can set up a meeting."

It'll take some convincing, but Caroline knows she can wheedle her way around her father's staunch anti-Mikaelson policy. Her dad's a stickler for fairness; she'll just point out that judging a son solely by his father's actions is a mite hypocritical.

Caroline's been thinking about it making this offer for a while now. Weeks, if she's honest. She likes working with Klaus. She's even enjoyed the research, despite deep dives into the very dull journals of long-dead sorcerers who'd suffered because of various curses.

Only Lady Ophelia Jenkin Hughes' diaries had been all that entertaining. When not afflicted with some weird sleeping beauty curse, she'd enjoyed a long list of conquests, her descriptions growing steadily more salacious as time went on.

Lady Ophelia had been born at the wrong time. In the 21st century, she'd have made a killing in the erotica game.

Caroline had read those in her room after Klaus had questioned her flushed cheeks.

Caroline can admit she's hesitated to ask her dad to help for purely selfish reasons. Working with Klaus has been fantastic. The problem is, she likes the moments where they're not working even better.

She's been reluctant to give any of it up – the quiet moments in the library, her shoulder brushing his when they walk along the forest paths. And then there are the meandering conversations they have in their clearing, how Klaus looks at her after he's made her laugh.

The news he'd received about his father has rattled him. She can't help him with that situation much, other than a sympathetic ear or maybe giving her grandmother a heads up. What she can do is try to ease another of his burdens.

He's obviously surprised by her offer. Klaus drops his letters and gives Caroline his full attention. She begins tapping her pencil against a book cover and tries to smile, "I just mean... I graduate in five weeks, and while I'd love to believe we'll crack this before then, I can't guarantee it."

Putting off her apprenticeship isn't really possible. She's checked.

"I can call my dad tonight; see if he'll meet with you this weekend."

The tension in Klaus' shoulders eases, and Caroline knows she's doing the right thing, even if it hurts a little. He reaches out, his hand coming to rest over hers, stilling her drumming pencil. "I would appreciate that immensely. More than I could probably say."

She keeps smiling, even when it begins to feel strained. She hopes that Klaus won't notice.

Caroline pulls away, lets her hair fall to shield her face as she busies herself with packing up her stuff. It's ridiculous, but her eyes are prickling, and there's a lump in her throat. She's known all along that her acquaintance with Klaus had an expiry date. She's only moving it up a bit.

It might even be for the best. How much harder will she fall in five weeks?

Before looking at Klaus again, Caroline takes a deep breath. When she tucks her hair behind her ear and meets his eyes, she sees he's frozen and wide-eyed, is watching her with something close to alarm.

Crap. She's totally making this awkward.

Caroline throws her bag over her shoulder, clears her throat, and pretends she sounds normal. "I'll let you know how it goes tomorrow, have a good night!"

She walks away too fast to hear any reply Klaus might make.

Caroline dozes fitfully, her thoughts too wild to allow proper rest. She can't stop looking at the clock on the wall. It's ticking loudly, counting down, though Caroline's only has a general idea of what time sunrise will be. Klaus had settled a few feet away, his back to where the door once was. He'd been slow about it, silent and pained, and it had been a struggle to resist demanding he let her check his injuries.

Though, to be fair, she knows even less about healing wolves than she does about healing people. It might be better to wait for him to turn back.

His eyes remain wary and on her, even when Klaus lays his head down on his paws. He doesn't sleep either.

When Klaus lumbers to his feet and stretches, Caroline figures morning's just about arrived. She's up more quickly than her lack of sleep should allow. First, she hurries to her clothing. She'd left it to dry by the hearth, had figured it would probably be best if she's adequately clothed for the conversation she needs to have with Klaus.

She's not usually superstitious, but the last time she'd been less than fully dressed in Klaus' presence had been a disaster. She's so not looking for a repeat.

Her jeans are still damp, but her top, sweater, and socks are dry enough. She ducks into the storage closet, wraps one of the sheets around her waist, knotting it securely. It covers more than any skirt she's ever owned, it'll have to do. Caroline hurriedly pulls on the rest of her dry clothing.

When she's decent, she exits the closet and drapes the bedding over the arm of the chaise. Klaus is going to need it.

She busies herself with coffee, wincing when the first crack of bone breaks the morning quiet. The sound echoes off the stone walls, quickly followed by another snap, then a crunch. Caroline closes her eyes when Klaus makes a soft noise, one that's thick with misery and nearly human.

Apparently, sometime in the last eight hours, she's given up keeping Klaus at arm's length. If she were a better person, maybe she'd let him have his secret.

The sounds of the change taper off, then quiet. Caroline listens to Klaus breathe heavily for a few moments. She takes a shaky inhale of her own and glances over her shoulder. He's pushing himself to his feet, more labouriously than she'd like. He doesn't seem at all self-conscious about his nudity, rotating his arms. She squints, eyeing his right side and shoulder, but it's too dim to get a good look at his injuries.

She licks her lip nervously and speaks softly. "I wasn't really thinking about the clothes issue, sorry. The good news is, your sheets aren't at all scratchy."

Klaus doesn't reply, but he does make his way to the pile of bedding. He also doesn't look at her; Caroline takes the opportunity to observe him more closely.

He's upright. Steady. Her suffocating worry eases slightly.

She's poured Klaus a cup of coffee because she figures it can't hurt. Caroline grabs a stool and drags it over, purposefully making noise. He's wrapped a few sheets around himself and taken a seat. Caroline hands Klaus his cup before sliding on to the stool, feet on the highest rung so she can balance her mug on her knees.

She probably should have put more thought into starting this conversation.

"Thank you," Caroline begins, and Klaus' eyes fly to hers. "For the whole fishing me out of the river and herding me into the house thing."

She'll let the headbutting and growliness slide.

Klaus clears his throat, but his reply is still raspy. "You don't have to thank me for that."

She's tempted to ask how he'd happened to be in the exact right place at the exact right time. Caroline has a hunch, but it's a can of worms she's not ready to open just yet.

It only makes sense to get the background info first.

Caroline just manages to wait until he's swallowed some coffee before she gets to more pressing matters.

"So. You're a werewolf."

She's fully aware it's an inane opening, isn't even offended by Klaus' derisive scoff.

"Which is why you went to The Academy. I can't *believe* I didn't put it together." In hindsight, it's embarrassingly obvious, but she'd been raised to believe that werewolves can't have magic. She'd also assumed, probably because Klaus had wanted her too, that *he* wasn't the cursed party. "How old were you when you started changing?"

She's a little confused about the timeline. She only knows the basics of werewolf biology and customs, but she *is* sure that the first turn usually happens in the mid-teens, often a little later for boys. Klaus had been years passed that when they met. If he hated being a werewolf, why had he waited so long to try to break free from lycanthropy? And what had he done on full

moons when he's been at the school? He'd practically lived in the library; Caroline's certain he'd never taken a single night off, never mind several.

"I was twenty-three."

Caroline blinks, waits for him to indicate he's joking. Instead, Klaus merely takes another sip of coffee.

"Huh, I didn't know werewolves could be late bloomers."

He cracks a small smile at that. "They can't be." He doesn't elaborate.

Caroline takes a calming breath.

Then another.

Klaus seems determined to be difficult. They'll never get anywhere if her temper flares, and she's fairly sure unsatisfied curiosity might actually kill her. "Okay then. Why did it take *you* so long to turn?"

"I was prevented from it. My mother weaved a curse on me when I was born. When she knew for sure what I was. Her curse kept me from knowing and from shifting when the time came."

Well. There are some awkward implications there. "Your father is a werewolf then. Not your mother?"

"He is, yes."

"And your father only had one child." She remembers that from their first conversations. "Then that means your father isn't... well, he isn't who people assume he is."

"Was that a question?"

She sets her coffee cup aside. It's empty, and she might soon be tempted to fling it at Klaus' uncooperative head. "Fine, I'll stop trying to be sensitive. Is that what you want?"

"I'm happy to answer any question you might have, love."

Somehow, Caroline finds that hard to believe, but she'll take him at his word. "What's your father's name? Where's he from? Where is he now? Do you speak to him often?"

"Ansel. He's lived in Germany since shortly after my birth though this house belonged to him. I haven't spoken to him in person in a few years, but we write regularly."

She knows she's staring at him, but she can't quite stop. Klaus is being *so* weird. He's not particularly tense, answers spilling out easily, without resentment. He's not offering any extraneous information, but he doesn't seem angry at her prying.

Caroline tugs at the sleeves of her sweater absently. She wants to ask about Ansel. Although she'd known Klaus felt little warmth for Mikael, she wonders if he's close to his biological

father. Why does Ansel live in Germany? Does he have a pack? Had Klaus' mother done something to keep him away?

She resists, however. She's technically imprisoning Klaus against his will, no need to stick her nose into *all* of his business.

"Judging by last night, you haven't managed to break the werewolf curse. Are you still working on it?"

Honestly, with as old as it is, Caroline doubts it's possible. It's not even a traditional curse, though supposedly it was in the beginning. Now, hundreds if not thousands of years later, it's probably more of a genetic quirk.

"I'm perfectly content with being a werewolf."

Huh.

She turns that statement over in her mind. She doesn't see the appeal, but she can't fathom why he would lie about that. But then why had Klaus turned up at The Academy?

"Oh, your mother!" Caroline exclaims, then she slaps a hand over her mouth. She'd been overly exuberant there, but she does love a good epiphany. Klaus seems to be hiding a smile behind his cup, so she decides not to be embarrassed. "Your mother," Caroline repeats, this time at a normal volume. "She cursed you. Is that the one you were trying to break?"

His head dips, "Exactly. When we met, I wasn't attempting to *stop* from turning every month. I was trying to start."

She can't stop the involuntary shudder. "Why?" she asks. "That," Caroline waves a hand, gesturing towards the spot he's just endured what seemed like agony, "seemed awful."

"It is. But only for a few minutes."

He doesn't explain, and Caroline sighs. "You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

His expression flickers, his amusement leaking away as he grows solemn. "It's not purposeful. I've not spoken to many people about this. And to even fewer in any depth. Just one, really. And..." his teeth clench together after he lets the word trail off, jaw tight.

Well, now she feels guilty.

Caroline unfolds her legs and hops off the stool. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be..."

His hand's latched around her wrist before she can walk away. "Wait," he says, tugging gently until the back of her knees hit the chaise. "Sit down, sweetheart. Please."

She does so slowly.

His head tips towards the fire. “Can you brighten that a bit? I’d do it myself, but the shift tends to throw my magic off.”

Caroline does as she’s asked, and soon the room is bright and toasty warm. She’s now able to see the fresh bruising Klaus’ has tried to hide with the careful draping of sheets. She leans in, nudging the fabric aside. The distressed noise that spills from her throat is involuntary as another piece snaps into place. “You’ve been busting out of that cage in your room, haven’t you?” It explains both the cage and why his shoulders and ribs had taken the brunt of the damage.

“I have, yes.”

“We’re going to have to pad that thing,” Caroline mumbles, fingertips skimming his shoulder. The damage extends farther this time, and her hand and eyes follow it passed Klaus’ elbow.

His hands lay loosely in his lap, palms open and relaxed. Caroline spies a black symbol on his left.

She rubs her eyes, wondering if perhaps her lack of sleep has her seeing things. Klaus stays pliant, even when she drags his hand towards her face.

The mark, an eye, bisects Klaus’ heartline.

She’s very familiar with the spell. Knows how to cast it, how it binds.

Caroline drops his hand, slumping back. She wonders if there’s a secret stash of booze anywhere in the room. At the very least, she’s going to need *a lot* more coffee. “So, when did you meet my grandmother?”

He rattles off a date, Caroline barely hears, mind already running ahead to an even more alarming thought.

Namely, what exactly had Klaus promised?

Caroline’s only half paying attention to Tyler Lockwood – he’s explaining something football-related that she doesn’t care about. She’d spotted him as soon as she and Kat had arrived at The Falls, couldn’t help but notice that he’d gone through something of a growth spurt. Not so much height-wise, he’s still barely taller than she is, but his shoulders are broader, his arms thicker.

She figures he’s begun turning, had wondered if she should mention that she’s well aware the Lockwood’s have been werewolves for generations. She’d decided not to after he’d teased her a little about her fancy private school like he usually does. He hadn’t even hinted that its exclusivity has nothing to do with academics. Caroline decides he must not know, and she’s not about to enlighten him and potentially spend the rest of her night explaining the ins and outs of magic.

Tyler's inching closer, probably thinking he's oh so smooth, backing Caroline away from the larger group. She's deciding if she's going to accept his invitation to a more private party. She has before, and it's been enjoyable enough (as long as she's on top), but she's not really feeling it tonight. She'd *like* to chalk that up to anxiety about the rule-breaking she's currently engaged in. She'd caved to Kat's badgering. Slipping through the barrier at the school had been easy, but they've still got to get back through it, into the school and their beds, undetected.

Kat's next to the bonfire, wrapped around Matt Donovan, so clearly *she's* not worried.

However, Caroline's fully aware that something else is behind *her* lack of enthusiasm.

Two weeks ago, Klaus had met with her father. He hasn't been the same since.

And Caroline's moping about it.

They're still plugging away at his project, but Klaus has carefully avoided spending any one on one time with her. He hasn't been rude or cold but he always seems to anticipate when she's working up the courage to suggest a break, and he has excuses ready. Caroline supposes she should feel grateful that he's let her down gently.

Maybe she'll get there. Eventually.

Tyler's talking about the SUV he'd gotten for his birthday now, working up to inviting her to check out its backseat.

Caroline feels a presence behind her, just before a hand skims her hip. She jumps, her drink sloshing out of her cup. She's eased into the warmth of another body as an arm drapes around her waist. She relaxes at the touch, finds she fits nicely against the leanly muscled frame she's pressed against.

Tyler's eyes have narrowed, "Who's your friend, Care?"

She hasn't looked, but she's completely unsurprised when he introduces himself. "Klaus. And you are?"

"Tyler Lockwood."

Klaus had obviously asked the question out of politeness as he doesn't even acknowledge the introduction. Instead, he leans over Caroline's shoulder, his lips skimming the side of her neck. She shivers, head tipping back. He speaks softly, but she assumes Tyler can hear, given his heightened senses. "I apologize for my tardiness. I know you hate that. You look lovely, by the way."

What is he *doing*?

Tyler's more adept at taking a hint than Caroline would have assumed. He retreats, tossing his can of beer aside, muttering unhappily. Klaus' fingertips are tracing patterns over her stomach, and Caroline's distracted by the intimacy. She's wildly confused and far too comfortable, has to concentrate on pulling away.

Honestly, her willpower is top-notch because her body does *not* want to move away from his.

She spins to face him notes that he's still temptingly close. "How are you even here?"

His hands land on her hips, reeling her in again. Caroline *should* slap him away.

His head dips, and when Klaus speaks, she swears his lips brush her ear. "Are you aware your little friend is a werewolf?"

Of course, he's dodging.

Caroline rolls her eyes. "Obviously. I'm not an idiot. Plus, Tyler's family and mine go way back."

Klaus' expression grows darker. "Oh? Does he know what you are then?"

She shrugs. "I don't think so. Not yet, at least. His mom's kind of a nightmare; I can imagine she's planning to shield her precious boy from the big bad world for as long as possible."

"And what were you discussing? You seemed... intent."

Oh, he's getting *real* close to making her angry. Her spine straightens, and she crosses her arms, forcing him farther away. "How is that any of your business?"

He smiles, but it's strained. "Indulge me, sweetheart."

She glances behind him, notes that they've drawn some attention. It might be the lure of good gossip, their tension evident. But it could very well be their magic – her power is crackling and sparking under her skin with her temper, and it's not just Caroline. She can feel Klaus' magic, almost *taunting* hers, inviting a clash.

People in Mystic Falls are good at dismissing weird; they have to be given the sorcerers and werewolves who call the town home, not to mention various supernatural visitors.

Still, there's no need to tempt anyone to get observant. Caroline dumps the rest of her drink, tosses the cup into the fire. She spins on her heel, walking away from the noise.

She doesn't look back, and the music is louder than Klaus' footsteps. She knows he's following her, can sense that he's annoyed and spoiling for an argument. Once the sounds of the party have faded away, Caroline turns, colliding with Klaus. They stumble, and he pulls her into him, doing most of the work to keep them upright.

Ugh. He's warm, and he smells good, and he's *so close*. It's hard to remember that he's a dick and she's gotta yell at him.

Klaus breathes deeply, his eyes fluttering closed. She feels his hand clench into a fist at the small of her back, and when Caroline touches him, his next inhale is shakier.

She's been so sure that she's imagined something between them, but at this moment, he's the opposite of disinterested. Klaus looks like he's fighting the urge to press even closer.

She'd bet just about anything that he'd been jealous of Tyler, and she needs to confirm that. Luckily, Caroline's never been afraid to play dirty.

She allows her hand to wander, sliding it up Klaus' chest until her fingertips graze the skin at his open collar. "If you *really* must know, Tyler was about to ask if I wanted to have sex with him in his car."

Klaus goes rigid, and his eyes pop open, anger palpable. "He's a werewolf. That's dangerous."

Caroline snorts dismissively, "Oh please."

"He could hurt you," Klaus insists.

"It's not a full moon, and he's barely an adult."

"That's even worse; he has no control!"

"*Maybe* he's a little stronger than your average guy, but that might be *fun*."

"Caroline," Klaus says, and it sounds like a warning.

One she ignores.

"Hot sex against a wall looks like a good time in movies, but I'm iffy about it in real life. Might be doable with a werewolf."

He tenses further; she can feel it where their bodies meet.

Caroline pushes her luck, "Want me to let you know how it goes?"

"That isn't the *least* bit funny."

She shifts, doesn't try to hide the way her eyes flit down to his lips. "Who's trying to be funny?" she asks innocently. "Sexual fantasies are perfectly normal. Healthy, even."

"You don't know what you're doing," Klaus rumbles, strained.

So patronizing.

"Pot, meet kettle. Why are *you* doing here, Klaus?"

He swallows hard and glances away from her. "Caroline," he says, and this time there's a hint of pleading.

Unfortunately for Klaus, she's not nice enough to let him off the hook.

Caroline reaches up, her hands framing his face, twisting it back to until she can see his eyes again. He doesn't resist and she's rattled by how unsure he appears. Her heart beats a little faster though, because there's longing there too. It makes her reckless.

She needs to know she's not crazy.

"You had to have followed me here. Tell me why. I don't want pretty lies or bullshit excuses, just the truth. I want..."

You, she almost says, but that's far too revealing. So she's done being the transparent one.

"Just tell me why you're here," Caroline demands.

He surprises her again, drawing her even closer, up onto her toes. He checks her reaction when she's just a breath away. Then, his mouth brushes hers. The noise Caroline makes is shocked, but her lips part willingly, one of her hands shifting to settle into the curls at Klaus' nape, the other gripping his shoulder like she's afraid he's going to run away.

Leaving seems to be the last of Klaus' intentions.

His first kiss is tentative, gentle, exploratory brushes, his lower lip a fleeting presence as hers attempt to cling. It's softer than she'd thought him capable of, nothing like her fantasies. Still, her knees tremble.

Caroline steps back, and Klaus follows, his body as close as their clothing allows. Their steps are slow and halting, both reluctant to break the connection between their mouths. She sighs when bark presses into the skin between her shoulder blades, left bare by her sundress. Klaus' thigh slides between hers, and his hands grasp her waist as his tongue slips into her mouth, a slow glide that has a moan building in her throat.

He stills and pulls back, only as far as she lets him. Caroline shakes her head, "Just shut up," she says, pulling him back into her. "Let me have this."

She doesn't want to talk or think or remember that this is probably a momentary thing. She's felt like crawling out of her skin these last two weeks, the polite distance Klaus had instituted hard to bear. Caroline had told herself that Klaus felt nothing but friendship for her, but that's not the case. She's never been so pleased to be wrong or willing to enjoy it.

A noise rumbles from him, rueful, maybe pained. His forehead rests against hers, voice rough when he speaks. "Anything, love. Anything you want."

Then he kisses her again, needier now.

Her hips jolt, straining to get closer as he tastes her thoroughly. She should have known he'd be good at this, as gifted as his mouth is when teasing and taunting in other ways. Her lips are wet and growing swollen. She needs to breathe, of course, but she does it as little as possible, sinking back into the kiss once she's filled her lungs. He's crowded her against the tree, but he's still. Caroline grows impatient, body moving restlessly against his, annoyed by the fabric that hides his skin from her.

His hand sinks into her hair, thwarting her attempt to kiss him, but she can't mind when his mouth drags across her jaw, finding a spot under her ear that has her toes curling in her boots.

Her hands are the first to grow bold, slipping under his shirt so her nails can find purchase on his spine when his hips *finally* grind roughly into hers.

He groans, pressing her harder against the tree, reaching down to drag her thigh up and around his back. This time his movement is deliberate, his hips grinding in slow circles, and Caroline shivers, nipples tightening as pleasure licks across her nerves. “Yes,” she whispers, gripping him firmly, returning the pressure.

She needs more.

Caroline drags her hand up his back, fingers exploring the hot skin and lean muscle she finds. His shirt bunches around her wrist. “Off,” she gasps, head tipping back against the tree behind her. “I want this off. Let me touch you.” His mouth finds her pulse, and she shudders when his teeth drag over it. Klaus obliges her willingly, eagerly, grasping his collar at the back of his neck, yanking the shirt over his head and tossing it aside. She curls over him, lips dragging across his bare skin.

Klaus inhales sharply in response, the hand that had lingered on her hip fisting in her skirt. Much to Caroline’s disappointment, he does not attempt to go under it.

She’s got to fix that.

Caroline leans back against the tree, panting softly. Klaus’ eyes are hazy when they open, dark blue, and focused on her face. She tangles their fingers together, draws his hand to where she wants it, high on her bare thigh. His lashes fall, and his head falls back, palm opening and gliding up. He grasps her hip, thumb tracing waistband of her underwear. Caroline’s stomach clenches, need ratcheting up. She shoves the strap of her dress off one shoulder, is immediately distracted when Klaus’ mouth opens over to the newly revealed skin. His stubble scrapes against her, Caroline shivers, fumbling with the other strap. He drags the first one down farther, lips teasing the edge of her bra.

She arches, impatient, and his soft laugh is muffled by her skin. “Beautiful,” he breathes, lips lingering between her breasts. He wraps an arm around her back, lifting her higher, and Caroline yelps, mostly in surprise but a tiny bit in pain.

More of her back is exposed now, the rough bark scraping in a way that isn’t entirely pleasant.

Klaus freezes, pulling away. “It’s fine,” Caroline murmurs, thigh tightening to keep him close.

He pulls her chest to his, calloused gliding down her back, lips against her throat. “I won’t hurt you.”

Caroline laughs, “You’re not. At all. I want more.” To prove it and perhaps distract Klaus, she works the other side of her dress down. It bunches under her breasts, lower when she shimmies her hips a bit.

Klaus groans, his hands sliding down her arm. He turns to study the ground, tugs her with him when he takes a step back. “As much as I’d adore fulfilling the fantasy you mentioned earlier, I don’t think this is quite the right venue.”

She grins and follows Klaus’ lead, dropping to her knees and brushing leaves away. “Some other time then.”

“Definitely,” he rasps before he kisses her again. He leans back, drawing her into his lap, his hands sifting through her hair. He angles her head, licks into her mouth, taunts her with his tongue and his teeth until she’s writhing against him. Caroline moans into his mouth, crowding closer, folding her legs next to his hips. They’re closer now, she has more control. It’s still not enough.

Caroline tears her mouth away, gulps in a breath, head falling back as she rocks against him. He’s far from unaffected, hard behind his jeans, his muscles straining under her hands. Caroline bites her lip and moves her hips again, searching for more friction. Klaus’ lips brushes the slope of her breast before he catches her nipple, scraping his teeth against the peak through the lace of her bra.

Still not enough.

Caroline whimpers, fingers tangling in his hair. “God, Klaus. More.”

He grips her ass, yanking her closer, intensifying the slow grind of their hips. “Anything, remember? Tell me what you want, and it’s yours.”

No one’s ever asked her to talk during sex or been particularly interested in what she needs to get off. She takes a shaky breath, tries to push away enough of her arousal so she can think clearly.

She wants Klaus, and she wants everything he can do to her, the things she can do to him, and then everything they can experience together. All of it, in any order.

And more than just this night. Possibly forever, as scary as that is.

Caroline has no idea how to *say* that. How to tell him that every night before she goes to bed, she finds her mind wandering – to his hands and his mouth and his body. To let him know she’s spent an embarrassing amount of time imagining how he’d feel inside of her.

She’s always been better at *doing* than at finding the perfect words.

Caroline leans into Klaus, lets her lips skim his stubbled jaw. His head rolls to the side, encouraging, giving her more room. She kisses the muscle where his throat meets his shoulder, then she sinks her teeth in, meaning to leave a mark.

The noise he makes is guttural, body jolting under her. He yanks the cup of her bra aside for his mouth, sucking roughly on her nipple.

He’s frantic now, but she loves it, squeezing her hand between them to tear at his belt.

His hand lands on her leg again, without her having to encourage him. His thumb drags along her sensitive inner thigh, her muscles tensing and twitching. She's wet enough that he notices, a low moan rumbling out.

His thumb rubs the damp lace that covers her, dragging upward to nudge her clit. She *shakes*, humming in pleasure when he lingers, circles. "So perfect," he rasps, kissing down the length of her sternum. "Somehow, you feel better than I'd thought possible."

"You too," she breathes. "I never thought..." she chokes on the words when Klaus slips under the lace, widening her thighs.

He strokes her clit gently but briefly. Caroline peels her eyes open to glare at him, and Klaus smirks, unrepentant. "You thought?" he coaxes.

She swallows hard, nerves creeping in. Klaus' pupils are blown, eyes barely blue around all the black. He's flushed, and his lips are wet, watching her hungrily. He rubs her back, offering comfort even now. "Nothing you could say or want is wrong, love. I want to know it all."

"I want you to stay with me," Caroline whispers, even though she knows he's talking about sex. "I want more than tonight. I want *you*."

His eyes close, a tremor wracking his body. Klaus' hand slides up her spine. The world tilts and spins, Caroline's finds herself on her back, head protected from impact by Klaus' palm.

He kisses her again, hard and fast and frantic; Caroline can barely keep up.

She's totally willing to work harder.

Caroline grips Klaus' back, her thigh climbing his side. She hears a rip, feels a sharp sting to her side, yelps in response.

Klaus freezes.

She opens her eyes, glances down. Somehow, Klaus has managed to tear the band of her bra. She plants a kiss on his neck, "You can owe me one," she teases.

He doesn't relax, lifting more of his weight off her. His hands are digging into the ground at her sides, eyes squeezed shut, and his breathing labored. She touches his side, tentative. "It's okay, Klaus. Really. Are you..."

He shudders violently, "Don't," he grits out.

Caroline drops her hands in alarm. "What happened? Did I hurt you?"

He doesn't reply, rolls off of her. Klaus crawls away before stumbling to his feet. He leans heavily against a tree, bent at the waist, breath heaving noisily. "Are you... are you okay?" Caroline asks. She yanks her dress up.

She has no idea what's happened. Had she lost control of her magic, and had Klaus reacted badly? Had he registered what she'd said, decided that he wasn't interested in something more? Caroline sits up slowly, arms crossed over her chest. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

Klaus doesn't look at her. Or reply.

He just leaves.

Caroline watches him in disbelief, growing cold. Her eyes prickle, and she sniffs, clearing her throat. She reaches for anger, finds it's out of reach, covered by a thick layer of hurt and humiliation.

Caroline vows not to cry. She tells herself Klaus doesn't deserve it.

She gets to her feet, mechanically makes herself presentable again. She collects Kat. Weathers Kat's increasingly concerned and demanding questions as they trek back to school.

Her vow only lasts until she's curled under the quilt she'd brought from home. She breaks it more than once.

Caroline gets up and begins to pace. She thinks better when she's moving, and she's become far too aware that Klaus is only wearing sheets.

Which would probably be very easy to peel away.

She's not going to think about that now, and risk being distracted, not with a brand new puzzle to work on.

Winifred Caroline Forbes Abernathy is one of Caroline's very favorite people. She's proud to carry her grandmother's name (even though she's always been kinda glad her mother had nixed 'Winifred'). Her Gran is scary smart, crafty, powerful, and the most ruthless person Caroline knows.

Really, she's kind of a nightmare. Tons of people find her terrifying, something her grandmother relishes. However, the full force of Gran's less desirable traits have never been directed at Caroline but always outward, protecting her. Honestly, she's always coveted them.

Caroline will be thrilled if she manages to be even half as intimidating when she's an old lady.

At this very moment, though, she's significantly less admiring.

"You made a promise," she mutters, more to herself than Klaus, though she's fully aware he can hear her. "You wouldn't have been marked if you hadn't. But you won't be able to tell me what that promise is."

She assumes, at least.

Caroline twists her head as she walks, eyes narrowing as she looks over at Klaus. “Are there any not-so-nice consequences if I ask you what you promised Gran and you try to tell me?”

He grimaces, nods, and Caroline groans. “Great. Just great.”

She does another circuit, mulling over her options. “What was that date again? When you met Gran?”

“May 15th. Just after I...” he doesn’t finish the sentence, avoiding her gaze.

“Got to third base and then fled?” Caroline finishes, tone sickly sweet, though without much true venom. A memory rushes back, of Kat dragging her away from moping in her dorm to go outside a few days after Klaus had left. They’d done a silly little ritual under the full moon, meant to exorcise Klaus from Caroline’s mind. It had been after they’d drunk the half-bottle of cheap rum but potent rum that Kat had filched from someone.

Obviously, no excising had happened.

“Was May 15th the full moon?” Caroline asks.

“The day before.”

Curiouser and curiouser.

“Was that full moon the first time you shifted?”

It’s a guess but apparently a correct one. Klaus smiles, slow and pleased, and Caroline hates that the bubble of pride that simmers to the surface, pushing her anxiousness aside for a moment. “Correct, sweetheart.”

There’s an obvious next question. She’s mentally tiptoed around it since last night, since Klaus had appeared at the exact moment where her safety, possibly her life, had been in the balance.

Had he known that? Did the connection Caroline’s tried so hard to ignore actually exist? Was it stronger than she’s thought possible?

Is she Klaus’ mate?

If Caroline asks that, she can’t take it back. She’d lost an awful lot the last time she’d taken a risk on Klaus.

The humiliation if she’s wrong? Not something Caroline thinks she can come back from a second time. She’d have to freaking walk to the nearest town, get a cab to the airport, then find some town where no one she knows will ever find her. She’d have flushed her apprenticeship down the toilet, so she’d have to learn a skill real quick.

She’s charming; people like her. She could probably sell shoes or something, but Caroline would prefer not to torpedo her entire future with a rash question.

She whirls away from Klaus, stalks determinedly to one of the marks she'd drawn on the wall last night. She takes a breath to steady her nerves, concentrates until the ink melts away. The stone groans as it shifts, windows and the door appearing again.

It's time for a strategic retreat.

She avoids looking at Klaus even though it's cowardly. "I'm going to the library," she announces. Hopes he gets that he's not welcome to follow her.

She'll do some research, check to see if there's any way she could be wrong.

She still has a million things she wants to ask Klaus, her curiosity burning and insistent. She ruthlessly pushes them aside, begins to formulate a plan.

Her questions will have to keep.

Caroline's next steps will be rational. Careful.

Even if it kills her.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

And this is where the smut happens. Petition to make Library Ladder Sex more of a thing...

When Caroline had decided to *borrow* the SUV she'd found tucked into one of the outbuildings, she'd had some concerns. There was the whole driving on the left thing. Then the possibility of running into some form of law enforcement officer while driving *badly* on the left. How disappointed her mother would be if she ever found out Caroline had technically committed grand larceny because she hadn't *asked* to borrow Klaus' vehicle.

That last one is unlikely – Klaus will never rat her out - but Liz Forbes' disappointed face is above average, honed by years of breaking up parties thrown by bored teenagers, and Caroline does her best to avoid it.

What Caroline hadn't considered was that the SUV would just freaking *die* on her.

Caroline turns the key yet again, but nothing happens. The engine doesn't rumble to life or make weird noises. None of the lights on the dash so much as flicker. She has no idea what the problem could be. The gas tank had been full, and the dirt road off of Klaus' property is packed down; she *knows* she hadn't hit anything, nor had she heard anything out of the ordinary.

The SUV had just lost any form of power and rolled to a stop.

Caroline leans forward and rests her head on the steering wheel, allowing herself to verbalize her frustration with a short scream. She'd left the house when the sun was just beginning to rise, had figured she'd be able to get to town and call and catch her grandmother at home given the time difference. She'd been hoping to sneak out and get back without Klaus being the wiser.

He'd given her a wide berth yesterday, hadn't disturbed her once she'd gotten to the library (after taking a brief detour for her room for clothes). Caroline had poured over dozens of books. Klaus' library is conveniently well stocked with various texts about werewolf history, physiology, and lore, which Caroline cannot *believe* she hadn't previously clocked as weird. She hadn't found anything that would even hint that her theory was off base.

Not that she'd really expected to. The pieces snap together too neatly.

She'd gone to bed, had tossed and turned, then given up on sleep around 2 AM. She'd pulled out a fresh notebook and tackled another issue. Namely, what exactly had Klaus promised

Gran? And why had she broken out a big gun of a spell to ensure he would keep those promises?

She'd filled about a dozen pages with neat lists and questions before admitting she needed to go right to the source. Since Klaus' house is, at least in terms of communication devices, firmly in the dark ages, she'd known she needed to go to town to call Gran.

Leading to her current predicament.

With one last groan, and a quick knock of her forehead against the steering wheel, Caroline grabs her bag from the passenger seat and reaches for her door's handle. She's rougher than she should be, shoves it open, only to yelp when the door seemingly slams into something solid. Caroline pulls back, rubs her wrist, eyeing the open door warily.

She feels that something is... off. Familiar magic brushes against hers, magic that has no business being here, at an intensity that seems excessive. Caroline narrows her eyes, glancing once more at the darkened dashboard. She extends her arm again, carefully, and meets the same resistance.

Her muscles quiver as she tries to push just a few inches further. It feels like she's swimming through molasses, and she stops when her bicep quivers and her forearm burns with strain, slumping back into the seat and shaking her arm out.

She tries a different tactic, closing her eyes and breathing deeply, reaching out with her power this time. She doesn't attack, merely explores, sending tendrils of magic along the barrier to get a sense of its size and strength. It's similar to the wards around The Academy, carefully composed layers of spells woven together to make something that should be impenetrable. It's definitely her grandmother's handiwork. She feels Klaus in it, too - his signature criss-crosses Gran's.

Caroline pulls back, shaking her head as she settles. "Annoying," she mutters.

On the plus side, she hadn't somehow destroyed Klaus' SUV. It should be fine once she's out of it, though they may need to figure out a way to tow it back a few feet so it's out of the barrier.

Caroline slides out of the driver's side, unable to resist trying to push through with her other arm. Her left is weaker, and she gives up quickly with a sigh.

She wiggles her toes, considers her options, already deeply regretting that she'd chosen to wear cute sandals. She'd driven for about fifteen minutes before the SUV had crapped out; she's not looking forward to making the trek back. She decides to remove the shoes, figuring the odds something is hiding in the grass that could give her tetanus are low.

Caroline puts on her sunglasses, shoulders her bag, and begins walking. "At least that's one question answered," she grumbles. Not one that's high on her list of priorities, but she appreciates it anyway. Klaus had obviously run with a conversation they'd had back at The Academy. He'd convinced Grandma Forbes to lock him onto this property, proving what they'd theorized when they'd talked it over because Caroline's well and truly penned in too.

If she hadn't already figured out she's Klaus' mate, the barrier would have been a big fat clue.

Klaus is waiting for her when she returns, appearing in the entryway as soon as she crosses the threshold. Caroline's immediately outraged that he looks great, if a little tired, while she's a sweaty, dirt-streaked mess. She glares, yanking off her sunglasses once she realizes the effort is wasted. "I stole your car," she tells him.

He doesn't seem upset, inclining his head. "I figured."

Hmm, had he noticed she was gone and thought to check the barn, or does the mate bond already allow him to sense her? She'd thought, based on what she'd read (though admittedly it hadn't been a deep dive) that the ability to track a mate's proximity takes time to develop.

She makes a mental note to read up on that point.

"I also might have broken it."

His gaze sharpens, running over her critically. He steps forward before stiffening, his hands clenching at his sides. "Are you all right?"

Caroline considers fleeing again, brushing past him and making her way to her room, sulking in the bathtub for a bit. But really, what's the point? She can't go to her grandmother; the library is only so helpful. Klaus is currently her best and only source of information.

"You'd know if I wasn't, wouldn't you?"

Klaus sucks in an audible breath, eyes going wide. It's shock, Caroline thinks, not fear or dread. She's pleased that she's surprised him, a little miffed that he must have been assuming she'd live in denial for as long as possible.

"I would," he replies cautiously.

Doesn't elaborate, of course.

Caroline sighs and tosses her sunglasses onto a side table, "I think your SUV will be fine, by the way. It just died on account of the wall-o-magic that surrounds this place."

"I'm not worried. I rarely use it, and I can always buy another."

She takes a deep breath, counts to ten. It's not at all rational that she's annoyed by Klaus shrugging off the news. It's not like she wants him to be mad at her. She just wants a hint that he's experiencing even a fraction of the roiling storm of emotions that *she's* finding nearly overwhelming.

"There's a barrier around your land. I couldn't pass it."

Klaus shifts with what Caroline thinks is uneasiness, and she's not proud of the petty pleasure she takes in it. "I'm sorry about that."

He's not at all surprised by the news, however. She's so sick of being one step behind.

Caroline knows that she needs to ask the right questions because Klaus' agreement with her grandmother prevents him from speaking freely. It dawns on her that boxing him in had likely been intentional and is typical of Gran. Her husband had died young, and she'd had no interest in remarrying, had often proclaimed to Caroline that there was nothing more blissful than being able to do what you wanted, when you wanted, without having anyone question you.

She'd want to protect Caroline's ability to make choices, even against something as immutable as being a werewolf's mate. Caroline appreciates the sentiment, even if it's currently her greatest aggravation.

The problem is, she's been shying away from the right questions, telling herself they could wait. She's been fearful, a waffler, and she's absolutely been raised better than that.

She takes a deep breath and forces an air of confidence that she does not feel when she asks Klaus, "Did you tell my grandmother that I'm your mate?"

Some of Klaus' tension leaks away. She's selfishly gratified that she's not the only one who's been anxious about the big reveal. "I had to. In order to convince her to help me. She's a formidable woman."

She suspects that 'formidable' is the most polite adjective of many he could have chosen. Someday, she's going to need a play-by-play about how the encounter had gone down. 'Hey, I'm a Mikaelson, though technically in name only, and a werewolf, and your only grandchild is my mate, will you help me?' would have had Gran casting first and asking questions later.

"Yeah, Gran's a bit scary. I'd like to tell you there's a marshmallowy center in there, but that would be a lie."

"She's protective because she loves you."

"I suppose that's better than being on her bad side."

Klaus makes a noise, half-amusement, half-agreement. He steps towards her, slowly, gauging her reaction. He reaches for her bag, and Caroline lets him take it. "I promised your grandmother three things. Now that you've figured one out, I believe I'll be able to speak more freely."

"You? Speak freely? How new and different." It *would* be a significant change from how he'd been when they'd worked together at The Academy. He'd been a master at distraction and neat deflections, save for a few instances.

Though, now that she thinks about it, she has a bone to pick with him. "At the Academy, you told me you were developing an elixir to break a generational curse. Which was a lie."

"A small one. I intended to have you research curses that functioned similarly to lycanthropy. My working theory was that werewolf genetics would prove stronger than my mother's

curse. Which, in the end, was correct. I do apologize for misleading you; it just seemed sensible at the time.”

She’s not a fan of lies, but she can understand why he hadn’t been entirely truthful in the beginning. Admitting to being a werewolf with magic could have been dangerous, and he hadn’t known her at all. She wouldn’t have spilled such a dangerous secret to a stranger either.

“I guess that makes sense.” She wonders what he’d gone through then, working through the realization that he had a mate, how he’d felt once he’d struck up a conversation. She’d been a little snippy, probably hadn’t made the best first impression.

Might have been part of the reason for the lies. Maybe he hadn’t liked her all that much.

Caroline shakes the thought away. She’s sure it’ll pop up later when she least expects it, and throw her into an insecurity spiral, which will be super fun.

“I was deceptive by choice in the beginning. Lately, it’s been forced.”

“Good ol’ Gran,” Caroline mutters.

“Her thoroughness has made matters a bit more difficult. Though the first promise was made moot by your arrival, and the third was something I would have done anyway.”

“Moot by my arrival,” Caroline repeats, her mind beginning to whirl.

Klaus smiles, tips his head in the direction of the kitchen. “I imagine you didn’t stop for breakfast, are you hungry?”

Now that he mentions it.

“I could eat.” Caroline turns in the direction of the kitchen. Klaus falls into step beside her, not quite close enough to touch. She can feel him watching her.

“Is there a place in town where I can get something overnighted? I will have to give Gran a piece of my mind on paper, but I want it to get to her ASAP. Half the time the post office can’t find her house, but it’s probably my only option.”

“My older brother will be here in two days. He can see that she receives anything you send expediently.”

Huh. That’s interesting.

“What’s the occasion?” she asks. “I got the vibe that you were doing the whole tortured loner mad alchemist thing out here. Visitors don’t fit the vibe.”

His head twists, his expression flatly unamused. “I’m not sure I like that description.”

“I suppose I can drop the ‘mad’ part. It implies a certain disregard for personal hygiene that you’ve managed to avoid.”

“Do I detect a compliment in there?”

Caroline scoffs. Of course he’d latch on to that. “Only if you’re *really* vain.”

“I may be guilty of that particular sin. But, to answer your question, Elijah’s not visiting for any particular occasion. He makes the trek out here every three months. We exchange letters as well, but there are instances where it’s better not to commit our conversations to paper.”

Caroline takes a second to absorb that. “Sounds like you’re plotting.”

A hint of anger darkens his expression, “Unfortunately, it’s necessary. I know better than anyone what Mikael’s capable of. Elijah agrees that he’s a threat, even manages not to complain excessively that we must have out discussions out in the elements.”

“He can’t cross the barrier?” Caroline asks. It hadn’t occurred to her. It should have been possible that someone who shared blood with Klaus, like a half-brother, would be able to pass if they’d been given a specific enough location.

Klaus shakes his head. “I cannot be sure that my mother or one of my untrustworthy family members wouldn’t find this place. Elijah can approach, but he can’t breach your grandmother’s wards.”

Caroline’s suddenly immensely glad for her small, tight-knit family. She might be a bit miffed at Gran, but she can’t imagine feeling unsafe with a single member of her bloodline, or believing that they’d intentionally hurt her. “Will you know if the ward’s breached?”

It’s pretty standard practice, Caroline can’t imagine Gran skipping it, but she wants the confirmation.

They’ve arrived at the kitchen, Klaus motions for her to go first. “Yes. If someone with magic, other than you or me, attempts to cross it or dismantle it, I’ll know.”

“And no one has?” Caroline presses.

“Not yet,” Klaus says, and his tone makes it clear he doesn’t expect that will always be true.

An idea worms its way into her mind. Gran and her dad make a healthy living through designing and casting wards, and various other protections, for less adept sorcerers. These days, they’re mostly benign, but that hadn’t always been the case.

She’s never personally built something that can fight back, but plenty of the Forbes grimoires, the older ones from back when it had been more socially acceptable to maim anyone who dared trespass, outline how.

She can probably work it out. She’ll add it to her list of things to do, just to make sure she’s not overestimating herself, then run it by Klaus.

She grabs his hand instinctively, squeezing in a way she hopes is reassuring.

Her working assumptions regarding the reasons Klaus had locked himself away had centered on the mate bond. Maybe he hadn't been ready, or maybe he'd thought *she* hadn't been ready, that she would reject it or resent him. She'd been thinking too small.

Caroline's not entirely certain how to move forward with Klaus, is still working out what it means that they belong to each other in an unshakeable, *unbreakable*, way.

There is one thing she's sure about, however. Anyone coming at Klaus won't *just* be coming at Klaus.

They'll have to go through her, too.

She takes her time rummaging through the cupboards, then considering the contents of the refrigerator. Klaus asks if she needs help, but she waves him off, unsure of exactly what she wants. There's a heavy wood table in the center of the room, worn smooth from use. Klaus settles on one of the benches, seemingly content to let her putter around.

Indecision, when Caroline thinks about it, is becoming a theme. One she's not super fond of.

She decides to keep it simple, grabbing a loaf of bread and a pile of sandwich fixings.

Caroline glances over her shoulder, "I'm not keeping you from anything pressing, am I? I know I've been the absolute worst apprentice over the last few days. There was the whole imprisoning you against your will thing, then I spent all day yesterday on my own research. And today I snuck off before it was even light outside."

Yikes. Good thing Klaus isn't going to snitch to The Guild.

"It's fine. I understand that you've received a great deal of concerning information over the last few days."

She pauses, sets down the jar of mustard she'd been about to open. "I'm not sure that I'd use the word concerning."

Klaus laughs, though there's little amusement to be found. "The revelation that you're trapped with a werewolf who can't seem to be contained on the full moon would be concerning for most."

"Oh please," she returns to her sandwich, swiping on the mustard before stacking on the second slice of bread. "That's literally the least concerning of all the things that I wouldn't even call concerning." She takes a bite, steps over the bench opposite the side Klaus had chosen and sits down.

Klaus regards her incredulously, staring as if he's wondering if she's in full possession of her senses.

Which is rude, honestly. "You had ample time to hurt me the other night. You did exactly the opposite. *I* locked us in together. I knew exactly what you were. I wouldn't have done it if I was afraid of you. Besides, the cage held the first month I was here, didn't it?"

“It did,” Klaus says. “Miraculously.”

Caroline’s got a theory about that. “Last night, you busted out because I’m an idiot who almost drowned myself for potion ingredients. The good news is, now that I know, you don’t have to use the cage anymore.”

She feels guilty that he’d spent two months caged already, to hide what he is from her, and injured himself in the process.

Klaus disagrees, “No, I’ll reinforce the cage. I’m not willing to risk something happening to you.”

Again with the patronization.

“I’m going to need you to accept the fact that I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

Klaus manages not to argue that point. She can see that he kind of wants to. Caroline debates calling him on it, decides they can save this particular, sure to be heated, disagreement for later on. They’ve got a good number of days until the next full moon, plenty of time to convince him that she’s right.

“How long will the wards hold for?” When they’d first discussed the possibilities of using magic to contain werewolves, she hadn’t been sure about timelines. Gran would have had a better idea.

“Your grandmother seemed certain they would hold two years. She used my magical signature, but I wasn’t confident that my nature wouldn’t have an unseen, complicating effect. We agreed on renewing it annually, and she’s come back every June.”

Caroline freezes, the sandwich halfway to her mouth. “Wait, how long have you been here?”

“Almost two and a half years.”

God, she can’t believe she hadn’t put that together. “So, after your mother’s curse was broken, you went to my grandmother. Then you came here? And you’ve been here ever since? *Trapped?*”

“It’s not a trap if it’s my choice.”

“Klaus,” it’s a warning, snapped out in a tone that she doesn’t often use.

He winces in response, “It was necessary. And it hasn’t been bad.”

She sets her sandwich aside; it’s grown tasteless and dry in her mouth. She swallows with some difficulty. “Why? It’s not like the full moon is unpredictable. Surely you could...” she trails off, something he’d said earlier hitting her hard. “Oh no,” she gasps, horrified.

He reaches for her, grasping both her hands. “Caroline, really,” he begins, low and coaxing.

She shakes her head. “You promised her you wouldn’t go looking for me. Right? The first promise? It doesn’t matter now because I showed up here.” It’s her turn to laugh, a sharp, brittle sound. “What a waste, huh? You exile yourself, and I waltz in and make it all *moot*.”

His free hand covers hers, tugging, until she looks at him. “It wasn’t a waste, and none of this is your fault.”

She knows that’s true, intellectually. Doesn’t make her feel all that much better.

“It’s not your fault either.” She threads her fingers through his slowly, looking up to find Klaus watching her carefully. “How about we just blame The Guild for my intrusion into upon fortress of solitude?”

Klaus relaxes, “I support blaming The Guild.” He nudges her plate, brows lifting in expectation.

She rolls her eyes but dutifully picks up the other half of her sandwich and takes a bite.

There’s so much more they need to cover; she should keep up her strength.

Caroline insists they head to the lab after her sandwich brunch. Klaus tries to argue, but if she refuses to keep slacking on her work. She’s going to earn her place in sorcerer society, will finish her apprenticeship with distinction.

Though she might have a bit of an ulterior motive.

She’s always been careful around Klaus. At The Academy she’d tried not to make it obvious that she was super into him, though she’s sure that she’d failed miserably. She’d told herself that his feelings were nothing but friendship, that any hints that it might be more were just her overactive, starved for male contact, imagination. That night at the bonfire, she’d definitely let the cat out of the bag but, when presented with something she wanted so desperately, she hadn’t been able to resist diving in. Since she’d arrived, she’d closed herself off because she hadn’t wanted to open herself up to be hurt. There’d been cracks, widening as time marched on, but Caroline had done her best to patch them up as they appeared.

She isn’t sure of all that much, but there’s no real point in trying to hide her feelings, is there?

They’re mated, bound by forces beyond their reach, but that’s the big picture. Caroline wants to start working on the small stuff, the things she *can* control. They have to begin figuring out what their life together will look like, and she thinks the best way to do that is to start in the lab. They complement each other there, even when she’d been trying her hardest to treat him with nothing more than the politeness she owed due to his position as her assigned mentor.

She’s banking on the rapport they’ve developed while working together to ease the way.

Caroline spots the bag she’d stuffed with ingredients on the night of the full moon still sitting on her desk, and decides to start there. Ingredient prep is just the sort of methodical activity that she needs, will allow her to think while her hands are busy.

Besides, she's pretty sure she's guessed the rest of Klaus' promises. He'd promised not to find her, said that he'd also promised something he would have done anyway. She thinks she's got that one too, but it's the final promise which seems to be the lynchpin, the thing that's preventing Klaus from *offering* significant information. She'd mulled it over while she ate, can't believe it has been staring her right in the face this whole time.

Honestly, it's so freaking obvious.

Caroline hums as she collects a few tools and sets up a cutting surface on her desk. She braids her hair, checking up on Klaus while she twists an elastic around the end. He hasn't made any move to set up, regarding her with some disbelief.

Oh well, if he doesn't want to work, that's his business. She reaches into the bag, comes out with a linen pouch that she'd stuffed with feverfew leaves. She dumps the leaves onto her board and begins stacking them, lining up the edges carefully. "You promised my grandmother that you wouldn't tell me anything that I hadn't already figured out myself, didn't you?"

She hears Klaus exhale with a rush, glances up to find he's staring right at her, brimming with relief and a considerable amount of pride. "About the mate bond," Caroline continues. "About your family, biological and otherwise. But also..." she picks up a knife, hunching down to keep her eyes on the board, "...about how you feel about me."

It's hard to say, feels a bit conceited.

"Correct on all counts. She didn't want me to be able to manipulate you."

Exactly as she'd thought. "Gran doesn't trust men much, charming one's least of all. You must have gotten grilled." Realizing what she's said, Caroline squeezes her eyes shut, peeking after a moment, exasperated to see Klaus has grown smug, "Don't you dare. You *know* you're attractive and appealing and..."

Ugh. Like that's going to deflate his giant freaking ego.

"Whatever," Caroline mutters, determined to move on. If Klaus knows what's good for him, he'll get with the program. "So I've got one and two. I think I have the third, too. Do you need some time to keep preening or...?"

"Please, go on."

"You promised you'd protect me." He's lived up to it, in a ton of little ways she hadn't even noted since the idea had started rolling around in her head. He's even still stubbornly stuck on trying to protect her from himself. "Kind of overkill, if you ask me. Everyone knows werewolves are protective."

At school, plenty of the smutty books the girls passed around covertly had involved werewolves and mates. Protectiveness was a prominent characteristic in werewolf characters. Caroline may have liked those stories the best and has to admit that little fact is *hilarious* now.

“You’re correct, sweetheart. As I said, I’d have done that without your grandmother’s magic forcing me to, but I cannot blame her for ensuring it.”

It feels pretty damn good to be right. “Is the mark on your palm gone?”

Klaus lifts his hand, now bare of any trace of her grandmother’s spell. Caroline sighs with relief, glad that they’ve removed at least one complication, even as a new worry nags at her.

She can ask all the questions she wants now – is she brave enough to voice the hardest ones?

Caroline decides to lean into optimism. “Good. That should make things a little easier.”

Hopefully, she hasn’t jinxed herself.

Caroline likes sleeping. She’s good at it, always has been. She’d never been the kid who called her mom to come pick her up early from a sleepover, she’d never had any trouble on the camping trips her dad loves. On planes, trains, cars – she’ll conk out at the first opportunity. She gets real cranky when she consistently gets less than eight hours a night.

She hasn’t managed a solid night of REM cycles in at least a week. There’s been plenty of tossing and turning, some late-night wandering, that disaster on the full moon. She’s exhausted and it’s becoming a problem. Caroline kicks the covers off, slaps a pillow over her head, and groans with frustration.

She’s like 90% sure there’s an easy solution for this issue, that her restlessness can be chalked up to the existence of a mate, one who she’s not close enough to. Several of the books had mentioned mated pairs will crave proximity, skin to skin contact. Physical intimacy.

And boatloads of sex.

If she could just muster up the courage to mosey on down to Klaus’ room, she’d probably be sleeping like a baby within a half hour. He wouldn’t deny her request to sleep in his bed if she explained what was wrong. She could probably even weasel out of asking for the skin to skin contact and just blunder her way through some kind of horizontal yawn and stretch routine.

Another concern keeps her stubbornly rooted to her bed. The worry that *other* urges should prove too overwhelming. The sexual ones.

The texts she’s poured over have done their best to be delicate, using euphemisms and carefully scientific terms. They’ve still done an excellent job of conveying that extreme horniness is a pretty typical thing for mates, particularly early on, though apparently the hyperactive sex drive never truly wanes.

Caroline has noticed a definite uptick in her libido since she’d arrived for this leg of her apprenticeship. She hasn’t thought much of it, has figured it was only natural. This placement is considerably less stressful than the others, she has more time and privacy. She’s assumed that Klaus is a factor, in the sense that she’s known the weight of his body on hers, his mouth

on her skin, his fingers stroking her most sensitive parts. Though that interlude might have been, Caroline's still able to close her eyes and recall it with perfect clarity.

She's been remembering it a whole lot lately, usually in the bath before bed, occasionally in the early morning, when she wakes from a pleasant dream and can't resist slipping her hand under her sleep bottoms to make it a good morning.

Frankly, she doesn't trust herself not to molest Klaus in his sleep.

She has a hunch that he wouldn't mind, but it's probably best to have a conversation about it first. The thought of starting that conversation, however, is freaking mortifying.

Caroline rolls over again, shivering when a breeze from the window whistles through the room, groping for a blanket to pull over her bare shoulders. She squints at the clock on the nightstand, groans again when she sees it's 4:10 AM, only about 14 minutes since the last time she'd looked at it.

Tomorrow. She'll suck it up and broach the subject. She's got at least a couple of hours to figure out a classy way to do it.

Even if it kills her.

She's surprised to see the light on in the library when she's dragging herself to the kitchen, intent on sucking down what will likely be the first of many cups of coffee. It's only a quarter to six, and typically the people Klaus has hired to clean don't come until later in the morning.

Caroline pauses in the doorway, spotting Klaus slumped in by the window. His eyes are closed, an elbow propped on the arm of the loveseat. His head rests heavily in his hand. With his face at rest, the dark circles under his eyes are prominent.

It hits her that she hasn't been the only one suffering sleepless nights, that Klaus may well be worse off. He's just hidden it well.

He's suffering; she's suffering. Needlessly. Caroline's going to put a stop to it.

She strides forward determinedly, and Klaus' eyes blink open, hazy with exhaustion. She sits down, facing him, pulling up her leg so her shin presses into his thigh. Even that tiny bit of contact, with her skin shielded from his by his jeans and her leggings, loosens the tension in her muscles. She holds her breath as she reaches for him, cupping his rough cheek and brushing her thumb gently under his eye.

It's a minuscule touch, but it manages to make her feel more alert.

Klaus' lips part, and his eyes flutter closed again, a soft hum rising from deep in his chest. "Good morning, Caroline." He makes no attempt to shy away, his thigh shifting minutely to solidify the contact.

"You haven't been sleeping," she says, and it's not a question.

“Not often,” he admits.

“I can’t either.”

He looks at her, concerned but not especially surprised. “I’m sorry, love.”

She shakes her head. Somehow, they keep acting like someone’s at fault here instead of working together. “No, no more apologies. It’s... biology. Magic. There’s no blame. It just... is.” Caroline realizes she’s making zero sense, that she probably sounds like an old hippie who’d done too much acid in her youth. Klaus seems to understand though, she thinks that’s all that matters.

His hand comes up to cover hers, pressing it to his face once more. “I know. I’ve had years to come to terms with this. You can take all the time you need.” His head twists, brushing a kiss against her palm.

Caroline’s breath catches, she shivers, and Klaus’ eyes darken in reaction.

Yep, overwhelming horniness is totally a thing. She can’t let it take over though.

Not yet.

“Why’d you leave that night? After we...”

She’s glad Klaus doesn’t need her to elaborate. He clears his throat. “Do you remember when I mentioned that I had believed that I didn’t have to break my mother’s curse, that my nature would prove stronger?”

Caroline nods. She’d added it to her mental lists of topics they’d have to circle back to.

“That was correct. Only it didn’t happen in the manner that I had anticipated.”

He’s looking at her expectantly. Maybe it’s the lack of sleep or the fact that her body is telling her that climbing into Klaus’ lap is something she ought to be doing right now. Maybe she’d just used up all her sleuthing skills yesterday, but she’s got nothing. “So what happened?”

“*You* happened. You broke my mother’s curse that night.”

“What?” Caroline exclaims, loud enough that she instinctively glances around to make sure she hadn’t disturbed anyone else. “How could I possibly have done *that*?”

He pulls her hand down, clasping it between both of his, using light pressure to offer comfort. “I’m not 100% sure, if I’m honest. I wasn’t thinking clearly, or processing much beyond what was happening between us. The sources I’ve read disagree about what it takes to solidify a mate bond. Some insist it’s physical, others say it’s mental.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, if we believe theory A, I’d guess the mate bond was triggered when you bit me.”

Caroline feels her cheeks heat. She had done that, hadn't she? The noise he'd made is one of her favorite memories, something she returns to when she needs a final push to get off. He tugs her hands, pulling her attention back to him. "Don't be embarrassed. I liked it."

She swallows hard, "Noted," Caroline manages. She squirms slightly, wishes she'd worn something lighter because she's beginning to sweat in her chunky sweater. They're *barely* talking about sex, she shouldn't be this turned on.

Klaus' fingers tighten against hers, and when she glances down, she spies the tendons in his arms, pushing against his skin. She migrates closer, resting against the back of the couch, leaning into him. She feels the deep inhale he takes. "If we believe the second theory," he says, and she's sure his voice has grown raspier, "Then the mate bond was sealed when you told me you wanted me to stay with you."

It's an interesting question, academically speaking. Caroline just doesn't have it in her to care much about which is correct. Theory A, theory B – it doesn't change where they are now. "That doesn't really answer my initial question."

"I left when I noticed I was stronger. That I felt... whole, in a way I never had before. I didn't understand why, in the moment, but I knew that something had unlocked the part of me I'd been denied, and it was *very* close to the full moon. I wasn't sure of my control."

"And you thought you'd hurt me," Caroline finishes, slightly exasperated. It makes an annoying amount of sense.

Klaus has the grace to appear contrite. "In hindsight, it would have been more gentlemanly to explain. It was too much all at once. The way that I desired you, it was incredibly difficult to control even when my mother's curse held. When I was freed, the want was consuming. I wanted... well, I wanted things one typically saves for later in a relationship. Things that are probably best done for the first time in a more comfortable locale."

Oh, wondering what *that* means is going to haunt her.

Her mouth goes dry, and she has to look away from him. She takes a deep breath of her own, though it only serves to make her realize that her nipples have tightened, that the throbbing between her legs is getting harder to ignore. "I was going to suggest we go back to bed and nap, since we both clearly need it. But I don't think any napping would happen, do you?"

The noise Klaus makes is more pained than amused. "I don't know that I've ever been more awake."

She pulls her hands from his, digs her nails into her palms. She lets her head tip back and breathes in, holding it until her lungs burn, then exhaling noisily. She feels more clearheaded, but doubts it'll last long.

The pull between them is just too strong. There's just one thing Caroline needs to know before she gives herself over to it.

“Did you like me?” she blurts out, eyes slamming shut. “When you figured it out, did you wish it was someone else, or that I was different? Less... I don’t know. Mouthy and argumentative. Or maybe you like short brunettes or women who don’t wear makeup or...”

She feels Klaus moving, turning until he’s hovering over her, one knee on the cushion next to her. Caroline’s eyes remain stubbornly closed. Klaus slides a hand around the back of her neck, his other grasping her wrist. He lays her palm flat against his heart. “Look at me,” he urges, thumb stroking her racing pulse.

“I can’t.”

“Sweetheart,” he coaxes, but Caroline shakes her head. He leans forward, soft lips brushing her clenched eyelids. “From that first moment you walked by me in the library, I knew it was you. There was a sea of girls there, remember? They faded away, and you became all that I was aware of. I was so vexed that you were the only one *not* looking at me.”

A strangled laugh squeezes through her tightly pressed lips. “Conceited,” she mutters.

She feels him smile, mouth lingering against her forehead. “And then, after our first conversation, all I could think was, ‘How could I possibly be so lucky?’”

She reaches for him blindly, arching up and knotting greedy hands into his shirt. Klaus’ head dips, his lips finding hers, the hand on her neck sliding to cradle the back of her head. He sinks into the kiss, swallowing her whimper, invading her mouth slowly, until she’s twisting towards him, growing frustrated with how far away he still seems to be.

He holds her steady, maintains a whisper of distance. He takes a breath, hand flexing in her hair. “I want you,” he tells her, steady and sure. “But I need to hear exactly what you want.”

Caroline swallows, an audible gulp, reigning in the urge to be flippant. He can’t possibly be laboring under the misapprehension that she *doesn’t* want him. She’s near trembling with the fierceness of it, different from any desire she’s felt previously. *This* makes everything that’s come before seem perfunctory and unimportant. Just bodies and friction, momentary and easily forgotten.

She’s always thought of sex as something mindless, like a fun little vacation where she powered down her mind for a bit, then came back sharper, ready to tackle the next goal she’d decided to check off her list. It’s never been consuming or necessary.

Klaus had said he’s never been more awake, and that’s part of it. Caroline’s never felt more *aware*. She wants to savor every second.

“I want to know you,” is what she finally says, “I want you to know me. I want to keep talking, I want to know your secrets. But I want that later, I know we have time for that. Right now, I want to know how your hands feel on my body, what sounds you’ll make when you’re inside me, how...”

His mouth crashes into hers, and he wraps an arm around her hips, easily lifting and shifting her. When Caroline pulls back to suck in air, he’s sprawled against the arm of the couch, and

she's straddling his thighs. He rears up, mouth demanding on hers, dragging her down until her breasts press into his chest. She moans her approval, rubbing her tongue against his even as she wriggles to align his cock with the ache between her legs. He's hard behind his jeans, and Caroline grinds shamelessly, widening her thighs to improve the angle. Klaus tangles his hand in her hair, tugging gently to urge her to tip her head back. She lets out a sigh when his mouth latches on to her throat, rolling her hips even faster.

She's growing unbearably hot, her sweater chafing her skin. Caroline reaches down to find the hem, arms crossing to peel it off her body. Klaus groans, pained. She looks down to watch his hands splay over her stomach, breath hitching when his thumb teases her navel. His gaze is equally riveted, his eyes wide as his palms glide up, leaving her skin sensitized and trembling. He fills his palms with her breasts, fingertips tugging the cups of her bra down.

"Klaus," she chokes out when his teeth graze her nipple, hand flying out to steady herself on his shoulder. A deep tremor rocks her, starting at the base of her spine. She's a little scared of how much she's feeling, her nerves lighting up from even the smallest touches.

"I've got you," he murmurs. "Let me take care of you, hmm?" She feels his breath against her nipple first, then his lips wrap around the tip, wet and demanding. He applies suction, and she cries out, stomach clenching, the rocking of her hips growing frantic.

His hands have wrapped around her hips, helping her move. She needs more and she grasps his wrists, comfortable in making a demand. Shakily, Caroline drags his hand between them, pushing it lower. "I need you to touch me," she tells him, barely recognizing her own voice. She's hoarse, her breathing labored, and she moans brokenly when Klaus' response is to burrow his hand under her leggings. She tries to move, to give him more room, but the loveseat isn't really built for this, and her knee slips off the edge.

She yelps and loses her balance, falling heavily against him. Klaus' free arm glides up her back, cradling her closer. "Shhh," he murmurs. "You're alright, love. Take what you need."

She tucks her face into his throat, nuzzling his skin. "Please," she whimpers, wrapping her hand around his wrist. It flexes in her grasp, and she shudders when she feels two fingers part her folds, growing slick because of how wet she is.

He makes a rough noise and delves deeper, gliding down, easing just inside of her, then rising to press against her clit. She bears down against his hand, searching for friction. "Is this what you need?" he asks, fingertips rubbing over where she's most sensitive. He repeats what works, finding a motion that leaves her shaking. Caroline nods, closing her eyes and burrowing closer.

It's the *start* of what she needs, at least.

He turns his head, teeth sinking into her earlobe and tugging. "Will you come for me, Caroline? Just a small one, to start," he coaxes, the motions of his fingers speeding up. "To take the edge off. I owe you more, of course."

Caroline tries to argue because she doesn't want obligation, not with this. "You don't..."

She loses the rest of her sentence when Klaus traps her clit between two fingers and squeezes gently. He shifts so he can suck a mark into her shoulder. “No arguments, love. It’s selfishness if it’s anything.” He inhales deeply, “You smell incredible. I loathe that I’ve never tasted you.”

Caroline’s nails dig into his shoulders, so hard she won’t be surprised if they’ve pierced the thin cotton of his shirt. Klaus jolts underneath her, forcing his hand tighter against her slickness. Caroline whimpers, inhibitions fraying. She rears up, and plants her foot on the floor for leverage, her hands pressing into his chest. “It’s too much,” she babbles. She stares down at him, dimly registering the flush on his cheeks, how messy his hair has grown from rubbing against the arm of the couch. His eyes are nearly black, focused on her, drinking in her reactions.

It's too much. She wants too much.

Caroline’s head lolls back. “I’m too…” she forces his wrist down further, arching her back until his fingers begin to sink inside of her. “Yes,” she hisses, as the ache inside abates, her body clenching down as Klaus’ work-roughened fingertips drag over her inner walls.

“Poor love,” he murmurs. “Have you been hurting? You need something inside you?”

She works herself against his hand, and Klaus catches the rhythm that she needs beautifully. His hand moves deliberately, his palm curling so the heel of his hand applies steady pressure to her clit. The delicious tension inside of her tightens, tightens and frays, her motions growing short and jerky as her breath comes out in pants. “Talk to me,” she pleads.

A noise rumbles from deep in Klaus’ chest, she can feel where she’s has braced against his chest. His accent thickens as the words she’s requested come rapidly. “You look incredible, *feel* incredible. So hot and perfect, wrapped around my fingers. Can you feel how wet you are, love? Dripping into my palm. I’ll never be able to walk into this room again without remembering it. Shall I tell you what I have planned for you next?”

Caroline shivers, nodding enthusiastically.

“Why don’t you play with your nipples for me, hmm? They’re pretty, you know. Flushed and begging for some attention.” His palm splays over her lower back, helping her balance, and Caroline’s hands rise, covering her breasts, thumb and forefinger tugging, like Klaus has asked. It sends sharp jolts of pleasure shooting through her. She grows greedier, motions quickening, and high-pitched little noises spill from her lips.

She’s going to come soon, knows it’s not going to be small like Klaus had initially assumed.

“Perfect,” Klaus rasps. Caroline peels her eyes open, head tipping forward. His gaze is on her chest, eyes narrowed, like he’s filing away the exact sort of touch that she likes. His eyes flick up, catching her looking, and a slow smile crawls across his plush lips.

“That night in the woods,” he says lowly, and Caroline watches avidly as his tongue glides over his reddened lower lip. “You taunted me with something. Do you remember?”

She doesn't have the focus to remember something she'd said yesterday, let alone years ago. She tries to reply, is grateful when Klaus correctly parses the garbled sound and continues his story. "I had an epiphany that first month. I caught you in here, perched on top of one of the ladders, hunched over a book."

Dimly, Caroline hopes it hadn't been in the very early days after she'd arrived – Klaus' library has rolling ladders built into the shelves, straight out of *Beauty and The Beast*, and she'd definitely had a great time whipping from one end of the room to the other on them at top speed, fulfilling her childhood dreams.

"Your skirt had ridden up. I was ever so tempted to creep closer and see if I could catch a glimpse of more than just your thighs but, alas, I am a gentleman." He punctuates the proclamation with a particularly rough thrust of his fingers, and Caroline cries out, her hands on her breasts growing frantic.

"You told me you fantasized about being taken against a wall. Over the years, while missing you, I thought I'd perfected a fantasy of my own. Couldn't believe I'd never realized a ladder has far more potential. After you come apart around my fingers, while you're still drowsing in the aftershocks, I'm going to carry you over to that ladder, perch you on a rung, and put my mouth on you."

She'd never considered it before, but the image floods her mind, possibilities and permutations unfurling in her imagination like a dirty, technicolor, flipbook. The first tendrils of her orgasm ripple over her, streaks of pleasure making her limbs weak.

Klaus has her though, the hand on her back urging her down, until the needy noises she can't seem to stop are pressed into his skin. He isn't done talking, either. "You'll come with my tongue buried in your heat, more than once because I'm a greedy man. Then we'll find a bed."

He manages to twist his hand until his thumb is tight to her clit, rolling over it, back and forth, each direct brush sending a new wave of shakes down her legs. She comes with a sharp cry, trembling as a cacophony of pleasure washes over her, thick and overwhelming, more sensation than she thought she was capable of handling.

Considering they've only just started, she's probably going to have to adjust her expectations.

Caroline doesn't fully register the process of relocating. She's aware of Klaus rising. Instinctively, she wraps her limbs around him to the best of her ability (which, considering she can't even feel her legs is probably not that helpful). He doesn't seem to need the assistance, however, and she never feels unsafe.

The ladders sit at a slight angle, the base about a foot away from the built-in shelves, the upper track sitting right against the top of them. She finds the position surprisingly enjoyable, particularly with Klaus' lean, warm frame against her.

His hands caress her arms, stretching them over her head. He curls his hands over hers, until she's gripping an upper rung, dropping a kiss against the crook of her neck. "Hold tight for

me,” he instructs. His lips tease the skin between her breasts, and she feels him tap against the back clasp of her bra. “Can I take this off?”

She has a perfect view of herself when she glances down. Her breasts spill out of her bra, and even though she’s flushed from exertion and slightly shiny from sweat, the pink marks left behind from her own fingers dot her skin. Her legs are loosely wrapped around Klaus’ hips, and he’s still fully clothed, his shirt just slightly askew.

She feels not a hint of embarrassment, no urge to curl in or cover herself. Perhaps, after the best orgasm of one’s life, they lose the ability to feel shame. Or maybe it’s the way Klaus is looking at her. There’s something close to reverence in his heated gaze, though Caroline’s always associated that emotion with respectful distance. One doesn’t usually touch the things one reveres, and Klaus looks like he’s dying to continue exploring the curves and angles of her body, bare and splayed before him. Caroline arches her back, pretending she needs to adjust how she’s situated. His hands, resting lightly on her hips, flex. It’s a tiny hint at the strain he’s under, that he’s hidden with an admirably composed façade.

She wants to chip it away, piece by piece, until he craves a release that he’ll only find with her.

Caroline clears her throat, “Take off your shirt first.”

One of his brows rises, but he obliges her, his hand reaching over his shoulder and yanking the shirt off by its collar. Caroline bites her lower lip as she drinks in the sight of him, of his pale skin stretched over lean muscle, skin she can’t wait to explore again.

“You can take my bra off now.” A smirk plays over Klaus’ lips, and he smoothly opens the clasp. He drags it up, until Caroline relaxes her grip on the ladder to allow him to toss it aside. She hesitates, caught between two warring urges. She *could* touch him, suspects there’s not much she couldn’t convince him of, if she were to sink his teeth into his skin, or if she promised prettily to be good later, if only he let her have her way now.

He’s waiting for her to choose, patiently. She grips the rung he’d first directed her too, warmth flooding her as approval lightens Klaus’ eyes. She relaxes against the ladder again, though she’s not fully ready to let him run the show. “Now your belt.”

That pulls a soft laugh from him, Caroline smiles in answer, tipping her head up to receive the kiss he brushes against her mouth.

It’s brief, fleeting, and feels an awful lot like adoration.

She hears metal clink, then a whoosh as he yanks the leather from his belt loops. The belt drops with a clatter, and then his hands cup her hips, thumbs tucking into the waistband of her leggings. “May I remove these, now?”

Caroline nods, letting her legs fall away from him, heels coming to rest on a low rung so she can help him work the clinging spandex off of her. He’s managed to grasp her underwear too, when the hem of her leggings slips over her heels, she’s fully naked.

And still, not a drop of self-consciousness troubles her. If anything, it only makes her feel powerful.

She narrows her eyes playfully. “You didn’t ask about my underwear.”

Klaus takes a step back, slowly popping the button of his pants, sliding the zipper down. Her toes curl, anticipation flooding her, but he stops too soon, moving until he’s just a breath away, cutting off her view. “Tease,” she accuses.

Klaus shrugs, unrepentant, hands once more spanning her hips. Caroline shivers as his thumbs trace the hollow under her hipbones. “I find the way you look at me maddening, and I can’t have any distractions.” He kisses her throat, takes a lush taste of her skin. “To fulfill my earlier promise, I’m going to need you to move up a bit, love.”

They’re more or less aligned now, his hips pressing lightly to hers. Caroline swallows hard, using her grip and the leverage from her foot to move up. Klaus’ hands glide over her skin, and he makes no move to help. “Good,” he praises, when she settles one rung higher. His mouth is now level with her breasts, and he takes advantage, holding her gaze as the flat of his tongue circles her nipple. “Another.”

Caroline sucks in a breath and hesitates. Klaus waits, seemingly content coax her nipples into tight, throbbing knots. Her biceps tremble when she moves because she goes excruciatingly slowly, Klaus’ mouth dragging down the length of her sternum as she lifts her body higher. He nips at the bottom of her rib cage, lips quick to sooth the sting. His eyes are challenging now, and Caroline knows what he wants – he’d painted a *specific* picture – but he’s letting her choose it, making her admit that she wants it too.

She stretches her arms up first, wrapping each finger around the ladder, one by one. Her feet move next, thighs tensing as she finds purchase. She rises to the next rung, relying on the muscles in her legs because her arms have grown weak and shaky.

Klaus presses a kiss against her skin, just above her pubic bone. She hears the echo of the thanks he hasn’t voiced when he turns his head, resting his forehead against her hip.

Klaus’ hands turn intent, settling her thighs over his forearms. He grins at her when he leans in, tauntingly, in a manner that stokes the heat that’s banked during this slow, challenging, *lovely* variety of foreplay. He grasps the sides of the ladder, hands climbing upwards. Each inch he gains lifts her thighs, pushing them wider. Soon Caroline feels cool air smooth over her slick folds, she bites her lip to hold back a whimper. He watches her face carefully, gauging her comfort, stopping just before he strains her considerable flexibility. His head dips, so close to where she’s begun to burn, pauses. Caroline squirms when his harsh exhalation stimulates her clit. His eyes sharpen, “Tell me if you want me to stop, Caroline.”

She shakes her head instantly. This is new, a little scary, but she likes it. She’s fairly certain it won’t take much more than a flick of his tongue to have her shattering again.

“I’m not just talking about now. If you ever don’t like something, you can tell me.”

“As long as you do the same,” Caroline replies.

Klaus leans in, mouthing along the tense muscle of her inner thigh. “Agreed.” He inches higher, licking away a smear of wetness left behind from their earlier play on the couch. He hums his pleasure at the taste. “Better than I thought possible.”

Then his tongue is on her, his fingers parting her folds, and Caroline’s abs clench down hard. Her breath comes hissing out through her clenched teeth. He’s not easing her into it, eyes focused on her, direct and electric. Each swirl of his tongue on her clit makes her hips twitch, but her range of movement is limited because of how he has her pinned. There’s nowhere for her to go, she sinks into the pleasure, breath growing heavy when the strokes of Klaus’ tongue linger. Caroline’s hips flex with each taste he takes, chasing the high his mouth is pushing her to, pleasure skittering through her body. Her lashes flutter, vision going white around the edges as Klaus presses harder, deeper, speeding up until she comes with a scream.

She chokes when his lips latch onto her clit, applying harsh suction that somehow makes her hotter. Her spine arches away from the ladder, thighs quivering, and Klaus holds her steady, licking away the liquid that seeps from her entrance, making sounds that indicate he’s finding some satisfaction of his own in this.

Caroline collapses against the ladder, hands aching from how tightly her grip had gotten, trying to catch her breath. She’s disoriented, rubs a trickle of sweat away, against her shoulder absently, shifting in Klaus’ solid grip.

She stiffens when his tongue dips lower, flicking over her entrance, pushing past the clenching muscles. Belatedly, she remembers he’d promised she’d come more than once. “I can’t,” she slurs, head feeling heavy.

Klaus’ voice washes over her, butter-smooth and coaxing, as he shifts to drape her thigh over his shoulder. “I think you can.” His thumb ghosts over her clit, “I think you’ll like it.”

She moans, resolve crumbling, heat building all over.

Klaus pauses, turns serious. “But, as always, if you want me to stop, I’ll stop.”

Her body’s clearly on Klaus’ side, her inner muscles fluttering, begging to be stroked and stretched. Caroline groans, “You’ll pay for this,” but relents, relaxing into the ladder.

She’s totally going to have to write some strongly worded letters to whatever old, prudish, scholars had written the books in Klaus’ library. They hadn’t even come close to preparing her for this.

Klaus’ low chuckle tells her he’s the furthest thing from threatened, only solidifying Caroline’s resolve to exact revenge. One day, soon, she’ll give him a taste of this, have him yearning and writhing under her, burning with need.

She’ll just have to bide her time.

He treats her to a slower build, less frantic. Klaus has absorbed a wealth of knowledge very quickly, and he exploits it, using his lips, tongue, and teeth deftly. He changes his grip, shifting so he’s still supporting her weight, but she’s now got room to move against his

mouth. He follows where she leads, speeding up when she rubs against him, backing off and softening his strokes when she retreats.

Her orgasm rolls over her, slower, languid, but just as good as the frenetic chaos of the last one, leaving her limp and drowsy.

But not entirely spent.

Klaus eases her down the ladder, his hands gentle and soothing and his mouth exploring all the skin within it's reach. When she's more or less in her original position, Caroline turns her head, searching for his lips, clumsy hands dropping to tug at his waistband. Klaus kisses her, sweet now, attempting to brush her hands away.

Which is absolutely unacceptable, in Caroline's opinion.

"I'm updating your agenda," she tells him firmly. He's trapped her hands, so she improvises, wincing slightly as her thighs twinge when she lifts her leg and hooks her toes into his jeans. "I want you inside me. Here, now. Then we're going to take that nap."

"Love," Klaus begins, and nope, she's not about to let him talk her out of something she wants. Caroline's capable of laser focus in pursuit of a goal, something that serves her well now. She brushes the back of her hand against Klaus' cock, still as hard as he'd been when she'd been in his lap, and stretching his boxer briefs. The sound he makes is strangled, though he swallows it quickly.

Caroline sighs, leaning in until her forehead rests against his. "I know you've built up this idea that you owe me. You never did, though. Let me make you feel good too, Klaus. That's what I want now."

He groans, something defeated in the sound. Caroline only has a second to feel smug before she yelps in shock when Klaus picks her up again, easing them both down to the floor. The rug beneath her back is thick, only slightly prickly, but Caroline forgets all about that when Klaus' body comes over hers. She threads her fingers into his hair, dragging his mouth to hers. She moans when she realizes he's somehow managed to strip away the rest of his clothing, hitching her thigh over his hip when his cock rubs against the slick, swollen seam of her.

One of his arms curls under her, supporting her head as he plunders her mouth again, tongue delving deep. Caroline slips her arms under his, crossing one over his shoulders, the other stroking over his lower back. Pressed this close together, she can feel him trembling faintly. She nips at his jaw, mouth teasing the skin just below his ear. "I want you," she tells him again, rolling her hips against his. He moves with her, until it's a dance rather than a clash, the thick length of his cock gliding through her folds. She sighs when she feels the tip of his cock catch at her entrance while Klaus shudders, a deep full-body motion. Caroline holds him tighter, curling around him as he eases inside of her. He goes slow, and she's glad because this feels like the kind of fairy tale magic she's never believed in.

To Caroline, magic is a discipline. Sorcerers are born with the spark, but then they have to work. Magic has always been a craft she's labored at and grown proficient in. It's not nose

wiggling or wand-waving, there's nothing instant or effortless about it. The magic she's learned to wield is never quite perfect.

This moment, Klaus inside her, his ragged breath in her ear, heart beating against hers, is something beyond even perfection.

How had she lived without it? feels like she belongs here, as close to Klaus as possible. She's never felt safer, or more free.

Then he moves, and her head drops back in a gasp, eyes widening. She'd expected to enjoy this, of course, had known that there was no way having Klaus inside her wouldn't feel good. She'd expected to gain satisfaction from getting Klaus to his release, to revel in his loss of control, to luxuriate in his closeness.

It's better than merely good, and her knee bends, thigh creeping higher on Klaus' side, as each of his thrusts manages to send new sparks shooting through her system. "Caroline," Klaus gasps out, reaching down to grip her upraised thigh.

He begins to move faster, roughly grinding her each time she's full of him. She gets closer and closer to her tipping point, muscles tightening in anticipation. Caroline's hands dig into Klaus' back, urging him to let go. She drags her mouth over his shoulder, searching blindly for the right spot.

He comes when her teeth sink in, hips rocking, hard and erratic, her name a guttural shout. The feel of him losing control sends Caroline sailing over the edge once more. She clings to him, his weight a comfort, as the world goes fuzzy.

Her last fleeting thought, before they slip into unconsciousness, is that she's glad they'd made it off the ladder.

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