Belonging To The Fog

by the_artful_scribbler

Summary

Hermione has lost herself. Her identity, her memory is now a complete blank, even down to her being a witch. She's a girl on the run. But she doesn't know what she's running from. She doesn't even know her own name. (Rated M for violence, language and sexual content. Written in the style of a Gothic Romance/Mystery. Angsty and dark, eventual Lumione romance.)

Notes

Hi everyone, thanks for reading! Just a few notes before we get started:

Regarding the M rating: this story is on the dark side and includes violence, psychological and physical abuse, horror, offensive language, problematic relationships, adult themes and explicit sexual content, so mature readers only, please. Please heed these warnings as I won't necessarily repeat them throughout the story!

Feel free to review! I'll take anything from "asdkfjalskdfjskdfj" through to a full page of detailed concrit (try to keep it kind, though, with emphasis on the "constructive"). Flames, however, will be unanswered and simply removed.

Heart-felt thanks to my beta StoryWriter831 for everything she does to help me. A huge
thank-you also to bloomsburry, who designed the gorgeous gif book cover! Thanks also to the talented Strip_Dancer who is translating the story into Russian; you can find it on ficbook dot net under the title Принадлежащая туману.

... Freely Asked Questions:

Q. Will this story have smut?
A. There will be sex, but bear in mind this is a slow-burn. There is a LOT of smouldering sexual tension to get through first.

Q. Will this story have rape?
A. I'm not intending for there to be any rape; however, there is violence with sexual overtones, attempted rape, and (since we're dealing with an amnesiac) complications with consent. Please don't read if you would find such things potentially triggering.

Q. Is Hermione of age?
A. Yes. The story is set after the events depicted in canon.

Q. Will there be a romantic Lumione HEA?
A. Yes. Eventually.

Q. Will there be any major character deaths?
A. Not of the main pairing. I wouldn't do that to you! All other characters are fair game, though ;)

Q. Do you have an update schedule?
A. I'm a very slow and sporadic updater, and sometimes my real life does intrude on my writing time. However, I won't abandon this story. It means too much to me and I've put in far too many hours (years) into it, to think of abandoning it. I appreciate your patience and understanding.

... 

Lastly... this story is many things. It is a dark romance, a psychological drama, an angsty thriller...but first and foremost, it is a MYSTERY. So if you like your stories laid out before you in neat, orderly rows, then I suggest you don't waste your time here. If, however, you don't mind being lost in mist and entwined in shadows, then by all means, join hands with our heroine as she makes her way through the dark, winding forest, in search of the light...

Hope you enjoy :) 

xox artful scribbler
Running

I was running through a forest, but I had no idea why.

A stinging rain lashed my face and bare arms, plastering my clothes to my body, my hair to my scalp.
I was freezing cold and crying, but the tears meant no more to me than an ephemeral warmth on my raw cheeks.

*Where am I?* My heart was thumping in tempo with my pounding feet. *Where am I?*

*...WHO am I?*

Thin branches welted my skin, I felt twigs snapping and leaves catching on my hair and clothes. I wondered if I was running towards something or away from it.

Was I being chased? Was there something pursuing me—something terrible, unspeakable?

*...Or was I desperately seeking, searching for something?*

I had no idea how long I had been running for, but my calves were burning, my knees jarring and I was puffing in deep gasps. I had nothing but instinct to guide me, nothing but momentum to keep me from collapsing in a heap.

*Thud—thud—thud—thud,* my feet struck the ground with rhythmic urgency, *thud—thud—thud—thud,* my heart struck my ribs with synchronous fear.

The trees began to thin and the light was changing, the gloominess lifting. I must be nearing the edge of the forest. That could only be a good thing.

The rain abated, but now a thick, encompassing fog was roiling in towards me. I could see the vapor of my breath billowing before me in white puffs, but beyond that, it was difficult to make out anything, the trees were now but vague dark smudges in the haze.

My foot suddenly caught a jutting tree-root and I slammed into the muddy forest floor, landing on my right wrist and twisting it painfully. I uttered a cry, but my voice sounded eerily muted, deadened by surrounding fog.

I clambered to my feet, rubbing my wrist with my other hand.

Brushing myself down, I now realised I was wearing an inadequately thin dress, pale yellow, stippled whimsically with daisies. Splattered thickly with mud.

My legs were bare, scraped in places, the pale skin almost blue with cold. At least I had on trainers. They appeared to be the only item of clothing suited to a wet forest terrain, although a disjointed voice in my head irrelevantly informed me that they did not go with my dress.

My right hand twitched, but it wasn't from the pain in my wrist or the bone-chilling temperature. There was something odd about it; it almost felt as if something were... *missing* from it.

I counted my fingers. One, two, three, four, and my thumb made five. I turned it over and over, but it looked like a regular human hand—muddied, scratched and bruised, but a normal hand none-the-less. And yet I couldn't shake the inexplicable feeling it was somehow incomplete.

*Who am I?*

A very watery, very low sun broke through the clouds, illuminating the billows of mist and the silhouetting the canopy above. It couldn't be too far off sunset. *...God, it was freezing. My body was shivering violently. If I didn't find shelter before nightfall there was no question I would die.*

I began a hurried, stumbling march, dogged determination now taking place of momentum. I headed
in the same direction I had been running before, simply because I had been running that way, never mind that I didn't know why...

A harsh, guttural "Kraa!" brought me to a second lurching stop. Peering up into the stark branches, I made out the black shape of a bird, either a raven or a large crow. It launched off its perch and fluttered to the tree further beyond.

For no better reason than it gave me a visual incentive to keep moving forward, I began to follow the bird. Each time I neared, the bird would loudly caw and flutter onwards. Sometimes it would make a different kind of cackling call and I fancied it to be mocking me for my plight.

On and on we went, bird and human, one elegantly swooping through the air, the other noisily trudging along the forest floor.

Then suddenly the my feathered guide disappeared from sight and almost at the same moment I found myself standing on the edge of a wide open moorland, soggly shining in the last thin rays of sunlight which pierced the great hood of darkening sky above.

A sharp wind raked through my saturated dress and hair, penetrating through my skin, to my very marrow. My teeth began to chatter uncontrollably, and my head ached with the cold, but despite the lack of shelter, I was relieved, immensely relieved to be out of the forest.

Wet scrubby grass and limp tussocks stretched out in all directions. In the distance, I could see a copse of tall trees, and rising above the copse was the unmistakable curling tendrils of chimney smoke from a building hidden within.

Chimneys meant hearths, fires, warmth. Oh god, for some warmth.

I stepped out onto the plain and began trudging towards the copse. They wouldn't turn me away, would they?—whoever 'they' were? Surely not. And they could ring the police, get help, find out who I was.

And then tell me.

Adding insult to injury, the rain returned, first as a light spatter, but swiftly turning into a drenching downpour. I began to run again because I was too cold, frightened and sodden to walk.

It was further than I thought. On first glimpse I had assumed the copse was smaller and nearer, then I realised it was much bigger and further away. As I ran I counted the swirls of smoke...seven, eight...no, nine altogether. It was either a small enclosed village with several dwellings or one huge building, like a stately mansion or manor-house. I didn't care which, as long as they let me sit by one of the fires and thaw out.

There was no obvious road leading into the copse, but as I neared I saw there was a towering black wrought-iron gate set deep within the trees, overgrown with creepers. I slowed down, puffing, rubbing at an aching stitch in my side.

Rather daunted, I approached slowly, cautiously. The gates creaked open of their own accord. There must be a security camera somewhere, I thought, the gates must be electrical ones. I was surprised I had been let in, the state I must be looking.

Beyond the gate was an enormous house. It looked ancient, more like a forbidding fort than a stately home, thickly walled, with narrow windows and heavy buttresses, cloaked in thickly braided layers of dark-leaved ivy.
I shivered with cold. With trepidation.

A wide flight of stone steps led up to a huge door of iron-braced oak, and I paused at the bottom, steeling my nerves.

Before I could take the first step, I heard a cracking sound behind me, then the crunch of feet on gravel. I jumped, startled, and quickly turned.

A man had appeared as if from nowhere and was striding towards me, but he hadn't noticed me, for his eyes were fixed on the silver head of a long black cane which he held in his gloved hands.

He was a tall man, with an imposing bearing, not young—perhaps mid-forty—but wearing his years with an easy grace and power. He was handsome: very, in fact almost beautiful; his face was full of sharp, arresting angles and planes, but the harmony of his features was marred by an insufferably arrogant hauteur of expression. His hair was blond almost to whiteness and fell in a silken cascade past his shoulders, contrasting vividly against the sable-black of his attire.

I had the oddest sensation that I had gone back in time. The man was dressed in a compellingly eccentric way, his clothes being not so much old-fashioned as historical, even medieval, although manifestly immaculate and expensive. Most striking was his long black coat—or robe, rather: high-collared and trimmed deeply with dark fur, which billowed around his elegantly booted ankles as he walked.

By rights, he should have been soaking, like me, but weirdly neither his garments nor his hair seemed affected by the pouring rain. Before I had time to puzzle on this aberration the man looked up, stopped dead in his tracks, and in the drizzly light, I saw his pale face turn a deathly, waxy white.

"YOU!" The word was a hiss, a bark, a snarl.

I recoiled at the violent intensity in his eyes: eyes that should have been light-grey, but were somehow silver and liquid, like mercury, blazing with an unfathomable hatred.

"P-please, I'm lost—" I stammered, backing away. My heel caught on the bottom step of the stone stairs and I lost my balance, tumbling heavily backward.

Before I could scramble to my feet, the man bolted forwards, thrust me back down and pinned me bodily under him, shoving his cane hard across my throat with both hands, crushing my windpipe.

"You dare show your face here, mudblood?" His voice was hoarse with fury.

I tried to scream, but the cane constricted both voice and air supply, and I started to choke. I flailed uselessly beneath him, clawing at the cane, black and white starbursts obscuring my vision. Horrible gurgling noises were issuing from my throat.

I wondered if I was about to die. I wondered why.

Please, stop it! I haven't done anything wrong! I don't even know you!

STOP!

YOU'RE KILLING ME!

It was almost as if he heard my mind screaming. He suddenly discarded the cane, releasing me of its throttling pressure, then he grabbed a fistful of my sodden hair, wrenching it back, forcing me to look in his eyes. "Why are you here?"
I gasped in huge lungfuls of air, coughing violently, my eyes streaming. "I-I'm lost, I got lost a-and I don't know—I d-don't remember—" I was stuttering, almost incoherent with fright.

The man stared down at me, breathing hard. His incomprehensible rage was now alloyed with an expression of increasing incredulity. His other hand roughly gripped my chin, his fingers and thumb digging into each cheek painfully. "Who am I?" he demanded.

I looked confusedly up at him, utterly at a loss. "I have no idea," I shakily replied.

Suddenly he reached towards my throat again and I emitted a small cry of fear, flinching away. But his arm made a swift, hard, jerking movement and I felt the chain of a necklace briefly bite into the skin on the back of my neck, then snap off in his fist.

I hadn't even known I was wearing a necklace.

He thrust it in front of my eyes. "Where did you get this?" he hissed urgently, twisting my hair painfully.

"I don't know!" I cried. I tried to focus on the glinting object. It appeared to be a small silver pendant in the rather macabre shape of a bird's skull. I hadn't realised I had it on or remembered having seen it before.

A series of rapidly-changing emotions told upon the man's pale face. Shocked recognition, astonishment, disbelief. "Is it possible...?" he whispered, through barely moving lips.

He swiftly pocketed the necklace, then looked sharply back at me. Suddenly he clasped me against him, bringing his mouth so close to my own that for one panicky, disorienting moment I thought he was going to kiss me. But instead, he breathed an odd, foreign-sounding word.

I felt the whisper brushing my lips.

His eyes locked onto mine in a gaze at once enigmatic and engulfing: I felt myself falling, falling, drowning in the slate-silver of his irises, the infinite blackness of his pupils. I could feel the slow, strong thud of his heartbeat reverberating through me...the heat and inflexibility of his frame pressed against my shivering, wet body...

...Then a strange sensation in my mind...as if invisible tendrils were reaching inside my head to curl around and sift through my very thoughts...

"What are you doing?" I gasped, but he merely clamped his hand over my mouth and continued holding me closely, his immersing, intrusive stare probing deeper and deeper into my brain...his body was hard, rigid, every muscle tensed, every tendon strained. For a moment he seemed to hold his breath, then very slowly he exhaled through his nose, almost as if he were deriving some kind of gratification, satisfaction from whatever it was he had been doing to me.

He let me go, propelling himself to stand over me, gazing down at me with a new expression lighting his icy eyes, one I could not begin to fathom, but which was somehow related to...triumph?

In that moment, his entire manner seemed to change. Gone was the ferocious, violent assailant and standing in his place was a perfectly cool, perfectly urbane gentleman, albeit one with an intolerably arrogant smile. "Forgive me, my dear. I mistook you for...another young lady." His voice was velvety and suave and edged with razors.

He held out his hand to me, the leather of his glove creaking as his fist slowly unfurled.
I stared up at him in total shock, my heart pounding wildly, wondering what the hell was going on. One minute the man was trying to kill me, the next he was—well, god knows what he was doing—and now he just expected me to cheerfully take his hand as if nothing out of the ordinary had taken place?

I saw that his cane was tucked under one arm, although I hadn't seen him pick it up. I glared at it mistrustfully, my hand going automatically to my throat. It still throbbed and ached from the recent assault. It was sure to bruise.

He made an impatient beckoning gesture. "Come, I won't have you expiring on my doorstep like a half-drowned cur." Then in a softer tone, he murmured, "...You needn't fear me."

Needn't fear him? He'd just about strangled me! ...And had he really been...reading my mind? No. That was impossible...

I still couldn't bring myself to put my hand into his.

With a soft curse of annoyance he reached down and caught my wrist, roughly pulling me to my feet. His grip was crushing, making me wince. Immediately he dropped my hand, turned away and ascended the stone steps. His heavy robes flicked against my bare arm as he pushed past me, leaving me standing at the bottom in a puddle of bedraggled bewilderment.

I watched him tap his silver-headed cane once against the massive oaken door and it swung silently open. He half-turned back to me and even at this high vantage his head was tilted back with an undisguised superciliousness. "Are you coming? Or do you mean to spend the night enjoying a gradual hypothermic demise?"

I grimaced. Well, I thought, if you put it that way...

I knew, as of course did he, that I had no choice.

Wearily and warily, I clambered up the stone steps, not at all comforted by his inscrutable gaze and curling lip, mulling over the questionable wisdom of entering a strange house with a strange man who had just attempted to kill me. My brain was sending out all sorts of warning signals to the rest of my body, making my hands shake, my knees tremble and my mouth go dry.

As I joined the man at the top I was uncomfortably aware of his height and the powerful breadth of his shoulders and chest. I wouldn't be besting him should he choose to engage me in a wrestling match, that much was certain.

He held out his arm towards the open doorway, directing me to go before him. "My humble abode," he murmured, handing me courteously over the threshold—so courteously as to leave little doubt that he was mocking me.

Many scenarios flashed through my mind as I stepped into the gloomy, low-lit hallway. Was I entering the lair of a predator, a rapist, a psychopath? A murderer?

Well, I decided grimly, I'd rather be murdered inside and at least die warm and dry, than spend another second out in this freezing cold rain.
He showed me into what appeared to be a dining room, furnished in a manner at once grand and oppressive, cluttered with dark-wood furniture and dreary burnished antiques. A huge mahogany table ran the length of the room, its highly polished surface dimly reflecting the lights cast upon it by three low-strung ormolu chandeliers.

An enormous fireplace dominated one wall and its bright flickering blaze was the only remotely cheery thing in the whole room.

I staggered over to it, kneeling down and stretching out my hands as close as I dared to the tongues of red-gold flame. I closed my eyes and let the warmth envelop me, heedless of the strange man, of his recent bizarre behaviour to me—heedless of anything but the perfect beauty of heat on my skin.

"What is your name, young lady?" The man's soft, drawling voice was much closer than I expected. I gasped with surprise and my eyes flew open. He was standing over me, one arm resting on the marble mantle-piece surround. I hadn't heard him approach. "Who are you?"

...Who am I?

For some reason I didn't want to admit to him that I had absolutely no idea. It seemed like such a horribly vulnerable thing, to not know my own name. ...Why didn't I know? How was it possible that I could be so lucid, so aware, and yet know nothing, remember nothing, of my own identity? It was like my memory was a butterfly, hovering just out of reach, flitting away whenever I tried to snatch at it...

I felt tears of frustration threatening to well up but I forcibly swallowed them away. "Um...my name is...Alice," I improvised unconvincingly. "A-Alice Carroll."

I could see in his eyes that he knew I was lying and yet he looked oddly pleased. "Alice Carroll," he murmured. "That rather rings of a little mu- girl who once fell down a rabbit hole. Is that what happened to you?"

"I don't know," I replied, confused by the glinting light in his eyes. "I think I must have had an accident and banged my head or something. I can't remember...certain things."

"Indeed?" His expression was impassive. "But that is unfortunate. ...Can you recall where you live? Or perhaps, the contact details of your parents, your family?"

Reluctantly I shook my head. "No, it's sort-of a blur at the moment."

"What about your friends?" He said the word lightly, yet it rang with a sharp, metallic timbre. "Do you remember their names, addresses—anything at all?"

Still not wanting to reply with a negative, I said, "Maybe if you called the police, they could help me..."
He smiled, although I couldn't understand why. "I'm sorry to inform you that I don't have a..."—he paused, almost as if casting around for the correct word—"...er...'telephone'."

"Not even a mobile?" I asked. He shook his head, the smile still hovering about his mouth.

"...No, I guess there wouldn't be coverage here," I answered myself.

"As you say."

"Well, can you drive me to the nearest phone box?"

He gave a faint sigh, apparently tiring of the conversation. He left his post by the fire and began to pace around the room, the click of his boots echoing on the wooden floor. "I'm afraid that is out of the question, Alice. This is a very remote area, some several hours away from civilization. You will simply have to stay here tonight and we shall see what arrangements may be made for you tomorrow."

I nodded. "Alright. Thank you," I said quietly. I certainly wasn't in a position to argue. My throat still ached from the crushing pressure of his cane, the knowledge of which made me shiver uneasily. He said he'd mistaken me for someone else, but it wasn't exactly comforting to know that he was capable of attempting to throttle any girl in cold blood. What sort of a man was he? Which reminded me—

"Ah...excuse me, sir..." I said tentatively.

"Yes?" He elongated the word in a decidedly patronising way.

"I... I was wondering what your name was."

He leveled his gaze at me and for a moment seemed to be considering how to reply. Then he made a slight, elegant bow and said, "Lucius."

"Oh." The name seemed to fit him perfectly, it seemed so silvery and powerful and strange. "Well, I just wanted to say thank you for helping me out...um, Lucius." I flushed self-consciously as I tried the name out loud.

Again he smiled, but it was a derisive, hard expression—nearly a sneer—which made me flush even more deeply. "Not at all, Miss Carroll," he replied in an distinctly sarcastic manner. "Being of service to you is a pleasure of truly profound magnitudes."

I gulped and looked away, stung by his scathing tone. I was only trying to be polite! Clearly the man was some kind of misogynist or chauvinist. ...Well, he could make the conversation from now on, since he obviously found mine so contemptible. I pressed my lips together and stared at the fire.

After a minute of frosty silence on my part, Lucius addressed me again, his tone now blasé, perfunctory. "Are you hungry, Alice? I can have something prepared for you."

"No thanks," I said shortly, although my stomach was actually cramping with hunger pains. I had no idea how long ago my last meal had been.

"Very well, we shall have a drink."

"No, really, I'm fine." I don't want to be more of a burden than you obviously already regard me, I thought sourly.
Ignoring me, Lucius moved over to a rosewood drinks cabinet and took out a cut-crystal decanter containing a liquid of a rich, burnt-umber hue and two short-stemmed, tulip-shaped glasses. He poured out a generous measure into each glass and conducted them gracefully over to where I still knelt.

"Hors d'Age Bas-Armagnac, 1910," he murmured, proffering one to me. "It is superb."

His expression brooked no refusal, so I accepted the glass from him, taking as much care as possible not to let my fingers brush his, although I didn't quite know why.

"It's wasted on me," I said bluntly. "I don't like spirits." I was surprised at my own adamance. How weird that I could know that, without actually remembering anything about myself.

"You will like it," he briefly replied.

He seemed to be waiting for me to drink.

I had an idea that I was supposed to take a small sip and slowly savour the subtleties and layering of flavours, but I wasn't going to make a pretence just because an insufferable snob was looming over me.

I brought the glass to my lips and took a large, clumsy gulp.

_Hopefully he hasn't put a date-rape drug in it_, I thought, coughing and tearing up a little as the burning liquid hit the back of my throat. I wasn't too sure about the flavour, which seemed awfully strong and spicy and kind-of smokey...but then a lovely warm glow began quickly spreading through every part of my body, warming my insides as thoroughly as the fire was warming my outside.

"Oh," I whispered, blissfully, thankfully. "It's...it's like..." I couldn't find the words.

I looked up at Lucius and for the briefest moment I thought I saw a flash of that same white-burning hatred I had beheld before. But I blinked and it was gone. A mocking smile touched the corners of his mouth: his eyes derided but did not detest.

I must have imagined it.

He lifted his glass towards the lambent flames, swirling it slowly. "Like 'liquid fire and distilled damnation'," he said softly, evidently quoting.

I nodded. That was pretty much it.

I was getting sleepy now. Exhaustion was steadily, seductively seeping into my limbs, stifling my brain. I made a rather unsuccessful attempt at muffling a yawn. "Would it be alright if I...I mean, is there a couch or something that I could sleep on tonight?" I grimaced at my own clumsy phrasing.

"There is a guest suite," he replied. "I will take you to it presently."

I felt so heavy. So tired. Maybe he had drugged me, after all... My body swayed forward slightly, a little too closely to the fire. A firm hand gripped my shoulder, drawing me back. "Steady, Miss Carroll. We don't want you falling into the flames, do we? That is a fate reserved only for—." He stopped mid-sentence.

"Witches?" I said drowsily.

He made no reply.
I suddenly realised he was still touching my shoulder and I felt my body stiffen as a prickly, hot blush overspread my face. At some point he had removed his gloves and his hand rested, bare skin on skin, between my neck and dress-strap. It was warm, unexpectedly so, all at odds with his icy demeanour. I longed to twist away or shrug him off, not because I found his prolonged touch creepy—which I certainly ought to have done—but precisely because I didn't. In fact, rather alarmingly, my body was tingling with all kinds of electric sparks, galvanising me into a state of exquisitely awkward over-awareness...

...I dropped my glass.

It happened with a slow-motion inevitability: my trembling hand simply lost its hold on the stem of the wine-glass, over-balancing it towards me, spilling the remaining drink all over my dress before tumbling to the ground and smashing on the marble hearth.

I gave a small cry of dismay. Mortified, eyes burning, I bent down and blindly tried to gather the pieces of the broken vessel up, muttering apologies.

"What are you doing, you foolish girl?" I heard Lucius snap, with irritation rather than concern. "You are cutting your fingers." He knelt and grasped my wrists in his hands, preventing me from scrabbling about the shards of broken crystal any longer.

"I'm sorry about the glass," I said, eyes fixed on the floor. "I'll pay for it, of course—"

"Do not speak nonsense," he cut me off sharply. "Show me your hands."

My fists were balled, but he used his thumbs to pry them open. There were some small cuts stinging my left fingers and a deeper gash on my right hand which was throbbing and streaming blood—although it looked worse than it really was.

Lucius sighed and shook his head, as if thoroughly bored and unsurprised by my clumsiness. He muttered a word through gritted teeth, but I didn't catch it. Clearly, it was no complimentary term.

He brushed away a couple of crystal fragments from my bleeding palm.

I barely noticed the twinge of pain, suddenly overwhelmed by this new, too intimate proximity—him leaning so closely over me, the gentleness of his touch on my hand, the iron inflexibility of his grip encircling my wrist...my heart was thumping and I was sure he must be able to feel the corresponding flutter beneath his thumb. My senses were inundated, ambushed, by a complexity of hypnotic scents: his aftershave: subtle, expensive, ozonic. The woody spice of the Armangac on his breath. And his skin. It smelled...warm. Was it actually possibly for skin—or anything for that matter—to smell warm?

I bit my lip. What the hell was wrong with me? Here I was: lost, amnesiac, covered in scratches and bruises, stuck with glass and bleeding all over the place—and all I could think was how incredible this man smelled? A man who had recently tried to throttle me, no less?

...I must have banged my head really badly.

Lucius reached inside his robe and took out a silken handkerchief. He deftly wrapped it around the palm of my right hand and knotted it securely. Then he stood up, still holding my hand tightly, bringing me with him. "Come along, Alice," he said, his voice fairly dripping with contempt. "I will show you to your room."

I wobbled on my feet for a moment, the blood going to my head, making me dizzy. I felt like a silly, chided child.
He escorted me back into the corridor. I now saw that the walls were hung with lavish tapestries and huge gilt-framed paintings, although despite the grandness and splendour, it somehow still managed to feel dingy and very bleak.

We passed a painted portrait of a medieval-looking woman with luminously pale skin and pointy features. She was beautiful, with a fine-boned, glacial loveliness, but her expression was unutterably disdainful.

Obviously an ancestor, then.

The artist had captured her in such a clever, subtle way that it almost felt like her eyes were moving, following us... It was hard to take my gaze off those eyes...they were compelling...mesmerising...

Suddenly, horribly, the eyes rolled back then forward, the pupils changing to narrow black slits in a veiny yellow surround. The portrait bared its teeth at me—teeth that were pointed like fangs and oily with blood—and hissed like a snake.

I shrieked, stumbling backwards into Lucius. I heard him softly curse, thrusting me back upright, but I couldn't regain my balance, my head was spinning and my throat clammed up with pure terror. I couldn't breathe, my legs had somehow liquified, and I was falling.

I tried to clutch onto something, anything, but all I felt was air, nothingness and air...and I was tumbling down, down into the darkness.
Snow

Chapter Notes

A/N Beta'd by the wonderful StoryWriter831. Everything belongs to JK Rowling.

My re-emergence to consciousness was deeply disorienting.

Disturbing, surreal memories surfaced and sifted in my mind, of running through a fog-strewn forest, of being half-strangled, of being hissed at by a painting (really?)... And framing those brief slivers of skewed reality, an infinitely vaulting periphery of...blankness.

Complete blankness.

I lay for some time, going over in detail everything I could remember, which seemed to span only a very few hours, perhaps not even so long. Those few recollections revolved slowly—rings within rings, like gimbals of a gyroscope—around a whirring, powerful central axis represented by a pale-haired man who had called himself Lucius. Who had silver eyes.

Who had tried to kill me.

The more I thought of him, the stranger he seemed, until I wondered if I had merely dreamed him. Perhaps everything was a dream—perhaps I was in the middle of one right now...and yet I was pretty sure I was awake, that this was real. ...I think, therefore I am...

I am—who?

Alice?

I sat up and looked around. The first impression I had of the room was of emphatic grandeur. The bed and furniture were grand, the soft-furnishings were heavy and costly, everything impressive and ornate. A guest-suite that was furnished, not to put its inhabitants at ease, but to put them at a disadvantage.

I pushed back the heavy bedding and slid out onto the floor. With a sudden jolt I realised that I was standing in only my underwear. I flushed deeply.

Had he removed my dress? An angry huff escaped me: that pervert!

But then I remembered the sodden state of my muddy clothes and I was forced to admit that, as close to hypothermia as I had certainly been, it would have been dangerous to let me sleep in them.

Still, I squirmed at the thought of being seen undressed by the man.

A full-length mirror stood in one corner and I gravitated apprehensively towards it. I had to see my reflection. I had to look myself in my eyes, to discover if I knew myself, even if I didn't remember myself.

I gritted my teeth and stepped in front of the glass.
I hadn't realised I was holding my breath until I let it go in a loud relieved exhalation. *Yes!* I knew that face. I wasn't a total stranger. *Thank god for that.*

...I wasn't a very pretty sight, however. My hair was a matte mass of tangles, my eyes underscored with heavy shadows, they looked almost bruised against my unnaturally pallid skin. My bottom lip was gashed and there were other welts around my cheekbones and brow. A smear of mud ran the entire length of one cheek, temple to jaw. The rest of me hadn't fared much better: my arms and legs were scratched all over and liberally spattered with dried mud, bearing testament to yesterday's wild run through the forest.

I turned over my hands and inspected them. My right palm was no longer bound, and the gash appeared less raw than I had expected—it wasn't even very sore, which seemed rather surprising. Yet my sprained wrist ached and was beginning to visibly bruise, and my fingers still twitched with the oddly *incomplete* sensation I had noticed yesterday.

I lifted my chin, expecting to see an ugly purple welt across my throat...but strangely it was unmarked. I touched the skin gingerly, swallowed experimentally, but there was no pain or tenderness. Surely I hadn't dreamed that I had been choked? I felt a wave of confusion. Even the few memories I *did* have seemed to be contradictory, unreliable.

Daylight was filtering through the brocaded curtains and I padded over, parting them a fraction to peer cautiously out. I was on an upper floor, perhaps the second storey from the ground. There was not much to see. The house was surrounded by a wide stretch of gravel and bordered by the copse of bristly conifers. It wasn't raining, but the sky was a wintery, iron grey. It looked freezing out there. I shivered, remembering the relentlessness of the cold yesterday, the feeling I would never be warm again. I felt certain that, if not for following the crow out of the forest, I would surely have perished.

*Well,* I told myself, *you're warm, and you're alive. The cold didn't get you. And the man didn't murder you in your sleep, either. I suppose you should be counting your blessings.*

I spent several minutes searching through the various wardrobes and drawers for signs of my missing clothes, but they were all bare. An open door next to one of the tall dressers led through to an en-suite bathroom. I peered in, and was rather taken aback to see that the bath-tub inside was full of steaming water. I approached for a closer look. Like everything else, the bath was over-sized and ornamental. It appeared to be made from white marble, standing on baroque lion's paws, and by the looks of things the taps were gilded.

And yes it was nearly brimming with hot, sweetly-scented water. Apparently, someone had recently filled it up for me. *Isn't that a bit...strange?* I thought, frowning. *Like you can't run your own bath?*

A cloak-stand near the head of the tub bore a thick towel and an kimono-style bathrobe, both of which I supposed had been left for my use. I ran my fingers down the fine, silky fabric of the robe. It looked like the sort of sheer garment that covered much but concealed little...but it seemed like a better option than skulking about in my underwear.

The water *did* look inviting.

I dipped my fingertips in. It was a little too warm. I reached over to the gold taps, but oddly neither one would budge. The faucet handles were molded to the spout, unable to be turned. More strangeness.

*Oh well,* I thought. *...There's no denying you could do with a soak.*
I drew the en-suite door closed, wishing it had a lock. Self-consciously I peeled off my underwear, shielding myself with my hands, not quite able to shake off a deep-seated feeling of vulnerability. I quickly hopped into the bath and slid down into the enveloping depths.

For a while I just lay there, weightless, motionless, not thinking, just letting the water and heat cradle me, breathing deeply in the floral fragrance permeating the rising steam... But soon the gnawing, unsettling awareness of blankness intruded upon me again, and I felt myself tense up. When would my memory return? What if it never—? But no, I couldn't dwell on that. That thought was far, far too frightening...

Ducking under the water, I attempted to tease out the knots in my hair. When I came up I saw I had dislodged several leaves and twigs. *What a complete mess you must have looked to that man,* I thought, remembering with a cringe how refined and expensive his unusual attire had appeared to be. *Not that I should care,* unpleasant and sneering as he was. But I did. I just...did. Perhaps it was his undisguised contempt which made me care.

I scrubbed away the mud on my legs and my arms, flinching every so often when I hit a bruise or scratch. When I was clean I gathered my willpower and hauled myself out. Much as I liked the idea of spending the day immersed in hot water, I had questions that needed answering.

I dried myself off with the towel and slipped into the bathrobe. It was light as a whisper, silkily cool.

I went back to the mirror and spent some time taming my damp hair with my fingers. *At least it isn't full of twigs anymore,* I thought. I grimaced at my reflection. Although the robe was undeniably flattering, clinging and draping in all the right places, there was still no disguising my drawn, too-pale face, and the shadows under my eyes: eyes which stared with a somewhat wild fragility, like a startled deer.

*What happened to you?* I wondered of the young woman looking back at me. *Why do you look so...haunted?*

*Who are you?*

"Alice Carroll," I said out loud. "You're Alice Carroll."

But I wasn't so sure. I didn't know exactly why I'd volunteered that name to the man last night, but it didn't ring true—I didn't feel the same certainty, the same recognition I had experienced on seeing my reflection.

*Come on, Alice, or whoever the hell you are. It's time to go and find those answers.*

I was a little uneasy about leaving the room wrapped only in a thin slip of silk, and for a few further minutes I searched for my clothes, but eventually I gave up. I went to the door and stood still for a moment, trying to calm the sudden jangling of my nerves. *What are you afraid of?* I thought. *If that man was going to rape you or lock you in a dungeon, surely he'd have done it by now.*

Squaring my shoulders, I twisted the brass handle and pushed the door quietly open. I slipped out into the hallway and wandered down the passage. A flight of wide stone stairs led me down to the first floor, where I had fainted the night before. I stood at the end and made a tentative cough. All was still and half-shrouded in shadow.

"Hello?" I called, annoyed that the voice echoing back at me sounded like it belonged to a frightened child.

As I made my way down the corridor I found myself glaring left and right at the many paintings,
almost daring them to come to life. The prevailing theme of the collection appeared to be scornful ladies and imperious men. I noticed that many bore plaques on their frames engraved with the name 'Malfoy'. I wondered if that was the last name of my mysterious host. It seemed probable, if his propensity for sneering was any indication of kinship.

Thankfully, none of these paintings showed the remotest sign of life or movement. It seemed ridiculous now. Paintings didn't move...but soon I was in sight of the portrait that had—had hissed at me, and I automatically slowed down, a numbing dread overtaking me. I edged forwards, feeling almost nauseous with fear, but determined to look, to see...

It was completely normal. No bloodied fangs, no vertically-slitted pupils. Just a regular painting of an extremely haughty woman. Beneath it a small engraved silver legend read, 'Sidonia Malfoy née Slytherin'. I leaned closely in, fascinated despite myself. I could see the brush strokes, the texture of the oil paint. The portrait was certainly life-like, but not alive.

...Was it all in your head, then, Alice?

"Exquisite, is she not?"

I jumped, squeaking with surprise and quickly whisked around.

The man—Lucius—had materialised from nowhere and was standing a little behind me. He loomed large, his presence immediately confining, dominating. The sharp, angular beauty of his face struck me afresh; it was almost physically shocking, brutal, in a way...

So he hadn't been just a dream, then.

The man's silver eyes gleamed iridescently in the half-light. "Tragically, she was barren," he added. Then—to himself, it seemed—he murmured, "How differently might things have otherwise transpired..."

"She hissed at me!" I blurted out.

Lucius's mouth curved slightly at the corners. "The portrait?" His voice was a masterclass of disdainful incredulity. "Forgive me, I wonder if I heard you correctly. You say the painting...er...hissed at you?"

I flushed deeply. "Yes, it did, last night," I insisted, although my voice was by no means confident. "You were there, you must have seen it! The painting hissed and then I—I think I fainted.

"Certainly, you did faint," he replied, in such a way that made it clear my doing so had been a rather tiresome inconvenience. "You were suffering from exhaustion and very likely concussed. It takes no great stretch of imagination to conclude that your mind was playing tricks on you."

Lucius put a hand on my elbow, steering me away from the portrait, but I tensed and resisted. "No! I remember it clearly. Her eyes went like a-a snake's, and she hissed at me!"

He pursed his lips disapprovingly, I suppose at my stubbornness. "...Alice, may I ask if your memory has returned to you this morning, even in part?"

"Not yet," I admitted, somewhat huffishly. "But that has nothing to do with it—I know what I saw!" I turned and stared hard at the painting, willing it to come alive again. "I was so sure..."

I reached out to touch the canvas, but Lucius caught my wrist mid-air. "Enough nonsense, my dear," he said lightly, but with a warning edge to his voice. "Breakfast awaits." He turned and headed
down the hallway, pulling me firmly along with him and I was forced into a stumbling trot to keep up with his long strides.

I definitely did not like being manhandled and by the time we entered the dining room I had tried and failed twice to squirm out of his grip.

"Do you mind—" I began crossly, but my protests died on my lips as I found myself being pressed into a seat near one end of the mahogany table, in front of an unbelievably delicious-looking spread of food. Croissants, pastries, preserves, fresh fruit...there was enough to feed several people, though only one place was laid. A silver coffee-pot wafted promisingly.

I suddenly realised just how famished I really was. It was all I could do not to grab a croissant and stuff the whole thing in my mouth.

Lucius moved around to sit at the head of the table, a few feet away from me. "I trust you slept well, Alice?" he said. His tone was one of polite interest, though his eyes expressed anything but.

"Um, yes, thank you," I replied. I sat with my hands lodged between my knees, nearly crying with hunger. "That is, I don't exactly remember." Then, feeling I should acknowledge some sense of gratitude, I added, "But thanks again for letting me stay the night."

Lucius didn't comment. With a dismissive wave of his hand, he leaned elegantly back in his high-backed chair and regarded me impassively. After a few moments he spoke. "Well?...Are you ill? Why don't you eat?"

"I'm not ill," I quickly replied. "It's only...aren't you going to have some—?" I gestured to the food. "No."

I suppressed a grimace. Not, 'I've already eaten, or, 'I don't do breakfast.'...Just, 'No.'

What was with the man? He seemed determined to make me feel as awkward and uncomfortable as possible, while lavishing me with all this hospitality. ...Well, if he wanted to sit there and sneer at me eating, that was up to him. I was too hungry to care.

I reached for a croissant and wolfed it down defiantly, followed by a second. Then I poured a cup of coffee and drained it to the dregs, making no attempt at delicacy, clattering the china noisily.

There you are, Mr Arrogance Personified, I thought. You obviously wanted a display—I hope I didn't disappoint you.

I pushed my plate away and turned to meet his gaze. "Thank you. I feel much better."

"I'm glad to hear it."

I picked up a napkin and wiped my hands nonchalantly, determined not to be flustered, though my cheeks burned. I wondered if the man treated all his guests to such drawling sarcasm, of if I was a lucky exception. In a cool voice I said, "May I ask how long it will take to get to the nearest town from here?"

Lucius tilted his head back, not immediately replying. I didn't like the glint in his eyes as they fixed on mine. It could be mistaken for malice. "Have you the slightest notion as to where we are, Miss Gr—Carroll?" he said at last.

I was uneasy that he'd answered my question with a question.
"I don't know," I replied. "I suppose this could be anywhere in Britain."

He smiled. "I would not depend upon that," he enunciated with icy clarity, "if I were you."

"What?" I stared at him, startled. "What do you mean? Are you saying we're not in Britain? But you're—"

"British, yes," he said drily. "How wonderfully observant you are."

I sprang up from my seat, all pretensions to nonchalance now completely abandoned. "Well, then where the hell are we?!

Lucius also arose and took a step towards me, not in an exactly threatening way, but yet still as if to assert—to remind me of—his physical superiority.

I didn't need reminding. I remembered very well his brutality to me on the bottom of the steps yesterday, how his body had slammed me into the hard stone, his hands painfully wrenching my hair, the cane crushing my throat... Suddenly I wondered if I had been terribly, terribly naïve to put myself wholly in the power of such a man. I crossed my arms defensively. "P-please," I stammered, "I just want to go home."

"And where is that, Alice?" His tone was hard, mocking.

I shrugged helplessly. My lips felt numb. "I...I thought you were going to help me," I said.

He moved away from me, stopping before one of the tall, narrow window panes. When he eventually spoke he did not trouble himself to turn around. "I'm afraid you won't be going anywhere for the time being, my dear," he murmured. "Look out the window."

I did, and my heart sank.

Snow was falling thick and fast.
Great.

As if it wasn't bad enough to be lost and amnesiac, now I was stuck.

Stuck with a man whose principal personality traits seemed to be, at best, sardonic and saturnine; at worst, malevolent and violent.

True, he'd given me shelter for the night and provided quite a dazzling spread of food this morning. But he hadn't exactly been gracious about it. In fact, he'd been downright rude. And why was he so reticent about revealing our location? That, I thought, was distinctly ominous.

...There was much to distrust and dislike in his icy gaze and his contemptuous expression, but perhaps even more to fear in what was not expressed. I was afraid he wore that icy contempt like a mask, concealing something much deeper, much darker, infinitely more dangerous, something which I had glimpsed when our eyes first met across the rain-drenched stretch of gravel yesterday.

And what was worse, I could feel myself being somehow...drawn to him. There was something undeniably compelling about him, a magnetism comprising his strangeness, beauty, arrogance...and something else. He seemed to radiate with...god, what was it? ...Power. That was it. It was both frightening and fascinating, tangible and treacherous.

And I didn't trust it. I knew that I needed to get away as soon as possible.

Aiming, not very successfully, for a casual tone, I said, "It doesn't look like the kind of snow that settles."

The man didn't even bother replying. It really was a ridiculous comment, given the thick, blanketing flurries completely obscuring the outside world. But I tried once more anyway: "Perhaps this afternoon we could—"

"No," he negated abruptly.

"But I need to find out who I am—"

"You are Alice Carroll, remember?"

"Yes, but—"

"Unless, of course, that was a name you simply invented."

"No, no—but still, I think I should—"

He silenced me by turning and fixing his eyes on mine. They told me in no uncertain terms that it was of no use to continue.
I swallowed drily. I was going to have to try a different approach. "How long does a snowstorm usually last in—wherever we are?"

Lucius made a slight, sarcastic smile. "Why don't you hazard a guess?"

"I could hazard one much more accurately if I knew where we were." I could no longer disguise the uneasiness in my voice. "But for some reason, you don't want to tell me that."

His jaw twitched in irritation, but he offered no denial.

I peered surreptitiously at the man. He cut a statuesque and rather daunting figure, framed as he was by the window, back-lit by the glare of whiteness beyond. His robe was different to the one he’d had on yesterday, more like a cape. Beneath it he appeared to be wearing a black double-breasted waistcoat and riding breeches, tucked into tall, black hessian boots. I would have taken the entire ensemble for a costume, except that he wore it with such unconscious grace and ease... He had the look of some Germanic prince of a bygone era: all black-clad elegance, refined ruthlessness.

Yes, he certainly did look ruthless. What if he was some kind of psychopathic sex-fiend, with a dungeon full of torture instruments? It didn't seem impossible. It didn't even really seem improbable, which was a bit of a worry, all things considered.

With this rather disturbing thought now uppermost in my mind, I said, "Um, is there—is there anyone else living here at the moment?"

Lucius's lip curled with derision. "You mean, to hear you scream?"

"No, I didn't mean that," I said, blushing hotly, because it was precisely what I did mean.

He wasn't, it seemed, prepared to let me get away with it. "Come, now, that was what you were thinking, wasn't it?" He left the window and began to advance slowly towards me. "You're thinking it right now." Each step echoed, hollow and forbidding. I was rooted to the spot with equal parts humiliation and fear. He stopped mere feet away, looming menacingly over me. "Well?" he said, silver eyes taunting and agleam. "What do you think I will do? Outrage your honour on the table, perhaps?"

"NO." The word was vehement and many-faceted. (No, I wasn't thinking that/ No, I don't think you will do that/ No, please don't do that/ Just...no.)

Lucius raised a hand and gently brushed a stray curl away from my cheek, smiling thornily as I flinched. "Do you really believe I wish to rape you, Alice?" he murmured. His voice was soft, but cold as ice. "I ought to take exception to such denigrating, crude aspersions. Is that a befitting way to repay a man for saving your life?"

"I never...I didn't—said—say anything about you raping me." It was a clumsy, mortifying, jumbled mess of a sentence. "I was just—just curious if you lived alone. I thought you might have a wife, or —"

His expression froze, his whole body suddenly tensing, and I fell silent. He stared down at me, yet somehow through me. "No," he said softly. "I have no wife. Not any more."

Not any more? I wondered what that meant. Are you divorced? Did she die? Did you mur—

He must have read the half-formed thought in my eyes, for his own blazed with a sudden, white-hot rage, all colour draining from his face. "Insolent mudblood!" he hissed. He lunged forwards, grabbing my upper arms. I cried out as he began to shake me, hard, making my teeth rattle, my head
He shook me until my legs began to buckle, then suddenly shoved me away. I stumbled backwards, yelping as I collided with the table. For a moment I was too giddy to stand and I lay half-sprawled across it, my head reeling, desperately praying that he wasn't going to use the slab of mahogany in the way he had recently proposed. But a second onslaught didn't come and I recovered my balance to rise unsteadily to my feet.

Lucius had turned aside and seemed to be fighting to compose himself.

"I—I'm sorry," I said. My voice was low, trembling. "I didn't mean to offend you, but you frightened me. How am I supposed to know what your intentions are? I d-don't know you."

I wasn't prepared for the naked loathing on his face as he turned back to me. It robbed me of breath, winded me, like a kick to the stomach.

"Your virtue is quite safe from me, Miss Carroll, I assure you," he snarled. His eyes raked me from head to toe, his expression brimming with distaste...no, with actual disgust.

I bit my lip, my eyes suddenly hot and prickling. Much as I was relieved that he didn't intend to rape me, he didn't have to make it so abundantly clear that he found me repulsive. It was the sort of look someone might give a disease-ridden sewer rat. My stomach churned with insult. Nobody deserved to be looked at in such a way. I wondered about the word he'd hurled at me twice now. 'Mudblood'. Clearly an offensive term, but of what significance? ...It sounds derogatory, I thought bitterly. ...Even degrading.

The man now appeared to have mastered his composure and he moved back to take his seat at the head of the table. I stood awkwardly before him, abased and resentful, wearing his disgust like a crumpled crown.

For some moments we silently faced one another, currents of hostility rippling in the air between us.

Finally Lucius spoke. His voice was once again smooth and controlled, but I could see the tension in the set of his shoulders. "Alice, let us come to an understanding."

"I understand that you frightened me on purpose," I blurted out caustically, badly frightened and still smarting. "I understand that you nearly choked me yesterday! I understand that you won't tell me where we are. Can you blame me for being afraid of you?"

He did not reply, but he seemed to be measuring my words.

I plunged recklessly on, "And now I understand that I'm stuck here with you, for god-knows how long."

"Indeed, you are," Lucius said, "—for which, might I add, you should be extremely grateful. You would survive mere hours, were I to turn you out of doors."

He paused, as if politely waiting for me to refute it, but of course I could not. He was right, and we both knew it.

I felt he was relishing my discomfort as he continued. "So. Fortunately for you, I am, for the present, prepared to extend to you a measure of protection, which, I need hardly observe, you are in no position to refuse. Are we agreed on that point?"

I nodded grudgingly.
'Then let me make something quite clear. You may expect to be treated as my guest, nothing more or less. I will provide you with necessities for the duration of your stay here. And I will not harm you. You have my word.'

*Huh, I thought, why do I get the feeling your next sentence will begin with "However"?*

"However," he said—and I felt a small knot of smugness—"there is one overriding stipulation."

"Let me guess," I muttered acerbically, "I have to laugh at all your jokes."

He actually smiled, but it was the kind of smile that danced at the edge of danger. "All I ask is that you curb your curiosity."

I blinked, a little taken aback. "A-about what?"

"Anything and everything, Miss Carroll. Whatever it is you have the smallest modicum of curiosity about. Curb it. Or there will be consequences. Unpleasant ones."

*Hmm...so much for, 'I will not harm you'...*

"Do we have an understanding, Alice?"

"But why—" I began, but he cut me off by sharply banging the flat of his hand on the table, making me jump.

"Do we have an understanding?"

"But what—"

"I will not ask you a third time, Alice," he overrode me, his eyes glinting warningly. "A 'yes, Lucius' is all I require from you."


"Good." His tone was unutterably condescending and I felt my temper rise.

"Thank you *ever* so much," I said, bestowing back on him a dose of his own sarcasm.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "You *should* be thankful, my dear," he replied. In a softer voice he murmured, "I have been more generous than you know."

I felt deflated. I had so badly wanted to at least *start* the process of discovering my identity. I really believed that once the authorities identified me and I was returned to my family, my memory would return, everything would be okay. ...But of all the places to end up, it had to be this strange, remote, backwater fortress, completely cut off from civilisation, no neighbours, no telephone, inhabited by some kind of domineering autocrat with violent tendencies and an apparent grudge against young women.

*Well done, Alice.*

Tears of frustration welled up. *Don't you dare cry,* I berated myself. *Not in front of that man!* But I couldn't help it. Two hot beads escaped and trickled down my cheeks. I quickly turned, dashing them angrily away, but I had already seen the glimmer of amusement in Lucius's eyes.

"Now, now, my dear, there really is no need to snivel." His voice was maddeningly blasé. "Rest assured, if you follow these basic rules, you have nothing to fear."

But I wasn't convinced.
Looking back on the very brief history of our time together, I felt pretty certain that there was at least one thing to fear...and that was him.

We hadn't got off to a good start and I was fairly certain that relations with the master of the house would not improve with closer acquaintance.

After breakfast he directed me back to my room, with a brief instruction to find my way back to the dining room for meals. I hardly knew what to think, or how to feel. My presumption, that I would be assisted to safety and subsequent recovery, had been utterly deconstructed and demolished. I now faced the very disturbing probability of having to cohabit with the man for several days to come...perhaps even longer, depending on the severity of the snow-storm.

I lay on the bed, staring at the candelabra above me, wondering...just wondering about everything. Who I was; who he was. Where we actually were, if not in Britain. What I'd been running from. And exactly how my memory-loss had transpired...

And the longer I wondered, the further I felt myself sink down into the dark, still depths of fathomless blankness.

I dozed throughout the day, my mind filled with hissing portraits, stone corridors, mocking silver eyes. Each time I awoke I became more disoriented, more disturbed and it was difficult to determine between reality, hallucination and sleep-scape. I spent most of the day in this strange stupor-like state. Time itself seemed to warp, so that hours lurched past like the briefest moments and some seconds would stretch out and suspend like a small eternity. ...It wasn't until the light was beginning to fade that I vaguely realised I had missed lunch; that it must, in fact, be nearing dinner time.

Dragging myself out of the huge bed, I went through to the bathroom to splash water on my face and attempted to neaten my hair with rather trembling fingers. Then, feeling oddly numb, I left the chamber and descended down the wide flight of stone stairs, following the long corridor back to the room I had spent such a strange morning, in such strange company.

I was met at the door by Lucius, who was now magnificently attired in a robe of dark hunter's-green velvet, intricately embroidered with silver motifs. Immediately I felt a pang of self-conscious vulnerability, appearing before him in only in a thin slip of silk.

He greeted me with as little apparent pleasure as he had that morning, as if conforming to the barest demands of courtesy for his own sake, rather than mine.

Once again, I was guided to the extravagantly-laid table. Once again, I ate my meal under the man's inscrutable gaze.

My attempts to extract any more information about my whereabouts were rebuffed with emphatic silence; my endeavours to initiate polite conversation were met with drawling sarcasm. It was...confusing and frustrating. I couldn't understand why he continued to behave so rudely to me.

It was only when I had finished eating and sat with my arms crossed, having lapsed into angry taciturnity, that Lucius suddenly became more sociable.

"Have you recovered any of your memory, yet, Alice?" he suddenly addressed me, in a light, almost caressing voice.

I shook my head and replied, "Not yet." I could feel a blush spread over my cheeks in response to his
altered tone.

"Nothing about your family?"

"No."

"Not even your name?"

"No.—I—I mean—." I stopped, realising he had caught me out with embarrassing ease. His eyes glittered triumphantly but he didn't comment, preferring, I suppose, to watch me fidget uncomfortably beneath his meaningful silence.

Determined not to oblige him, I pushed my chair back and stood up. "I think I'll go back up to my room now, if that's okay with you," I said, mustering as cool a tone as I could.

"By all means, Alice." He said the name with sneering emphasis, his voice regaining all its original hardness and derision. He moved over to the door, holding it open for me with a mocking flourish, in that overly-genteel way he seemed to particularly favour, which served to convey contempt rather than courtesy. "Maybe tomorrow you will be able to recall things with more...accuracy."

"Maybe tomorrow you will be able to disclose where we are with more accuracy," I retorted as I edged past him. Then I hurried over the threshold, not caring to encounter his expression.

...I spent the remainder of the evening divided between trying to remember something—anything—about myself, and trying to forget the maddeningly elegant sneer which permanently overspread the sharply chiselled countenance of my silver-eyed host.
And so, in such a surreal situation and strange surroundings, I began to establish a kind of daily routine.

Each day was divided tripartitely by mealtimes, the hour of which was dictated by my hunger, for there was no clock in my room. It was something of a mystery that, however early or late I appeared in the dining room, the food was always as hot and fresh as if it had been served mere moments before my entry.

Lucius never failed to join me at the table, but he never himself partook of the meal, though he would sometimes take a glass of wine or spirits at dinner. He seemed to take a perverse satisfaction in watching me eat—or to be more precise, in watching me squirm by watching me eat.

Our conversations were usually curt and combative. Sometimes they would begin civilly enough, with him asking me if I had recovered any memories, or my asking him when he thought the snow might finally stop. But it never took long to descend into discord.

"I don't get why you can't just tell me, at least, which country we are in. You don't have to say the province."

"Oh, don't I? How magnanimous of you."

"If you told me where we really are, it might help to trigger my memory."

"A plausible theory. How unfortunate that you won't be able to put it to the test."

"Well, why not?"

"What did I tell you about curbing your curiosity, Alice?"

"It isn't idle curiosity! It's a valid question, absolutely pertinent to my current situation."

"On the contrary, it has no bearing on your situation whatsoever. Let us suppose I revealed we were in Alaska...what would you do differently if you subsequently discovered we were in Siberia?"

"Are we in Siberia?"

"Perhaps," he replied, with a mocking flicker of a smile. "Anything is possible."

And round and round we'd go. Always, always, the sparring ended in his favour. He was unflappable, and had a knack for flustering me, so that no matter what point I tried to gain—however reasonable it might be—he managed to effortlessly twist my words and deform their meanings, then offer them tauntingly back to me.

But for all his maddening crypticness and drawling contempt, I could never quite hate the man.
Indeed, the strange compelling draw I'd felt for him from the start seemed to intensify with every frustrating encounter. His presence was like a powerful magnet, messing up my already-so-damaged internal compass, so not only was I blank and lost, but I was becoming increasingly disoriented too.

I also remained somewhat afraid of him. Though he never used violence against me after the altercation in the dining room, he did not scruple to physically intimidate me. ...A sudden step towards me, a clenched fist resting casually on the table, him stooping too closely over my chair...all these tacitly threatening gestures served to remind me that while in his house, I was to play by his rules.

And admittedly, there were times when I was tempted to disobey the boundaries he had imposed, for the house seemed riddled with secrets that I longed to investigate.

Strange, chilling occurrences kept me always on edge: inanimate objects that seemed to move in my peripheral vision, sibilant whispers that haunted my steps in the long, stone corridors, candles that silently ignited of their own accord, as evening drew near...and once I heard the echoing peal of a woman's voice—laughing or crying, I could not tell which—that made my hair stand on end. I tried very hard to convince myself that it had been a bird's cry.

It was like the place was...haunted.

Of course, some puzzles I was able to reason through: the bath which was full of hot water every morning and evening could be on some kind of automatic timer, even though I never saw or heard it running. I presumed the clean robe and towel hanging in the bathroom each day were put there during the night—I hoped by a maid or housekeeper, for I certainly didn't like the thought of him coming into my room while I slept... And I didn't really believe Lucius lived completely alone. There must be some kind of staff to keep such a large house in order—to prepare the food, at least—not to mention the fact that my bed was always remade by the time I returned from breakfast each morning.

But I could never properly satisfy my reasoning with tangible proof.

I wanted so badly to ask Lucius the meaning of all these many unsettling, eerie things. But he had promised consequences to my curiosity—'unpleasant ones' he had said—and having already encountered his brutality twice, I had no wish to incite it a third time. Although I no longer really feared an attack, I knew that beneath the surface of suave sarcasm the man's temper was volatile. I still believed he was capable of doing me harm.

He's like the man in that creepy fairy-tale Blue Beard, who warns his wife not to be too curious, I thought with a shiver. And she goes and discovers the murdered bodies of all his previous, too-curious wives... And that thought went a long way to keep my inquisitiveness in check.

The days had a surreal, dreamlike quality to them—a dark dream, the kind that warps and deform the more you try to harness and control it.

There were long stretches of numbness and boredom spent alone in my room, punctuated by episodes of frustration and despair as I struggled to face the enormous chasm that was my lost memory. I would spend hours lying on the bed, cross-referencing the things I knew with the things I must therefore have experienced, and that way try to conjure up some shred of recollection. It became something of a habit, just before sleep, to whisper alphabetical lists of girl's names ("Abigail, Anna, Briony, Belle..."), hoping my own one might somehow jump out at me; so far, without success. Before descending for breakfast in the morning I would stand before the mirror, just staring and staring at my reflection, trying to find...me, somewhere in my eyes...
But it was hopeless. All I saw were shadows. Shadows in the glass.

... 

About a week into my stay, I managed to extract a rare concession from Lucius.

Thoroughly bored by his reticence and my restrictions, I accosted him about it one morning at breakfast.

"Exactly what am I supposed to do while I'm staying here?" I asked him crossly. "Since this snow is apparently never going to end, and I'm not allowed to ask you anything about anything? I am actually so bored I'm thinking about playing skittles with those antique vases down the hallway. I don't know what I'd use as a bowling ball, though..." I looked up at Lucius, encountering one of his usual sneers. "Any ideas?"

The expression in his voice mirrored the one on his face. "I'm sorry, were you addressing me? I had presumed, or rather hoped, those incoherent ramblings were for your benefit alone."

"I suppose that knight in the stairwell could go without his head," I continued, choosing to ignore him. "It's not quite the right shape, and it will definitely leave scratches on the floor...but you wouldn't mind, would you?"

He did not even blink. "Why don't you go ahead and find out?" It was not so much an invitation as a threat.

"Well, can I at least get a book or something to read, or is that considered a violation of your rules?"

Lucius looked at me rather intently, a strange kind of intrigue lighting his eyes, as if a question had occurred to him that he would like answered. "I will show you to the library presently," he said, to my complete surprise. "But all other rooms, save this one and your own, remain strictly off-limits."

And sure enough, after breakfast concluded he led me back down the hall, coming to a halt outside the door closest to the staircase. The heavy oak slab swung open at his touch, and with his usual mocking courtesy he handed me over the threshold.

I couldn't repress a gasp. It was just so...beautiful! I stared and stared around me, gravitating into the centre of the room, turning in circles, just marvelling at the hundreds—surely thousands of books, floor to ceiling, row on row, all exquisitely bound in dark leather.

Approaching one wall, I selected a book at random...then my wonder turned to confusion as I realised it was blank. Totally blank, inside and out. No title, no text, no embossing on the spine, just nothing.

It was the same with the next book. With every book I opened, in fact.

Lucius stood there in the library doorway, silently observing me flick through page after page of blank vellum, his silver eyes fixed watchfully on my face, a smile deepening the brackets around his mouth, no doubt at the growing mutiny of my expression. I felt he was toying with me, and I was sorely tempted to hurl one of the heavy tomes right at his smirking face.

"Something the matter, my dear?" he said at length.
"Yes," I snarled, "with you, evidently. What sort of person keeps a whole library full of blank books? Because the answer is not, 'a normal one'!"

"They are blank?" He sounded genuinely interested, and rather pleased.

"Oh, ha, ha. I suppose you think it's hilarious, do you? Playing mind-games with an amnesiac girl?"

"It is somewhat amusing, I own."

"Well, I don't find it amusing." I raised my eyebrow pointedly. "I think you're stooping rather low."

"Do you?" His eyes glinted at this, but the smile never wavered. "And from what lofty pedestal do you proclaim this judgement upon me?"

"Not from any pedestal. It's just called 'good breeding'. But maybe you've never heard of that."

Lucius chuckled, as if at some private joke. "Ah...that, my dear, is a subject for another hour. For now, there is something else that may, perhaps, engage your interest." So saying, he moved to the far corner of the room, beckoning me to follow. Glowering suspiciously, I moved over to where he now waited. As I approached he directed me to where a small, obscure cabinet stood, half-hidden by shadows.

An engraved panel fastened to its top read, 'Profana, Propaganda & Saecularia'.

With a last suspicious glare at Lucius, I knelt to inspect the books inside. Unlike the handsome tomes lining the walls in solemn uniformity, these books were dog-eared and mildewy, their edges frayed and bindings loose—but at least I could read the titles written on their cracked spines. They appeared to be an odd mix of classic works and ponderous, antique scientific textbooks, crammed into the cabinet in no apparent sequence. 'Tables of Toledo'...'The Odyssey'...'Macbeth'...'Canon of Medicine'...'Le Morte d'Arthur'...'The Tempest'...

I grabbed a couple at random and, muttering very ungracious thanks as I pushed past Lucius, I stormed up to my room. The title-less covers and empty pages of those beautiful books had deeply disturbed me; their blankness seemed almost to mock my own. I hated the helpless feeling of not being able to reason or rationalise the nonsensical things I was confronted with, before my very own eyes.

It was yet another baffling mystery to add to an ever-mounting pile.

The snow showed no sign of abating, and I began to wonder if we were somewhere rather Arctic. It was a marvel the place was so warm—and it was just as well that it was, for I was extremely under-dressed for the climate.

The miraculously-appearing bathrobes were all I had to wear, putting me at a perpetual disadvantage, and I was certain Lucius intended it that way. I hated having to always appear before him barefoot and in a single layer of flimsy material, when he was always immaculately turned out, right down to emerald cuff-links and starched cravat. It felt...demeaning. But when I complained, he politely advised me that if I objected to the robes I was welcome to go naked. The accompanying sneer made it plain that it would be neither of consequence or pleasure to him if I did so.

"But where are my clothes?" I demanded. "And my shoes? What happened to them, may I ask?"
He smiled witheringly. "By 'clothes' am I to understand you mean the pitiful rags you arrived in?"

"Yes."—This through gritted teeth.

"Ah." He shrugged. "They have been disposed of."

"Great. Thanks. Well, can't you just lend me a jersey or shirt, or something at least half-decent? You must have something I could borrow—"

"That is quite out of the question." And he had given me a very eloquent 'conversation closed' look.

It did cross my mind that the bathrobes were a kind of security against my leaving. I wouldn't get very far in three foot of snow clad only in a scrap of silk. But if that were true, if he didn't want me to leave, then why did he seem to dislike my presence so much? Why did he go out of his way to treat me like a particularly stupid child? Wouldn't he be glad if I up and left?

...I just couldn't make it out.

..."What have you been reading, Alice?"

I was eating my dinner, as had become customary, under Lucius's disconcerting, silvery gaze.

He had been watching me for some time, his head tilted slightly back, the usual disdainful curl playing on his top lip. He held a glass of some deep ruby-coloured liquid, swirling it slowly. His hand seemed too large for the delicate crystal vessel, it looked almost precarious in his grasp. But the elegantly relaxed lines of his fingers disproved the possibility of clumsiness—which was more than I could say about my hands, however much smaller and nimbler-looking.

I stared up at him, surprised by his question. "I nearly finished The Tempest," I said, through a mouth full of food.

Lucius looked faintly pained by the fact I was still chewing. He waited pointedly until I had swallowed, then he said, "And? Are you enjoying it?"

"Yes," I replied. "I must have read it before, or seen the play. I recognise quite a few of the speeches."

"It has an interesting premise, don't you think?"

I looked at him dubiously. "You mean a bunch of people being shipwrecked on an island?"

"No, my dear, that is hardly the premise, is it?" His tone was light and drawling, but his eyes gleamed intently. "I mean a...sorcerer, using his powers to restore rightful dominion over his would-be usurpers. Did you not find that interesting?"

"Um...I suppose so," I answered hesitantly.

"You suppose so. What a refreshingly original reply."

My cheeks burned. "I'm sorry," I said acidly. "I forgot to prepare an essay."

He looked amused at my pique. "I don't require an essay. Merely an opinion."
"Oh, you mean I'm actually allowed one?"

Lucius's eyes narrowed a little at my flippant tone. "But of course," he murmured. He set his glass down and then bestowed on me a very mocking smile. "So, tell me, Alice: what was it that interested you, if not the premise? Enlighten me."

I picked up a piece of bread and began to shred it, chagrined and consequently ruffled. "I don't know. The way it's written, I guess. The beauty of the words."

A sharp, enquiring look passed his features. "Then your appreciation is chiefly...aesthetic? You felt no special interest in its themes—for example, the supernatural elements of the work?" He paused, leaning forward slightly. "The magic?"

There was something cryptic in his voice that made me feel like it was a trick question. His gaze had become a little too piercing, and I felt myself getting flustered and confused. "I suppose so,"—I cringed as I realised I'd repeated the words for which he'd already mocked me. "I'm not—I hadn't really thought—I mean...why do you even care what I think?" I finished snappily.

Lucius leaned back again. "Oh—I don't." He looked pleased, too pleased.

I frowned. I felt I had somehow conceded a point, without being party to its significance.

What a strange thing to be smug about, I thought. It's just a play....

...That night I dreamed...

I lay on the shore of a remote island—alone, cradled by soft, sun-warmed sand. I was nude but not self-conscious; daydreaming, lulled by the whispering waves and sweet breezes caressing my bare skin...

The sun began to sink, and as the sky darkened, the island began to shrink around me. It shrank and shrank until it was mere feet in diameter...and I roused from my reverie to discover I was no longer on an island, but lying on a bed, inside the dark, stone bowels of a castle. I sat up, suddenly panicked, recalling that I was supposed to be looking for someone.

A flight of spiral stairs sprouted out of the ground—I jumped off the bed and began to ascend them.

...Dull lamps lead me upwards, ever upwards, but as I passed they sputtered and died, and everything behind me was plunged into deepest blackness. I realized the stairs themselves were falling away, and I began to run. I knew if I stopped running I would fall backwards into the nothingness. As I ran I tried to call out to the person I was searching for, but I couldn't remember their name... Instead I cried, "It's me! I'm here!"—but I was answered only by the echo of a woman's eerie laughter, which turned into the mocking 'Kraa!' of a crow...

I was getting tired, and my legs couldn't keep up with the encroaching darkness—the faster I tried to run, the slower I became—and suddenly I tumbled back, my arms outstretched as I fell, my mouth shaped into an O of a voiceless scream...

...I landed softly on my back. I was in a shadowy, sparsely-lit corridor stretching endlessly in each direction, the walls of which were completely covered in gold-framed portraits of sleeping figures. I lay there, afraid to move lest I awaken the portraits...I feared they would deride my nakedness. I feared they would mock my confusion.
A person appeared suddenly next to me, but it wasn't whoever I had been searching for.

"What are you doing?" It was a man's voice, although his face was shrouded by the shadows.

"I'm looking for someone," I said. My own voice was high-pitched, juvenile, distant.

"Who? Who are you looking for?"

"I can't remember." And I began to cry like a child.

The man knelt and gathered me up in his arms, pressing me against him. There was a sickening, squeezing sensation—then the corridor changed into my own room, and the man was laying me on the bed. His silky white-blond hair hovered just above me, and I reached up to touch the ends with my fingertips...he pressed something to my temple, and murmured a word...

...And my dream faded to blackness, like the dimming lights at the end of a play...
Then one morning Lucius did not appear at breakfast.

It was, by my reckoning, the twelfth day of my stay and I had just begun to get—not exactly comfortable, but at least used to the routine we had established. So it was with no small sense of misgiving that I discovered the man was absent, although the food was served as usual.

I wasn't quite sure how I felt about this. It was a relief to be able to eat without his icy gaze boring down on me. But the atmosphere of the room immediately changed. It felt...too quiet. Eerie. Everything seemed to take on a more tangibly sinister dynamic.

I hadn't realised how reassuring his presence had actually been. Despite his hostility, he was real, he was human, and that went a long way to tranquillise the dread and terror which threatened to overwhelm me, born out of my confusion, my amnesia, my helplessness...and something worse. I had started to question my own sanity. All the strange, uncanny things I kept encountering were taking their toll, and I was beginning to wonder if my hold on reality had been in some way compromised. This frightened me more than any other part of my predicament. Losing my memory was bad enough. But losing my mind? ...That was a thought too horrible to contemplate.

But at least by having Lucius to interact with, however discordant the interactions were, I was able to stave off those fears, to keep them somewhat at bay.

I wondered where he was. Supposedly still in the house, for the weather had not improved and I couldn't see any tracks in the snow outside, at least, not out the front. Mentally, I forced a shrug. Maybe he was tired of witnessing me loudly chomping and slurping my way through mealtimes (I had kept that up as a kind-of protest against him watching me eat.)

But when Lucius didn't appear at lunch or dinner either, my nervousness turned to alarm. What if he had left me here, alone in this haunted house? Or alone with my haunted mind?

Darkness had already descended outside and even though the usual light sources had somehow ignited themselves while I wasn't looking, the shadows seemed longer and darker than usual, the silence infinitely more forbidding. Panic began to wrap gradually around me like a slowly-suffocating shroud. What if he isn't real after all, Alice?...What if all this time you've been making him up?

I picked at my dinner, but my appetite had abandoned me along with Lucius. I kept jumping at unexpected noises: the crackling of a twig in the fire, the sudden rasping caw of a crow outside the window. Finally I pushed my barely-touched plate away and went up to my room.

For a while I managed to distract myself with a book (Malory's 'Le Morte d'Arthur') and nearly had myself convinced that I was indifferent, unperturbed. But several pages in I realised that I was picturing all the Knights of the Round Table as tall, silver-eyed, blond-haired men in long black robes...
Sighing, I snapped the book shut. Clearly, I wasn't going to be able to relax until I had seen Lucius, until I had made certain that I wasn't all alone in this place for the night.

I wandered over to the door, hesitating for a moment. Did this count as curiosity? Was it just a convenient excuse for me to nosey about?

Yes, and yes, I thought. But they were secondary reasons. My prime motive was not to find out about him, but to find him.

I opened the door and headed out into the corridor.

Half-way along the stone passageway I realised I was tiptoeing and I tried to make my steps deliberately louder, not wanting to be caught sneaking—though in bare feet I could hardly help it. "Lucius?" I called. "Are you there?" My heart was beating erratically, but whether it was for the sake of encountering the master of the house, or in fear of encountering something sinister, I was not quite sure.

Perhaps it was one and the same thing.

I reached the stair landing. Up or down? I wondered. I hadn't yet been upstairs...

Is that where his bedroom is?

An unbidden picture of the man arose vividly in my mind: sans his immaculate attire, blond hair spilling down over wide, muscular shoulders and a pale, solid chest...long, bare limbs, sinewy and powerful and...

I blushed, annoyed at myself. It was something I kept catching myself out on. I seemed to be dwelling on him far too often, more with each passing day. I kept replaying our conversations over and over in my head, changing their outcomes in my favour and imagining others which hadn't taken place, where I was the cool-headed victor of our debates and he was forced to concede to me his grudging respect...his silver eyes illuminating with admiration...and something more...

Ugh. I knew it was both futile and foolish to wish him to reciprocate the attraction I couldn't seem to help feeling for him. I hated to even admit to myself that I was attracted to him, after the way he'd treated me. He didn't deserve to be considered attractive, for he never showed even the slightest chink in his armour of arrogant contempt for me. How was it even possible I could feel something for him?

Frowning, I deliberately pushed the seductive image firmly from my mind. You've already got enough trouble with warped realities, Alice, I scolded myself, without adding confusing fantasies into mix.

For all I knew the man was somewhere in the house digging up floorboards in preparation for stowing the severed remains of my lifeless body.

Despite this not-very-comforting thought, I squared my shoulders and decided to ascend. Apparently, my curiosity was more powerful than my sense of self-preservation...

I took the stairs at a trot, afraid that I'd bottle out if I didn't force some momentum into my legs.

"Lucius, are you there?"

I had the sudden absurd idea that he and I were playing Hide-And-Seek, and I stifled a slightly-hysterical impulse to call out, "Coming, ready or not!" Instead I let out a rather silly, extremely
nervous giggle.

Then, just as I was nearing the landing, every single one of the wall-mounted candles in the stairwell suddenly snuffed out. I gasped and swung around. Darkness yawned horribly behind me. ...Like in the dream, I thought. I gritted my teeth and turned back.

*Onward and upwards it is, then.*

The third floor corridor looked similar to those below, except gloomier, grimmer—or was that just in my mind?

There were several doors along the passageway, but I didn't feel at all tempted to knock as I made my way down its length. "Lucius?" I tentatively called again.

As I walked (or crept, really, my initial energy having somewhat extinguished with the candles) I became aware of a dull, percussive sound, coming from behind the last door, at the far end of the passage.

It was rhythmic, kind-of scratchy...and very, very creepy.

*Crt-crt...crt-crt...crt-crt...*

I could feel my hair bristling and a clammy coldness had developed in the pit of my stomach and was spreading out over my entire body. My hands felt numb and heavy and my legs no longer seemed as reliable as they had before. *This is just plain silly, Alice,* I thought. *You don't want to investigate that sound. Really, you should turn right around and head back down the stairs. You can make it in the darkness if you cling to the banister.*

...But somehow, my feet were dragging me inexorably onward...

*Crt-crt...crt-crt...crt-crt...*

"Lucius!" I tried to call again, but it came out as little more than a quavering squeak.

I was very near the end of the corridor now, turning to face the door itself.

*There's sure to be a perfectly reasonable, mundane explanation...*

I took a step closer...

*Crt-crt...crt-crt...crt-crt...*

I reached out a hand towards the door-knob...

Suddenly—a bone-chilling, screeching wail from inside, the door was shaking and banging, juddering in its frame, as if someone was furiously hammering it with their fists—I was reeling away, terrified—and—

"MUD-BLOOD!"

A searing bolt of electricity shot through my body and I screamed, staggering backwards.

Lucius was striding down the corridor towards me, black cloak billowing, murder in his eyes. His left hand was clutching the cane with which he'd throttled me that first morning, his right hand wielded a slim baton of wood, outstretched and pointed directly at me.
"Lucius! There you are!" I cried unsteadily, speedily reversing into the passageway's extremity. \textit{Damn, I thought, why couldn't there be stairs at both ends?}

I was shaking badly, from the electric shock, from the fright of the quaking door (which, I noticed, had abruptly stopped) and from a new, more immediate threat, in the shape of the furious man backing me into the corner. As he approached, he jabbed the wooden baton into a slot in the top of the cane and didn't stop his long, wrathful strides until I was squashed hard up between the cold stone and his solid body, which suddenly didn't seem \textit{quite} so attractive after all, now it was being used as a kind-of battering ram against me.

His right hand grabbed my chin, forcing my face up towards his. "What did I say about prying?" he hissed.

The cane was digging uncomfortably into my side, and I tried to wriggle away from it. "I wasn't pry—OW!"

A hard shove of his body silenced and stilled me. "What did I say about prying?" he snarlingly repeated.

"You s-said there would be c-consequences," I stuttered, gasping a little at his crushing weight.

"Correct."

"But I wasn't—"

I abruptly stopped as he released my chin and raised his hand. I flinched, bracing myself for a hit.

But instead he clamped his hand over my eyes and there was the most extraordinarily awful feeling of—I don't know—pressure, \textit{suction}—as if I were being twisted and dragged through an old-fashioned wringer. I felt myself retching. "Stop—stop—stop it!" I cried, but it had already stopped and Lucius had removed his hand.

I would have fallen, but he held me up in a strange, close, fierce embrace until I found my balance.

I stared around, speechless. We were smack-bang in the middle of the dining room. \textit{How the hell did we get here? What just happened? Are you really going mad, Alice?}

But I wasn't able to dwell for long on my probable insanity, for Lucius had decided to grab my hair, wrenching it painfully. I didn't know if the roots of one's hair \textit{could} be stretched, but it certainly felt like that was what was happening. The burning twinge made my eyes water.

"What were you doing upstairs?"

"I—I was looking for you," I stammered between puffs of pain. Both my hands were frantically trying to disengage his fingers from my locks, but to no avail. He was so much stronger than me, and just so very, very angry.

His eyes narrowed. "You appear to have found me," he said.

"I can see that—" —another hard \textit{wrench} made me yelp, "—ah—ow—\textit{shit!} Lucius, stop!—Let me go, damn you!"

He did; and rather roughly at that, pushing me down into the nearest chair and standing over me aggressively. The cane was clenched in one fist and I eyed it apprehensively. I already knew first-hand the kind of pain it could inflict and I was sure there were plenty of other applications to which it
might be put to use. A quote I must have read somewhere jumped into my head, that in historical
days, "a man may beat a woman with a stick or rod as thick as his thumb and as long as his
forearm..." I truly hoped that wasn't going to be the case here.

Lucius seemed to have guessed my train of thoughts, for a smile hinted at the corners of his mouth,
and he began to softly rap the implement against the side of his leg, making a dull 'thwack' as it
struck the leather of his tall boots. "Consequences, consequences," he murmured softly. I found
myself flushing at his tone, at the gleam in his icy eyes.

I glared up at him resentfully, annoyed at his manhandling and intimidation, when all I had been
trying to do was to find him. Well, sort of.

"It wasn't my fault you decided to abandon me today, without any warning," I said angrily. "I
was worried."

"Were you, my dear." It was not really a question. "Your concern is very touching."

"I wasn't worried for you," I retorted. "I was worried for me. I don't feel like I'm—I'm
safe in this place."

Tap, tap, tap, went the cane. "Nor should you," he replied. "Since you have broken the rules
guaranteeing your safety."

"I told you—I was just looking for you. I wasn't breaking your precious rules. Or...not purposefully."

"Indeed." Tap, tap, tap... He regarded me with an impassive, almost bored, expression, as if he were
weighing up whether I was worthy of the effort of punishment. I was put in the very curious position
of hoping I wasn't, yet somehow half-wishing I was. I hated his contemptuous indifference almost as
much as I feared his unpredictable anger.

"Anyway, where were you today?" I said with a scowl.

He looked amused and faintly incredulous at my question. His elegantly raised eyebrow told me he
had no intention of answering it. "Tell me, Alice...what exactly do you suppose is behind the door
you were on the brink of most unwisely entering?"

I shivered, not really wanting to think about it. "How can I guess that?" I said.

"Please, indulge me."

"I don't know..." Then, snippily, "Another happy guest?" I knew I was risking his ire. For a moment
his cane stopped its tapping, and I winced a little at his expression. But then, unexpectedly, he tilted
his head back and softly laughed.

I was relieved, although I tried to assume an air of nonchalance. This all but disappeared as he
stooped over me, lightly placing the silver top of the cane to my lips. It wasn't an overtly threatening
gesture. But it was very unsettling. "If I catch you prying again," he murmured, an almost tender note
to his voice, "the consequences won't just be visible. They will be indelible."

I brought up my hand to brush away the baton from my lips, but somehow my fingers instead curled
about it's satiny length, my hand tingling oddly, and before I could stop myself I was involuntarily
pulling it towards me, as if to take it for myself.

Lucius hissed and I gasped at the same moment; quickly he snatched it out of my grip and for a
moment gazed down at me with a riveted expression which lay somewhere between anger,
outrage...and something else, entirely unfathomable to me.

"I-I'm sorry," I stuttered, eyes wide with shock. "I didn't mean t-to do that."

I clenched my teeth, bracing myself for an even more painful taste of his displeasure. But it did not come. Instead, Lucius straightened, turned his back on me, and simply stalked from the room without a backward glance.
You must have blacked out.

I was sitting on my bed, arms wrapped around my drawn-up knees, trying to make some kind of sense of what had happened up there on the third floor.

No, that wasn't quite right. I wasn't trying to make sense of it, I was just trying to siphon out some of the absolute impossibility of what I had experienced.

Yes, I thought, that's what happened. You must have fainted in the corridor. Lucius carried you down to the dining room—then you came to—and it seemed like you'd been instantly transported.

The details didn't exactly bear close inspection, but I wasn't inclined to be fussy. Any explanation, however tenuous, was good enough for me in my present state of confusion. And it was plausible, wasn't it? I'd fainted before, on the first night, so it was reasonable to expect I might do so again. After all, I'd clearly suffered some trauma to the brain, being amnesiac and all.

I didn't mind fancying myself to be experiencing the symptoms of a little temporary brain-damage. Because it was either that, or I had gone completely loopy.

What the hell was behind that door? I clenched my right hand, remembering the painful electric shock that must have come from the handle. Was it really a woman screaming? Goosebumps prickled over my entire body as the eerie wailing replayed in my memory. It had seemed to be in a female register of voice, but then again, it had sounded so...inhuman, that it could have been just about anything, even the howl of an animal. It was a sound I never wanted to hear again. ...And what about the violence of the rattling door? The way the wood had buckled and nearly splintered against its locks—could such fearsome strength truly belong to a woman?

I couldn't stop shivering, although I was not cold. I reached for a pillow and hugged it against me, trying to manufacture some feeling of comfort.

There was no denying something—somebody—was locked up on the third floor. Had that someone started out like me—a hapless, lost stranger? Had that someone sought safety and shelter, and found only torment and terror? Had that someone been manipulated or goaded, tricked or brutalized into simply...going mad?

Is that to be your fate, Alice? I wondered. To become a prisoner? Or a lunatic? ...And then a sudden, unbidden thought:...A ghost?

I shook my head vehemently. I wasn't going to indulge ridiculous, supernatural theories to explain away every weird or frightening occurrence, however tempting it was to do so. I wasn't a child, to fill dark spaces with monsters and goblins. Just because I didn't understand something, didn't mean it wasn't explicable. Did it?

My thoughts drifted, as they did all too often, to the man who was—by default, really—slowly and
surely becoming the centre of my universe.

Who was he? I had learned almost nothing about him since I first arrived, and yet he was in the extraordinarily powerful position of being the only person I currently knew. Was that what drew me to him? Was that why he was so damned...magnetic? Was that why—when he continued to insult and intimidate me—I still found him so compelling?... His face was the last thing I thought of when I dropped off to sleep; the first when I awoke... Why?

Perhaps it was simply his abrasive, inescapable beauty. But I didn't think so. Beauty did have its own undeniable power, but this—this ran deeper. Had the man worn a mask the whole time, I was sure I would still be lying here, clutching a pillow, thinking about him. Thinking about his hypnotic eyes, gleaming like quicksilver...

I flopped sideways onto the bed, curling around the pillow in the foetal position.

I wondered about the men in my life—in my real life. What were they like? My dad, my relatives, my friends—maybe I had a boyfriend? I was fairly sure they would be nothing like Lucius. No rational female (and I was sure I was usually rational, no matter if I was temporarily... unhinged) would voluntarily choose to put herself at the mercy of such an overbearing, arrogant despot. ...But I wasn't here voluntarily, and I didn't have a choice. And so I just kept on watching myself, with horrified fascination, being drawn down and down, deeper and deeper, into a strange kind of infatuation with this secretive, hateful man...a man who wielded his hate purposefully and expertly, like a poison-dipped sword.

*Why are you letting this happen, Alice? You know it's an uneven fight. He has every advantage. He has all the power. He doesn't even like you. In fact, he barely tolerates you. No good can possibly come of this.*

An image of him shimmered vividly in my mind.

His snowy-blond hair, with never-so-much as a single strand out of place. ...Was it ever tousled, from sleep, or from exertion, or—? I flushed. No Alice, I scolded myself. Let's just say it's never tousled, and leave it at that.

I thought about his eyes again. Strikingly fringed with jetty lashes and framed by dark brows, they seemed by contrast, so light and cold—even cruel. ...And yet their distinctive shape—tilting very slightly upwards at the outer corners—gave him a perpetual look of tenderness, even humour. I had noticed the same thing about his mouth. The corners flicked up disconcertingly, so even his harshest sneers seemed somehow softened, sweetened. Is that why he's so attractive? I wondered. Because of a mere quirk of feature?

He was certainly a man of contrasts, both in looks and personality. He was urbane and suave—yet he could be unkind, even vicious. Elegant and civilized, yet violent and savage. His voice was silky, purring, but his words sank like fangs. And he was so achingly beautiful—yet entirely masculine—too masculine: he was physically dominating to the point of brutishness. Every alarm bell rang in my head, telling me to ward him off, telling me not to be a conscious fool, not to be a willing victim.

*Do you really want to fall for a man like that?* I asked myself. *No, no, no, no, no. You shouldn't. You mustn't.*

Trouble was, I didn't know how to stop myself.
If Lucius believed his threats to have cured me of my curiosity, he was very much mistaken. If anything, it was stronger than ever.

I just wanted to know...something. Anything. I didn't discriminate as to which of the hundreds of questions I wanted answered first, I just knew that I wanted to know.

True, I didn't exactly feel like rushing back up to the third floor to conduct a personal interview with wailing lady. But too often I found myself wondering when the next opportunity to explore (or as Lucius would say, 'pry') might present itself.

And although I was afraid of Lucius, with each passing day I became less so. Not because he was changing, but because I was. ...It was almost as if I felt buffered from his wrath by my own growing feelings for him. As if that somehow counted. It was a dangerous fiction to cling to, but a pleasant one.

None-the-less, for several days after the events on the third floor I did my best to "behave myself" for him. I made a real attempt to be civil, polite, tractable, even deferential. I was like a self-repressing Victorian child: only speaking when spoken to, always seen and never heard. I even toned down the loud chewing.

But not once—not even once—did he meet me half way.

He treated me exactly the same as he had from the start, like some contemptible inconvenience. And it didn't take me very long to resent it. Soon enough we were back to our old combative, antagonistic exchanges—except now I was taking his insults to heart. I wanted so much for him to show just the smallest sign that he was softening to me. But the man was made of ice.

And when the only person you know despises you, the world is a terribly, terribly lonely place.

... "Frida...Greta...Hayley...Helen...Ingrid..."

I was in the library, sitting upon a pile of pillows I'd brought downstairs from my room and made into a kind of nest for myself, preferring it to the imposingly grand desk and its rather uncomfortable tufted-leather chair in the centre of the room.

I had started to spend more and more hours in the library. It had now been over three weeks of confinement since the snowstorm began, and my own room was beginning to feel too much like a cell. Despite the fact the books were ninety-nine-percent blank to me, I felt somehow comforted just being surrounded by them, like I had a natural affinity with them.

Often I would read, or just curl up and think (more often than not about him), or simply doze;—or, like today, I would simply stare at the ceiling and whisper through lists of names, hoping against hope to chance upon my own.

When finally I reached "Zara" I let out a sigh and let my eyes wander over the vaults of beautiful books. I couldn't help but be frustrated by so vast and great a treasure lying all around me, in plain sight, yet just beyond my grasp.

I longed to investigate the secret of their silence.

Well, why don't you, then? The thought sprang up to tempt me, as it did most days.
Because, I argued with myself, *if Lucius catches you prying again, you could get more than just a sore scalp next time.*

*He won't catch you, he never comes in the library. ...Besides, he has given you permission to be there. That implies permission to investigate...or, lets say, to 'peruse' the contents.*

Today, the voice of temptation won over the voice of caution. One moment I was nestled in my pile of pillows, then next I had jumped up, selected a book at random, carried it over to the door and wedged it under the crack, like a make-shift lock.

I gravitated back to the laden shelves, randomly chose another book, and transported it over to the desk. First I inspected the cover. It was made of a handsome dark red leather, embossed at the edges with golden scroll-work. But where there ought to be the title and author, there was a blank expanse of red. I tilted it towards the light of the over-head chandelier, trying to detect an imprint of lettering, or the texture of dried ink—anything. But I perceived nothing.

It creaked slightly as I opened it to the first page. It was also blank. I thumbed through the first few pages. All blank.

Then numbly—hardly daring to breathe, let alone think—I slowly, carefully began to tear away a page from its spine. The sound seemed horribly amplified to my anxious ears, and I kept halting to peer over at the door, half-expecting an enraged Lucius to slam it open at any moment. The book that was wedged underneath suddenly seemed ridiculously inadequate, serving as nothing more than a blaring testimony to my guilt.

But the page came away at last—the door remained firmly shut—and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Again I held it up to the light, peering at it closely. Again I found nothing. Rather self-consciously I spat a small blob onto the paper, and smeared it across with my finger. Still nothing.

The paraffin wall-lamps were too high to reach from the floor, so I dragged the heavy desk-chair over to the nearest one and clambered up. I pressed the paper against the glass casing, then held it over the open top, but the paper merely glowed opaquely, and there was no sign of oxidization. Finally, I tore off a small corner of the paper and dropped it onto the naked flame. It flared for a moment, then a spiral of smoke curled upwards, and I held the page above it like an umbrella. The paper discoloured slightly, but revealed no hidden markings.

Sighing, I climbed back off the chair and dragged it back to the desk. I placed the page carefully back from the place I had torn it, and stood for a while, gazing down at it thoughtfully. If the invisible ink didn't respond to light, moisture, heat or smoke...I could only suppose it required some kind of ultraviolet light or developing solution to be seen.

...*I wish you would reveal your mysteries,* I thought. *I wish...I wish...*

And I was just about to close the book up, when I was sure I saw the page flicker over with a spindly writing, silvery and fine, like spider's gossamer.

I blinked, gasped, snatched the page up and peered at it closely—but it was gone.

I could only suppose that, as per usual, my mind was playing tricks on me.

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"Lucius, may I ask you something?"
I had been mulling over the mystery of the books all afternoon, and now, come evening, I couldn't help but broach the subject with my ever-sneering dinner companion.

"If you must."

"Erm, promise not to get angry?"

He didn't need to say 'No.' It was written plainly on his face.

"The books in your library. They're written in invisible ink, aren't they?—I'm not prying." I quickly added. "This isn't curiosity. I'm just telling you what I think."

His cool eyes betrayed nothing. "And?"

"And I'm now waiting for you to confirm or deny my theory."

His head tilted back and his lips compressed in a tight, slight smile. "Such a prodigious wealth of impertinence you have, my dear."

"So I'm right?"

"...No."

"So I'm wrong?"

His gaze flicked over my face, lingering momentarily on my mouth before fastening back on my eyes. Again, that extrinsic, tender look made my stomach flip. "You are...consistently unwise."

I shrugged. I had come this far without provoking his anger, and it was making me a little reckless.

"Oh, just tell me, Lucius. I promise not to be shocked."

"You should not promise what you may not perform."

"Alright then—shock me."

This time his smile had teeth. "I'm not in the habit of indulging the petty caprices of foolish young girls, Alice. Suffice it to say, 'He who plucks out this great treasure, is right-wise born worthy'."

I grimaced. I could recognise an insult when I met one, whether or not it masqueraded as a flowery quote. So somehow I'm not worthy, I thought. I tried to look like I didn't care. But I cared alright. Perhaps that's what made me say the next words, spat sullenly out before I could stop myself.

"I wonder what you did so wrong."

The smile vanished, and I gulped at the sudden chill in his eyes. "What are you speaking of, Alice?" His voice was as icy as his expression. "Be careful how you answer me."

Immediately I was reminded how cruel, how brutal the man could be. How had I forgotten of what he was capable? I recalled suddenly, with awful clarity, him throttling me, shaking me, wrenching my hair, threatening 'consequences'...

A deep shiver ran through me and I stammered, "I...I only meant..."

"Yes?"

"Well, I...I mean...I suppose that's why you won't tell me where we are," I explained, praying that
my answer fell under his definition of being 'careful.' "You must be in hiding, or...there must be some reason that you don't want me to be able to identify your whereabouts when I go home."

"Ah. When you go home," he said quietly, and I was relieved to sense the atmosphere relenting. "...Indeed."

I didn't risk saying anything more, but, to my surprise, he continued where I had trailed off. "And so you imagine I am a fugitive, do you?" He sounded almost amused, but yet there was a palpable darkness thrumming just beneath the surface levity. "I wonder what unpaid-for crimes your fertile imagination has ascribed to me, from which I'm currently 'at large'."

Staring fixedly at my plate, I shrugged noncommittally. I did not not dare to meet his gaze, lest he read in my eyes the vivid recollection that was now playing through my mind, of him shaking me brutally, snarling, "Do you know I have killed men for less than what's written on your face?"
"Will this snow never end?" I said aloud, though only to myself.

Standing by the largest window in my room, I gazed out on yet another morning of blanketing snow. The bright glare of it made my eyes smart, and I turned away with a sigh.

A whole month. A whole month had passed, and I was no closer to leaving this place, than I had been that first morning, when the first flurry of snow fell. Nor was I any closer to finding anything out about the man with whom I'd been forced to cohabit all this time. The man who consumed my thoughts and haunted my dreams. All I really knew was his name, and even that without complete certainty.

A whole month and my brain was still as damaged and devoid of memories as when I first awoke into this strange existence, running, half-frozen, through the forest and fog.

As for my body...the early scratches, cuts and marks had disappeared, and now only a few bruises remained from the event of my "prying" on the third floor. But, although I was otherwise nourished and not ill-treated, I was not really "well". My appetite waned, I felt like I couldn't breathe properly, like I needed new oxygen in my body and blood. The anxiety of the lonely nothingness in my head and the stress from bearing the hostility of my host, were taking their toll on me. I was becoming paler and thinner, and there was no sign of my menses (for which I was somewhat relieved, not having discovered any provisions for such in the bathroom-cabinet that was otherwise well-stocked with amenities). This feeling of being trapped, shut in a cage, was becoming too much for me.

I made my way downstairs to breakfast feeling strange—well, stranger than usual.

At the table, I pushed my food glumly about with a silver fork. As always, it looked delectable, but I couldn't muster an appetite. I didn't even bother making my usual clumsy noises to annoy Lucius, too preoccupied was I by the thought of what lay beyond these enclosing walls...free air, open sky...

Happening to glance up, I encountered Lucius's eyes fixed on me, but instead of the usual unpleasant sneer, his gaze was enigmatic.

I cleared my throat. "May I go outside for a walk today, please?" I asked him, careful to keep my voice polite.

"If you wish to die from exposure to the elements," he replied, without missing a beat, "far be it from me to prevent you."

I bit my lip at the callousness of his jibe, anger starting to bubble inside, alongside the frustration and boredom. "I'm so sick of being cooped up like this!" I burst out at last. "I feel like an animal in a cage!"

"That is an interesting choice of simile," he said, a sudden intensity igniting in his eyes.
"What does that even mean?" I snapped. "Why must you always talk in riddles?"

Lucius smiled. Of course, his smiles were never comforting. "Call it an appreciation of irony, my dear."

"I would sooner call it an exercise in arrogance."

"As you please."

I rolled my eyes. "It must be hard work, being you," I muttered sourly.

"How so?"

I shook my head. "Has it ever occurred to you to simply relax? To...oh, I don't know...just be nice, for once?"

"I'm quite at relaxed, I assure you."

"You must get exhausted, maintaining that level of misanthropy all the time. I can just imagine you composing your insults each night before you go to sleep."

Lucius's smile widened fractionally. "On the contrary, they occur quite naturally," he returned. "With such inspiration as is provided me, there really is no need for premeditation."

Scowling, I threw my fork down and scraped my chair back noisily, secretly relishing the clenching of masculine jaw muscles it provoked in my companion. "I'm not hungry," I announced, standing up and stretching.

"The meal is not yet over, Alice."

"Oh, really?" I said sarcastically. "Well, I've finished, but you can carry on staring at my empty chair if you like."

His eyes narrowed warningly.

"What?" I said. "It'll be a nice change for you. Give your eyeballs a rest."

"Sit down and finish your meal, Alice." His tone was patronising and parental, and it goaded me into an immature response.

"I'm sorry," I said flippantly. "I didn't realise you were my father."

Instantly, I regretted it.

Lucius jumped as if scalded, and his face went perfectly ashen. His pupils contracted to black points and his irises gleamed cold and wide, like a snake's. He rose to his feet, staring down at me with an expression appalling to behold. "WHAT?" The word was barely a whisper, but the rage behind it was...deafening.

My heart pounded fearfully. I wanted desperately to run, but I was petrified to immobility by his terrifying gaze.

The muscles in his face were actually contorting with fury and loathing and—and pain?

"Never. Never. Never say that word. Again." He half-turned away and brought his hand over his eyes, spanning temple to temple, like someone with a migraine. The jewels on his rings sparkled in
the light, and I realised his fingers were trembling. "Get out," he hissed at me. "Get out of my sight before I kill you with my bare hands, you disgusting little mud-blood bitch."

I turned and fled.

... 

I sat on the edge of my bed for the rest of the morning, shaken, shocked and numb, a hard lump in my throat making it painful to swallow.

Lunch time came and went; I stayed in my room, my stomach clenching in revulsion at the mere thought of food. His hatred...his hatred was too much for me, I couldn't cope with it, no more than I could understand it. Because I didn't hate him. How could I? He was all I knew.

In the afternoon I paced restlessly, from bed to window, window to bed, sometimes moving to the door; imagining, wrongly, that I heard his steps outside. I think I was feverish, the hours slipped by in a blur as his hateful words played over and over in my head like a broken record.

I knew that had to get out. I knew that I couldn't stay here any more.

*You have to go, Alice. If you don't get out, you'll cease to exist. You'll drown in his shadow. You have to find out who you are, before you don't care anymore.*

Evening came, and I watched the shadows gradually annex the room to night's dark domain. And then, in the hushed gloom, I quietly started to pack.

Which is to say, I pulled the thick quilt off my bed, doubled it over, wrapped it around me and used one of the curtain cords to tie it in place. I looked like a giant marshmallow and I could barely move, but I didn't care. I was well past caring.

I waited, huddled on my bed, until I was sure it was after midnight. Then I quietly slipped out of the room and padded lightly along the corridor and down the stairs. All was dim and still, the only movement coming from the candles, flickering in some slight draught.

As I approached the door I began to have serious misgivings. *You haven't thought this through, Alice*, I chided myself. *You've got bare feet. It's snowing. It's freezing. It's dark. God only knows what is out there.*

But I couldn't stop now. If I did, it would be too late.

I was close enough to reach out and touch the huge brass door-handle. Slowly, oh-so-slowly, I curled my fingers around the metal ring and twisted it to the left. I felt the catch release, and the weight of the door shifted onto my arm as it swung inwardly, silently open.

Of course, he was standing there.

His arms were braced on either side of the door-frame. His eyes were unreadable.

We didn't speak. He merely stepped forward across the threshold and I stepped backwards into the hall.

One. Two. Three more steps: he forward, me back. The door swung shut with an echoing, ominous click.

He made a slight movement and both quilt and curtain-rope fell onto the floor, around my ankles.
The absurdity of the situation was suddenly too much, and I felt a hysterical urge to burst out laughing. "Hello, Lucius," I said, and it came out as a half-choked giggle.

Lucius did not look amused, but neither did he look angry. Just...watchful. "Alice, may I request—or do I ask too much—that you give me some account as to what exactly you think you are doing?"

I was grinning so much my cheekbones hurt. I couldn't stop it. "I was running away," I said with a loud snort.

"Running away from—what, pray?"

"Oh, from you. Definitely from you," I tried to suppress a chortle, but it spluttered out anyway.

"I see."

And then I was totally out of control, just laughing and laughing and laughing until the tears ran down my cheeks. "Kkkkkkkkk—ha ha ha - ha ha haaaaaaa". I kept whooping and gasping as Lucius silently took me by the arm and pulled me along with him, back down the hall and up the stairs. He opened the door of my bedroom and pushed me inside, following behind. A fresh burst of hilarity ensued as I realised the quilt was back on the bed and the cord tied around the curtain, as if they had never left.

I didn't really feel fazed by Lucius's stare as I wheezed and panted with great, gulping sobs of laughter. I was so used to it by now.

Eventually the hysteria had run its course and I stood trembling and hollow before him, sniffling. Ow, my sides. "I don't want to stay here any more," I said miserably, dashing away the moisture from my eyes. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

I peered up at Lucius. A play of deep shadows emphasised his sharp features, and he looked about as merciful as an avenging angel. "No, Alice," he murmured. "I'm afraid I can't allow that."

My face felt numb. A horrible, suffocating realisation was descending upon me. "You never intended to let me go, did you."

"I'm not your guest. I'm your prisoner." I read the confirmation in the hardness of his eyes, in the set lines of his expression.

My mind was a whirlwind of spinning, disjointed puzzle pieces. But some of them were snapping together, as if drawn into place by some magnetic force.

"You know who I am, don't you!" I cried. "You've always known!" My voice was getting shriller. "You've been watching me d-drown in this—this blankness, this nothingness, and you've just sat back and—and enjoyed it, haven't you? Haven't you?!"

To my disbelief and rage, Lucius actually smiled, making a slight bow of assent.

I heard myself utter a cry of anguished fury and before I knew what I was doing I was leaping towards him, my hands curled into claws, intending to rake them down his perfect, beautiful, insufferable face.

It didn't happen. In my blind anger I didn't see the hit, but none-the-less I was sent flying backwards, a full several feet, colliding with the wall and dropping to the ground.

I lay there, winded, a stabbing pain in my back, unable to move or even breathe as Lucius strode
over, his face twisting with venomous ire.

He hauled me up and shoved me against the wall with such force that my head snapped back and I bit my tongue. The spurting metallic taste of blood filled my mouth, but I was still too breathless to cry out. I didn't struggle, because, simply, I couldn't. His body was plastered the length of mine, and if his superior strength had not already precluded resistance, his sheer height and weight would have easily done so.

One of his hands was around my throat, the other painfully gripping my upper arm. "Care to try that again, mudblood?" he snarled, a furious incandescence lighting his eyes.

That word again. "Don't call me that!" I cried—at least, I tried to, but my bitten tongue was swollen now, and I only managed an incoherent mumble. I felt a warm flow of blood spill down my chin and onto the hand clutching my neck. Even at such close proximity I could see the stream of bright scarlet vividly striping his strong, pale wrist.

I heard a sharp intake of breath and immediately, reflexively, Lucius pulled his hand away and wiped it down the front of my robe. His palm, hot and hard, seared through the sheer fabric of my robe and connected with the curve of my breast, brushing to instant tautness the sensitive tip—and I gasped aloud.

His gesture had been automatic, even accidental. Yet suddenly, palpably, the dynamic between us changed. It was as if my gasp had some galvanising effect on him—on both of us—and we stood, locked together in a terrible parody of a passionate embrace...then I became aware of an unmistakable rigidity pressing into my abdomen...

Our eyes met and I don't know what he read in mine, but his were plainly expressing shock, disbelief...

With a hiss of discomposure, he quickly stepped back, releasing me. I fell in an ungainly heap at his feet.

He stood over me for some moments, staring down with a fierce, riveted look in his eyes, watching me attempt to stem the flow of blood with my sleeve. Tears were running freely down my face and I knew I was a complete mess.

Then abruptly, he turned on his heels and strode out the door, slamming it behind him. I heard the echo of his booted footsteps hurrying away down the hall.

I lay curled up, unmoving, trembling with shock and pain...and something else. ...His touch had electrified me, not in the brutality of his violence, but in the startling, unforeseen force of his sudden desire...and there was no denying my own response to him. A blaze of euphoria was coursing through me: my whole body thrummed and tingled.

And through the messy jumbled confusion of my mind, I kept thinking, he knows who I am.

And suddenly, unexpectedly, I was relieved.

Relieved that someone knew, anyone. Even him.

Now I just had to get him to let me in on the secret.
All night I lay awake, unable to sleep for the dizzying confusion in my head, the relentless thudding of my heart.

I couldn't quite believe what had happened and was, as usual, inclined to doubt everything—except for the all-too-real pain in my back ribs and the throbbing of my swollen, bitten tongue. I stared into the darkness, trying to somehow tether and subdue my wildly careering thoughts.

*He knows who you are, Alice,* I thought. *At least, he appears to. Or is he just toying with you?...* Just like everything else, I couldn't be sure.

Fervently I hoped that he *did* know. For some reason I felt that if he were to reveal the truth of my identity, my memory would come flooding back, everything would make stark, sudden sense...but then, what if he didn't tell me, or he didn't know? Would I be forced to remain in this infernal darkness forever?

*He must know who you are,* I decided. It was the only rational explanation as to why he would prevent me from leaving.

...Something I had kept well-suppressed inside me was forcing its way into my consciousness—that I had *always* known that he knew who I was. That from the very moment I first saw his shocked, incandescently angry eyes, there had really been no doubt about it.

Why had I been so determinedly blind? Was it simply fear, a sort-of false device of self-preservation? That if he didn't know me, he couldn't really wish to hurt me?

Probably. Yes, in fact. From the very first, he had made me afraid of him—threatened me physically, insulted me verbally. Of course I had wanted to detach myself from personalising such hatred and contempt. I had wanted it to be his flaw, his fault. I hadn't wanted it to be about me.

*All right, Alice, then let's say he knows you. Now what?*

What did he have in store for me? Why keep me here? Did he believe I owed him something? Technically, he had saved my life—perhaps I *did* owe him something. Something more than gratitude. ...It was not inconceivable that he would think so. Or was I here to serve a purpose? To solve a problem—settle a score? Perhaps he had plans for a ransom, perhaps he had been negotiating with my family and friends all this time... My family...perhaps it was an old family feud. What had really happened?

*So, you're a prisoner...*  

I tried to understand what that actually meant. How did a prisoner act? How was I supposed to act? Had he always treated me like a prisoner, and I, subconsciously, had always acted like one?—I supposed I had, in a way. I hadn't really had much choice in the matter. Did the fact it was openly acknowledged really change anything?

What was the etiquette? What was the accepted form of interaction between captor and captive? Hopefully he wouldn't get any worse. He was already unpleasant enough as it was, with his mocking jibes, his rules, his threats, his sporadic violence. The last thing I wanted was for 'consequences' to become 'punishments.'

I thought about the traditional forms of punishment for prisoners. Beatings, torture, starvation, rape...were such things what I now had to look forward to? Was that what had happened to the wailing lady? Was I going to end up locked in the same room as her, wailing my wrongs to the unheeding walls?
Or maybe he was planning to turn me into his slave, make me call him 'Master', crawl on my knees, kiss the hem of his robe, kowtow to him... Well, *that* was never going to happen. His power over me—his physical advantage, as well as his compelling magnetism—did not, and never would, extend to my subjugation. He might be able to bully me and manipulate me, but he wasn't going to degrade me. That much I knew for certain.

*Well, what's the worst he really can do to you, Alice?* I wondered—but I didn't care to look too closely at the answer.

Escape. I had already tried and failed. But that didn't mean I couldn't try again. My hasty, fool-hardy attempt had been doomed to failure, I could see that clearly now. Perhaps I had wanted it to fail. Perhaps I had been merely trying to force some kind of crisis on my stagnant situation...and if so, it had worked. Albeit against me.

But now—now I knew that he knew who I was—I wasn't sure if I wanted to escape anymore. If I ran, I could lose the answers I was so sure he had. If I ran, I might end up in eternal blankness. But if I stayed...

...The danger lay in my frighteningly snowballing feelings for him. It was like his power had somehow wrapped its tendrils around me, at first silently entwining, and now rapidly pulling me into a place of complete, inextricable helplessness. I was falling for him.—Not falling in love—that wasn't the right word. Love couldn't be this—this *fixation*, this craving that I was experiencing, that I could no more understand than I could deny... This was more like...like hunger-pangs of an oncoming starvation...and he was the only form of sustenance available to me. Poisoned, but irresistible.

*You're a fool, Alice.*

I was clinging to him because he was all I had, he was the only thing that was real at the moment. The lighthouse in the dark. The beacon in the fog. Because if I didn't, perhaps I would never find my way out again. And yet I knew I was in danger of being dazzled by that very same light. That I could wreck myself on the rocks surrounding him.

*What is the greater risk?* I wondered.

Stay, and risk being blinded by the light?

Escape, and risk forever belonging to the fog?

...Thankfully, my fears of slavery and subjection proved to be unfounded.

Things went on pretty well the same as usual. We still sat together during my meals. We still exchanged less-than-pleasant pleasantries.

The most obvious difference was that Lucius stopped staring at me. Not that he particularly avoided eye contact, or deliberately looked elsewhere. He just didn't spend the whole time with his eyes glued to my face any longer. I suppose I ought to have viewed it as a victory, but it was rather a hollow one, for in some ways I felt I lost more than I gained. I'd been so successful in making myself irritating to him, that, as my feelings for him grew, it had become something of a subversive way to secure his full attention. I hadn't realised, until it stopped, just how much I had begun to bask in it.
God, has it come to this, Alice? I wondered. ...You actually miss his perpetual sneer?

Worse than realising that my pride was failing me, my courage appeared to be doing so, too.

I couldn't bring myself to demand the answers I was so sure he had. I couldn't bring myself to form the questions I so desperately wanted to ask. They stuck in my throat, dry lumps I could neither spit out nor swallow away, gradually constricting my vocal chords so I could hardly speak for congestion...

I hated this new reticence and could hardly understand it. It wasn't fear of his anger, for his fits and starts of violence no longer held much terror for me, beyond a certain vague apprehension of pain. Pain I could cope with.

No, it was something quite different to physical fear which held me back...it was his hatred. That was it. I didn't want him to detest me any more. Seeing his eyes glint with that unfathomably hard expression made me almost ill with anxiety. And I knew that to broach the subject of...me...would be to throw petrol onto that ever-low-burning flame of his hatred, when all I wanted to do was to stamp it out, extinguish it altogether.

And so I persuaded myself that I ought to wait. That it was the sensible, rational thing to do. I told myself that first I had to break through his shell, which I felt had been weakened by his physical reaction to me against the wall in my bedroom, and then—only then, would it be safe to pursue the secrets of my past.

So, with my complicity, we went on much as we had before.

Until one night, when everything—everything—changed.
The Guest

Chapter Notes

A/N Beta'd by the wonderful StoryWriter831. Everything belongs to JK Rowling

There was something different about this evening, I knew it even before I descended to the dining room.

Perhaps it began with the two sharp 'Cracks!' that startled me away from the mirror, where I had been trying to tame my hair in readiness for dinner. They sounded like nearby gunshots, the echo of them resounding the air, usually so still and quiet. But upon peering out the window, I could see nothing but inky dark shadow, striped with white where the inside lights spilled out upon the outside snow.

I could only suppose Lucius had decided to shoot at something, perhaps a fox or rabbit. It was the only non-alarming explanation I could muster up, despite the fact I'd never seen any sign of a shotgun in the nearly-eight weeks of my stay here.

But although I tried to shrug it off, I was unnerved. I sensed something had changed in the very atmosphere of the house, there seemed to be a kind of humming tension I could not identify, but which made my fingers tremble as I returned to finish the task of smoothing down my hair.

The feeling of strange foreboding haunted my steps all the way down to the dining room, actually increasing the nearer I approached my destination. I could feel the throb of my heart in my throat as slowly I pushed open the door...then froze on the spot, unable to quite believe what my eyes told me I was seeing.

Lucius was not alone. There was another person sitting at the mahogany table.

She, for it was a woman, was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. Not that I could actually remember any other women, but I didn't need a catalogue of comparisons to be certain that she would surpass them all.

Luminescent, almost translucently pale skin, delicately flushed like a pale rose. Lustrous, abundant hair, piled high in a coronet of raven-dark curls. Full, red mouth and features so fine they looked like the idealized imaginings of a Renaissance master-sculptor. She was young—or rather, ageless—almost shimmering with health, and brimming with a kind of poised, taut vitality. There was a tangible intensity and force about her, especially manifested in her arresting almond-shaped eyes, which scintillated like black sapphires in the light of the chandeliers.

She was dressed in what could only be described as a ballgown, the colour of midnight. It was full-skirted and swept to the floor, with a tightly-fitting bodice, the neckline of which plunged daringly to display a seductively curvaceous figure. Such a dress would make a plain woman striking; on such a stunning beauty as she, the effect was almost painfully dazzling to behold.

I was so utterly confounded that I began to back straight out of the room again, but Lucius softly commanded, "Come, mudblood—come in."
And, in a trance, in a daze, I drifted over towards them, so astonished that I hardly registered his derogatory term of address, which would usually have me up in arms.

I was struck immediately by three things. Firstly, the lovely woman was sitting in my place. Secondly, the pair were dining together: both places were set, both plates were filled. Thirdly, there was no place set for me.

Lucius beckoned me to him and my breath caught as I realised how...different he looked. His silken hair was drawn back and tied at the nape in a curiously formal way. Although his clothes were always immaculate and expensive, I could see his present attire was of an even more luxurious "evening" variety—albeit an evening belonging to some century long past. He was as resplendently handsome as she was devastatingly beautiful. As I neared, I saw that the woman's extraordinary gown was, in fact, made entirely of glossy black feathers, gleaming in the low light.

Once I would have thought both of their elaborate, antiquated costumes bizarre. Now all I saw was them. Perfect, harmonious equals.

When I reached Lucius's chair he placed a hand on my side and turned me to face his mysterious companion.

Addressing her, not me, he murmured, "Allow me to introduce you to Alice. Alice—ah, Carroll. She is...staying with me, for the time being." He did not supply her name to me.

I don't know what I expected—that she would offer some kind of greeting? At least make a basic acknowledgement of my sentience?—But she did neither. The woman's dark eyes travelled slowly over me, over my whole body, taking in my gauzy, thin bathrobe, lingering on my bare feet, my tangled locks, my unmade-up face.

I felt myself blushing to the roots of my hair. To be confronted and scrutinized by two such exquisite examples of masculine and feminine grace, in all their rich finery and elegance, was a mortification I was ill-equipped to bear.

Suddenly, the woman's eyes flicked up to meet my own and my blood turned to ice as I saw her pupils dilate horribly, enlarging until there were no whites left in them, only terrifying, glittering blackness. The same nightmarish feeling swooped over me which I had experienced when the portrait in the hallway had hissed at me, or when I heard the wailing behind the third-floor door. It was something like knowing real terror. Hair-raising, bone-chilling terror. My legs started to wobble, and my breathing constrict.

I felt Lucius's hand grip me a little tighter, steadying me.

But then her gaze left my face, I blinked once and saw that her dark irises were perfectly normal. My terror evaporated, replaced by confusion as I wondered what the matter was with me to imagine such a thing. She wasn't horrible. She was beautiful. Too, too beautiful.

The woman turned to Lucius, and a gradual, sultry smile curled her ruby lips. "Charming," she said. "Most...befitting."

Lucius made a slight nod of agreement.

"Alice, my dear, go and sit over there." His voice was supremely dismissive as he pointed to a place near the fire.

Like an automaton, I did as he bid.
I had been so unprepared for such a thing to happen: for the population of my world to be—so suddenly and without warning—just doubled like that. It robbed me entirely of my self-possession, my very sense. I was completely blind-sided.

All I could think was, how can anyone be so beautiful? They both are. They're both so beautiful.

And while the pair dined, my eyes went back and forth, back and forth, between the half-profile of the man and the quarter-profile of the woman. I just sat there staring and staring and staring. Everything around them had dissolved into soft-focus, and there was a muffled thudding in my ears, which I dully registered as my own heartbeat.

Gradually the haziness began to clear, and I found myself tuning into their conversation.

The woman was part-way through a question. "—notice it displaying any sign of its former...precociousness?"

Lucius chuckled urbanely. "None at all," he replied. "Although it appears to have an ingrained tendency to inquisitiveness, I grant you."

"I'm certain it does," rejoined the lady. "Such predilection may be observed in any monkey."

"Indeed.—Although a monkey has no delusions of grandeur, nor pretensions to greatness."

"And so the muggle slips inexorably down the rung, below its tree-dwelling cousin." She laughed prettily. "But this one, at least, will not be nurturing such impudent aspirations." She laughed again, then sighed. "How I've missed our tête-à-têtes, Lucius. ...This reminds me of happier days—long, long ago. Before everything...happened."

Although I could not understand the drift of their discussion, I felt a pang at hearing his name on her lips. It sounded so intimate and easy—not at all like my faltering, awkward attempts at addressing him. ...Could that be his wife? I wondered, with a second pang. He had said he no longer had a wife. But they looked so compatible. Almost...inevitable.

Lucius took a sip of wine, and even at this distance I could see his eyes caressing and complimenting the woman in such a way that they had never done when fixed on me. And, to my dismay and chagrin, I felt a lump forming in my throat, and hot tears pricking my eyes.

"Remember what fun we used to have?" she continued. "Oh, Lucius, I do hope you have some lovely designs in store for it. You always had such a...creative flair for amusing yourself—and your friends—with those pitiful creatures."

He smiled. "I was younger then."

"Does creativity dull with age?"

"No, it merely refines. I am not so easily gratified. My tastes tend to exploits more...subtle and prolonged."

Another tinkling laugh. "What luck that you find yourself in the position to indulge them, then."

"For that, I can only thank you."

"When the time comes, I doubt not that you will." She paused, then in a low voice she murmured, "You know I'm taking a great risk in coming here, Lucius."
He replied by taking her hand and brushing it briefly with his lips. I felt myself trembling. Those lips—to me, only ever the conveyors of countless cruel words—imparting something so gentle and reverential as a kiss?

...An intricately tangled knot of emotions twisted my stomach: a terrible longing, born of the emptiness of my alien existence—a hopeless desire, to be acknowledged, to be respected, to not be hated—and a gnawing envy, as I watched these unattainable things being paraded before my eyes... How I craved to feel such things. How he had made me crave such things...

Suddenly the woman's back straightened and she made a little noise of pleasure. "Oh! It's the Dragon Waltz! It was once a favourite of mine."

Only then did I realize that the sound of supple, dreamy piano music was gently rippling throughout the room. I was in such a daze I hadn't noticed it before.

With an amused, playful smile—such as I had not believed him capable—Lucius stood and held out his hand to her. "Shall we shun convention and have this dance?" he said. The woman sprang gracefully up to meet him, and in one impossibly elegant motion, he spun her into his arms.

Get up and leave this room, I said to myself. There's the door. Walk over to it, and leave them to it. You're not wanted here.

But I couldn't. I couldn't do it.

They danced beautifully, naturally. Although the space was not large, somehow the floor seemed to augment, the lights to dim, the volume of the music to increase...it was mesmerizing. Enchanting. But then I couldn't see any more, because my foolish, foolish tears were now fully fledged and escaping down my cheeks.

The feminine laugh rang out again, but this time it sounded metallic and derisive. "Look, Lucius. There seems to be something the matter with it."

There was a pause, then I heard Lucius reply, "It makes a spectacle of itself with tiresome regularity."

They're not talking about you, Alice, I thought. They can't be. They just can't.

But it seemed that they could, and they were. When I dashed away the tears from my eyes they stood side by side, hand in hand, gazing down at me like I was some kind of circus sideshow freak.

"Maybe it wants to dance," the woman said. "Go on, Lucius, ask the little mudblood to dance. I want to see it try."

For a second I thought I saw Lucius's eyelids flicker warily, as if he were trying to calculate or interpret her motives. Then he stepped forward, grabbed my wrists and pulled me roughly up against him, and began to swing me around the floor, bathrobe, bare feet and all.

The humiliation was sickening. I could hear the woman giggling, and Lucius himself was smiling down at me in a hard, horrid way. His steps were lithe and assured, but deliberately complex and fast, and there was no way I could keep up with him. I stumbled clumsily about, totally unable to gain my centre of balance, dragged and tugged this way and that, feeling more like a rag doll than a real person. And I hated him for it.

"Let me go," I said through clenched teeth, my face burning. I tried to wrench myself out of his grip, but it seemed he expected this, for he held me very tightly, bruisingly.
"No," he murmured. The light caught his eyes in such a way that for the first time I noticed his silver irises were sharply edged by a fine, slate-dark outer ring. "I enjoy dancing with you."

"Let me go this instant or I'll—"

"You'll what, my dear?"

"I'll tell her everything," I hissed. "How you're keeping me here against my will. How I'm your prisoner."

"She will be most gratified to learn it, I assure you."

I blinked, suddenly unsure. He must be bluffing, I thought. And, determined not to let my courage fail me yet again, I stared straight into his eyes and loudly spoke out, "This man has kidnapped me and I ask that you notify the police immediately."

The burst of laughter from both of them was not the reaction I'd hoped for. "I'm not j-joking!" I cried furiously, fuelled by shame and bitter rage. "He really is keeping me here against my will!"

"But what an impertinent little puppet!" I heard the woman exclaim. "Hold it tight, Luci, I'm going to—"

—And then I was screaming uncontrollably, my body had been doused in petrol and set alight, and I was being hacked at with knives, and sawn with ragged-toothed blades—or was I being boiled in oil?—torn by wolves, gouged by razor-sharp claws—

And then it just stopped.

I fell against Lucius, all my muscles convulsing, retching helplessly, a cold sweat drenching my body. I was making strange whimpering noises, like a wounded dog.

"Oh, how disgusting, it seems to have wet itself."

Lucius made a quiet tsk-ing sound and let me fall to the floor.

She's right, Alice, I realized, you have wet yourself. But I was too faint and far-away to care, and I simply curled up, closed my eyes and just shivered and shivered.

I heard Lucius say, "You do not deem it unwise—?"

"Only obliviation needs to be avoided," the woman replied brightly. "Its memory is weakened to the last point before total irretrievability. Its body, however..."

And then I was writhing and shrieking again, this time I was being shredded and skinned alive, broken glass was driving under my skin, iron nails rammed into my flesh, my bones were being smashed, crushed, crushed—and was that acid being poured into my eyes, down my throat? And fire—fire again, consuming flames, blistering, charring my body—

No human, no living thing, was meant to bear such pain, such agony. My screams seemed to be getting further away—I was tumbling down a dark hole—my arms stretching upwards—and for a split second all the pain fell away and in the empty stillness I saw strong, slim fingers reaching down to catch my hand...I heard the echo of a voice whispering, HOLD ONTO ME...

But then my body simply shut itself down and delivered me to blissful blackness.
I drifted in and out of consciousness.

The hum of lively conversation seeped into my brain...then blackness...then the sound of convivial laughter...then blackness again...

Gradually the episodes of blackness subsided and I regained full awareness. My body ached all over, like I was suffering the after-effects of a severe cramp, but in every single muscle of my entire body. I was terribly, terribly weak and my temples were pounding wretchedly.

I neither moved nor spoke, for fear of another—another what? I wondered. Another seizure? Is that what had happened?

Through the throbbing in my head, I registered the chime of crystal glasses and the sound of low, amiable discourse, and I realised that the sophisticated two-person soirée continued, seemingly unhindered by my prostrate presence.

*Don't mind me,* I thought bitterly. *I'll just stay here on the floor, half-dead, wracked with pain and soaked in my own pee—but do please continue enjoying yourselves...*

*...You're a fucking prick, Lucius. Letting me lie here like this.*

I couldn't quite believe he was being so callous. I always knew he was a cold customer and often a cruel one, but I hadn't credited him with this level of hardheartedness. It hadn't crossed his mind to take me to hospital, then, despite the fact I had suffered an obvious trauma? And it wasn't because the roads were impassable, because *she* had got here, hadn't she?

Something so terrible happened to me that I had literally passed-out with pain, but there he was, eating his dinner and playing the charming host, like it was the most natural thing in the world for an unconscious girl to be lying on his dining room floor. ...Maybe it was. Maybe he made a habit of it. Maybe this was some sick, perverted sex-game he and that—*that Woman* played, to get them in the mood. Was that it?

I winced, remembering the intolerably insulting way she had spoken—not *to* me, but *about* me—as if I were brain-dead, as if I didn't count as an actual, breathing, thinking person.

*Who the hell does she think she is, calling me 'it', like I'm a dog or something?*

*And who the hell are you, Lucius? Who the fucking hell are YOU?*

I went through a list of suitable words to describe the man. *Pig, arsehole, son-of-a-bitch, bastard, bastard, bastard BASTARD.* And because there's wasn't a noun to really do justice to how I felt about him, I began crying again—but silently, silently.

What had happened to my body? Where had that incredible, unendurable pain come from? Had my appendix burst, or I had a stroke or something? ...But no, it was something to do with the woman, she had told Lucius to hold me tight and then—and then just *agony.* What had she done?

There was a scraping of chairs and I quickly closed my eyes, although I was facing away from them anyway. I heard them remove from the room, there was a bustling in the hall—him helping her on with her coat, soft laughter and the sound of the heavy entrance door opening and shutting.
With a groan of effort, I forced my protesting body off the cold, hard floor, and clutching the nearest chair, I dragged myself to my feet. The bathrobe was stiff and chafing my legs. I looked down at the obvious wet patch and the silent tears of hurt turned into earnest sobs of shame. "It makes a spectacle of itself with tiresome regularity." That's what he had said. And that's exactly what I had done.

I wanted to simply disappear. The adage about wishing the floor would swallow me up suddenly made perfect sense.

Well, no way was I waiting around for him to come back and humiliate me further.

Slowly, cringing with pain, I hobbled over to the door, opened it a fraction and peered out into the hall. The coast was clear. I wondered if Lucius was seeing her to her car. Or perhaps they were spending the night somewhere, together. I hope they skid in the snow and crash, I thought. I hope they maim their insufferable faces.

As swiftly as my seized-up muscles would allow, I limped along the hall and dragged myself up the stairs, never stopping my shuffling, painful steps until I had reached the sanctuary of my own room. As soon as the door was shut my legs gave way and I slid down against the oak panel. For some time I just stayed like that, hunched over, shocked to incapacity, one hand still grasping the brass handle above me like a drowning person clinging to a rock...

I was shivering violently, gasping for breaths between the silent sobs wracking my body, my hot, tear-streaked face pressed against the solid cool surface of the door. And all I could think was, how could he? How could he?

And then I was blindly stumbling over to the mirror.

Don't look, Alice, I pleaded with myself desperately. You'll only regret it.

But of course I looked. And of course I regretted it.

Today's bathrobe had been a dove-grey hue, the worst colour for showing up wetness. There was no mistaking the large dark patch discolouring both front and back panels. My hair was a fright, somehow both frizzy and straggly, although I had taken care to tame it before I went down to dinner. As for my face, it was ashen, marred with ugly blotches from crying. There was an odd expression in my eyes...a kind of strained, frozen horror beneath the swollen, red lids...

I shuddered with self-disgust.

I thought about the woman, how she looked, dancing with Lucius: graceful and superb and so right. Then I thought how I must have looked to her, barely dressed and barefoot, staggering and tripping ridiculously, a jarring incongruous joke. And that was before I wet myself.

Sick to the heart, I turned my back on my mockery-of-a-reflection and limped through to the ensuite.

As usual, the bath was full and hot. I clambered numbly in, bathrobe and all. I wanted to wash away the evidence of my shame. If only I could wash away the memory of it too, consign it to the darkness where the rest of my memories were locked so securely away.

I closed my eyes and let the hot water cradle me...gradually relaxing and unwinding my fraught, warped muscles...But I couldn't relax or unwind my fraught, warped mind. I kept replaying everything, over and over: them dining—dancing together—insulting me—forcing me to dance like a circus animal—her scornful laughter—his cruel smile—then that pain, that pain, that earth-shattering pain...
And you thought you weren't afraid of pain, Alice, I sneered at myself. Turns out it's pretty high up on your rather-long list of 'Things To Most Definitely Be Afraid Of.'—Oh, and you might like to add 'Incontinence' and 'Utter Humiliation' to that list.

The worst thing about the pain was not knowing where it had come from. If it was something he had done to me, or she had done to me, or I had done to myself. Or if, for that matter, it was all in my brain. My damaged, unreliable, miserable brain.

I hauled myself up to stand. The sodden material of my bathrobe clung to my body like a second skin and I peeled it off and balled it up. For a few moments I stared at it, a kind of burning rage and despair building up inside me. Then, with a sudden explosive screech, I threw it savagely across the room, into the farthest corner.

Standing there, naked and dripping, stripped of the loathsome garment, I felt suddenly stronger. Freer.

I looked at the clean robe hanging on the towel-stand—a pretty lavender one, all ready and pressed and dry—and I experienced an intense wave of nausea. I hated it. What it represented. My helplessness. My worthlessness. And suddenly my mind was made up. Never, never again was I going to wear another bathrobe as long as I lived.

Damn Lucius. Damn his secrecy, damn his rules. And double damn his 'consequences.' So, he was out gallivanting with his lady-friend was he?—Well, good for him. Good for them.

I was glad he was out of the house. Out of the way.

I was going in search of clothes.

I wound one of the large towels around me and tucked it firmly in place. My body was still shaking from the agony that had recently wracked it, but a rush of adrenaline was flowing through, dulling the residual pain and spurring me into animation and under its emboldening influence, I ventured out of my room.

Once in the corridor, I decided to be methodical. Starting on this floor, I would try each door I came to, going left and continuing around.

The first one was locked. I rattled and twisted the handle to no avail. I even tried shoving my shoulder against the wood, as if I had a hope of breaking the hinges with my inadequate frame. But I was still too sore and weak to keep that up for very long and soon I moved on to the next one. There were three more doors on my side of the passage, but all proved impenetrable as the first.

I reached the end of the passage and turned to try the doors along the opposite side. Like the others, the next door I came to was shut, but it wasn't a lock that prevented me from opening it. There was a very strange...sensation, a kind of cushion of air which actually stopped my hand from touching the door handle.

What on earth? I wondered. ...Is this even possible? I tried again, quickly dashing my hand out, but with the same result. I simply couldn't penetrate the invisible wall.

I stared at it for a while. Maybe it was some kind of high-tech security system using a magnetic-field, or something? ...Had such a thing actually been invented? And why this door? What was so important about this door that it warranted something other than a simple lock? ...Could it
be...his room?

On impulse I brought up my hands and tried pressing them palm-forward into the cushion of air. "Just...open, damn you," I whispered. My palms were tingling strangely, and I could feel the air stirring...indenting...almost bending...

I leaned in, closing my eyes. My hands were really hot now...burning rather than tingling...and I was certain they were slowly breaching whatever it was that was shielding the door.

_Open open open open open open open open open open open open open op—_

There was a brief whooshing sensation, and I suddenly collided with the oak panelling. Gasping, I quickly went for the handle again. This time my hand closed around it, turned it and the door clicked off its catch. "Yes!" I hissed, a rush of triumph coursing through me. Not such a sophisticated security system, after all.

Momentarily I stood still, listening for sounds of Lucius returning, but all was perfectly quiet and dark. Believing I had, in all probability, been abandoned for the evening, I slipped in through door and closed it gently behind me.

It was his bedroom. I knew it instinctively and with complete conviction. It smelt like him—that unmistakable, expensive, masculine scent he exuded. A sumptuous chamber fit for a prince. Velvet, brocade and silk. Ebony, mahogany and walnut. Silver, crystal and marble.

Imposing, grand and uncompromising.

Like him.

I was immediately struck by the absence of portraits on the walls. It seemed strange, considering the rest of the house was so crammed with them. Then again, there were several large mirrors to make up for the shortage of paintings. Clearly Lucius's vanity was in no danger of wasting away through neglect.

The bed was almost preposterously large, daunting, even. Like a fort. It was hard to imagine it as a place of repose, let alone one of tender intimacy. I seriously doubted any visitor to those plush sheets would have much say in what went on between them. ...Despite myself, despite my bitter fury with the man, I felt the colour rise to my cheeks, as certain images arose vividly to mind. I grimaced angrily at myself. This terrifying power he had over me...it had to stop...

"It is stopping," I said aloud. "Right now."

I took a deep breath, determined to focus. Right, I thought. Clothes.

It was hardly surprising that the wardrobes were many and large. Deliberately, I marched over to the nearest one and tugged open the door.

_Bingo!_ It was full of shirts. White, black, silver, green, burgundy. Mostly white though, and no two the same. Some outlandishly frilled, some intricately embroidered, all fashioned from the most luxurious of costly fabrics.

I took out one of a plainer design, a kind of long tunic and quickly slipped it over my head, afraid my courage would fail me if I hesitated. It came down almost to my knees. I pulled my towel off from underneath it and just revelled in the lavishness, the _substantialness_ of the rich, heavy twill against my bare skin, after so long in flimsy silk.
It smelt very pleasantly and subtly of him, but I was not going to let that unsettle me.

I turned to the next wardrobe. This one contained hanger after hanger of neatly pressed black trousers. I selected a pair at random and stepped into them. They were absurdly big, like oversized clown pants and I actually nearly giggled when I beheld myself in the mirror lining the open door. I rolled the cuffs up at the ankles, folded over the waist and then executed a celebratory pirouette. It was just so glorious to be wearing actual clothes again.

I felt a sudden surge of...power, knowing how recklessly insubordinate I was being, after his callous, careless treatment of me. Too long I had danced meekly along to his tune, and what had I got? Precisely zilch. Negative zilch, if you counted my gradually eroding confidence and self-esteem, slowly withering away under his continued contempt, insults and threats. Then add to that the humiliation and pain I had endured tonight...I was glad he had left me lying there on the ground, wet through and barely conscious. It was the wake-up call I needed.

With an almost painful clarity I realised that the feelings I had developed for him—that he had forced me to feel, by keeping me in isolation, confusion and fear—were as unsubstantial and demeaning as the silk robes he had me wear. Attractive and sensual, but really only serving to keep me in my place. Helpless. Tame. Which I suppose was what he had intended all along. He had woven me into a web of infatuation, wherein every attempt to struggle only bound me tighter...but I wasn't going to entangle myself any more, while he sat back and waited for me to stop moving...

I could tear myself out of such a web. I must tear myself out.

My despairing rage was fast converting into a frenzy of rebellious glee. I wrenched open door after wardrobe door, pulling on garments as I went—socks, cashmere jersey, satin waistcoat, white evening scarf... Coming to the last, tallest wardrobe, my eyes widened at the impressive array of exquisitely tailored robes, capes and cloaks...I freed a heavy velvety cape and wrapped it around me. It was very thick and warm and suddenly I thought, You could escape in this, Alice. Really escape. You could survive in the snow. You could.

The thought brought me to an immediate standstill. I was panting a little and my expression in the mirror was rather wild. This could be my only opportunity to run...my jailer away, warm clothes at my disposal...

I hurried over to the window and peered out into the darkness. I could see very little: just a dark world of inky shadows edged by slivers of moonlit snow...I could do it. I could run back across the moor to the forest and then follow its edge until I came to a road, or a house, or...

Do it. Just do it. Go on.

My blood seemed to surge through me. Before I knew what I was doing, I was already halfway across the room, headed towards the door through which I had come. But a few feet from the threshold I lurched to a stop.

Wait, wait, wait! I thought. You found clothes, but what about clues? Clues about YOU?

There were several items of furniture I hadn't even looked at yet: the large walnut dressing-table near the bed, the ancient, domed casket in the corner. The tall mahogany bureau next to the window. They all looked likely to contain things other than clothes. More important than clothes.

I couldn't leave yet, not until I had at least attempted an investigation.

Indecision and frenzy melted away, leaving me curiously detached, but equally determined. I took a
couple of steadying breaths, then moved back over to the dressing table. With slightly-trembling hands, I drew open the drawer directly under the highly-polished top. I gasped. It was absolutely brimming with glittering jewelry.

Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised, remembering the seemingly-endless variety of sparkling cravat-pins, rings, cuff-links, and lapel-jewels I had seen Lucius wear. But I just hadn't been prepared for quite such a horde. It was like a treasure-trove belonging to an extremely fastidious pirate.

I picked up a huge brooch in the shape of a snake's head, fashioned from emeralds and pearls. I had seen Lucius wear it once before and it had suited him, it had looked...normal, befitting. Up close, I realised that the massive gems were almost hideously ostentatious. In a kind of awed daze, I pinned the brooch to the neckline of my tunic, trying to imagine the kind of wealth of arrogance and arrogance of wealth that one would have to have, to be able to wear such a thing without compunction, as part of one's everyday attire. *That* was the kind of man he was.

I slid the drawer closed and drew open the one directly below. This compartment was lined in cushioned silk, but rather than jewelry it contained an assortment of boxes: one of engraved silver, one of black leather, an ebony box with ivory inlay and three smaller boxes covered in dark velvet.

I opened the velvet ones first. One was empty and the other two contained watches—not the normal sort with straps, but the kind with long chains and hinged cases, *fob-watches*, I thought they were called. They were beautiful, but not, I thought, relevant to my search.

Next I turned my attention to the silver box, but it would not open, despite there being no obvious lock. I moved on to the black leather one. It was very long and narrow, but the quilted interior was empty. I wondered what it usually contained. A letter-opener, or slender dagger...or perhaps, that slim baton of wood which he had threatened me with the time he caught me up on the third floor...

My hands hovered over the last box—the ebony one—but I hesitated to open it. Unaccountably, my fingers began to tremble. For some reason I didn't really want to touch it, perhaps because the design of the ivory inlay reminded me of a human skull... *It's probably empty anyway*, I told myself. *And you can't NOT look inside it*. Quickly, I grasped the lid and snapped it open.

It was *not* empty.

It was the necklace. *My* necklace. The one Lucius had ripped off my neck on that first day—the small bird's skull pendant.

But *that* didn't hold my attention for long. Because folded over and tucked into the back of the box was what appeared to be a clipping from a newspaper. It was creased in such a way I could see only the caption and the top third of the photo. The caption read *TRAGEDY AT TRAINING COLLEGE*. The monochromatic photo showed a group of smiling young men and women in what looked like graduation gowns—and, unless my eyes were deceiving me—and I seriously believed they must be—the photo was actually moving: the people were silently laughing and chatting with each other.

And one of them was *me*.

I blinked several times. Shaking and incredulous, I reached for the slip of paper and began to draw it out from the drawer.

As I did, several things happened, in quick succession.

There was a loud cracking sound—the drawer slammed on my fingers—I howled in pain. Lucius was all over me.
"HOW DID YOU GET IN HERE?"

Lucius grabbed my shoulders and thrust me over the dressing-table, shoving my face so hard down onto its surface that my cheekbone made a nasty cracking sound as it collided with the glossy walnut top. It was painful, but nothing to the agony of my fingers crushed in the drawer. I wailed incoherently, unable to think for the pain. The first shattering impact had rendered me winded and nauseous, but now his impellent weight was forcing my own body against the drawer-jam and I could both feel and hear my bones cracking and splintering—any more pressure and they would surely detach.

My wail rose in decibel and pitch to a piercing scream, but then he wrenched me backwards, releasing me from my snare and sending me sprawling onto the floor some feet away from him.

My fingers throbbed so excruciatingly that I shoved them in my mouth all at once, but Lucius was already striding over to me and I was forced to scrabble away. My be-socked feet kept slipping on the highly polished oak flooring and I only succeeded in propelling myself a couple of feet backwards before he was crouching over me and dragging me up by the front of my—his—clothes.

"Tell me how you got in," he snarled, his knuckles pressing bruisingly into my chest where he grasped the bunched material in his fists.

But I couldn't form a reply: the world was on spin-cycle, my fingers were on fire and my head lolled back like a broken-necked bird's.

I heard him growl with anger; he slapped my face sharply, but not hard, although it hurt my bruised cheekbone. "Answer my question, mud-blood!" he demanded, with a second stinging smack.

"What question?" I mumbled. My fingers, my fingers. The pain was so overwhelming I wasn't quite sure how I was going to deal with it.

"How did you enter this room?"

I frowned blearily, trying to filter his words through the blanketing pain. "Through th-the—the door." My fingers. God help me.

For a moment he looked like he would like to strike me in earnest, but he restrained himself and through clenched teeth he said, "Yes, through the door. Of course, through the door. How did you open the door?"

I tried to remember. It seemed like something I'd done years ago, not within the last hour or so.

But then I forgot to answer the question, because—because—my fingers again. My fingers, my fingers...I brought them up in front of my eyes and cried out with horror, my whole body beginning to quake violently. They didn't look like fingers at all, they looked like squashed caterpillars—purple and black, bloody, mashed, flat, broken. Some nails were missing, several others were split and
"Help me," I choked out, staring up at Lucius, just trying to somehow reach him through the haze of agony. "The pain. I can't. Please."

His expression was impassive and I thought, he's not going to help you, Alice. He hates you, remember? But then he half-turned away, murmuring something I couldn't hear, then moments later he was pulling me up into the crook of his arm and holding a small vial to my lips. "Drink," he commanded softly.

I would have drunk poison at that point, if I knew it would numb my fingers. Obediently I opened my mouth and let him tip the liquid in. It was very bitter and made my tongue and throat prickle—but then wonderfully, miraculously, the pain slowly began to reverse, to unwind, spinning into itself like a self-consuming vortex, diminishing and subsiding, until it simply disappeared...and I could see, could breathe, could think again.

"Thank you," I whispered, relaxing, almost nestling against him—willing, in my euphoric relief, to dismiss from my mind the fact that he was the cause of my pain in the first place.

I wasn't allowed to get too comfortable though. Lucius stood up quickly, tipping me unceremoniously back on to the floor. "Clearly it's the only way I'm going to get a word of sense out of you," he drawled, moving back to the dressing table.

Oh, that's right, I thought. You're a bastard who doesn't give a shit about me. Thanks for reminding me.

I clambered shakily to my feet and watched as he slid the drawer smoothly back to click into place, blood visibly smeared on its outer veneer. I met his gaze in the reflection of the mirror above it. "You may answer my question now, Alice," he said. "How did you enter this room?"

I couldn't quite make out if he were still angry...his voice was calm, but those eyes...I licked my lips dryly. It felt so strange to be at one moment in utter agony, the next to be quite pain-free. It was disorienting: that disjointed feeling of stumbling out of a dark room into blazing sunlight. Concentrate, Alice. "Um—I pressed my hands against that air...air-shield," I told him truthfully, for I could see no real reason to lie. "And it just disappeared."

He turned to face me and I noticed that his face was quite pale. "The door?"

"The air. It disappeared and then I opened the door, in the usual way."

He was watching me intently, piercingly, though not with his customary sneer. "And why, may I ask, did you—for the second time, and against my explicit warning—decide to breach the conditions of your...stay?"

If I needed a reminder that I had much greater cause to be angry with him, than he with me, then that last word did the trick.

"My 'stay'?
"The expulsion of that enormous pain had left a great space within me, which was quickly filling up with a deluge of fury. "As in, my enjoyable little visit here? My pleasant sojourn amongst kind friends?—Come on, Lucius, let's call a spade a spade. My custody! My imprisonment!"

With his hair drawn back Lucius's features seemed sharper, even more severe than usual. I quailed a little under his icy stare, half expecting him to lash out at me again. But he merely pursed his lips and said, "Call it what you will, it does not change the fact that you deliberately disobeyed me—yet again."
I glanced down at my hands, blissfully numb, but still horribly misshapen and broken. My rage swelled, then solidified.

"Of course I did!" I spat, anger absolutely trumping fear. "You forced me to, didn't you? I've been sitting back all this time like a perfect idiot, just waiting for you to throw me the tiniest scrap of information about who the hell I am, and what the hell I'm doing here—and you've given me nothing. Nothing. The only thing I have from you are these!"—I held up my poor, mangled hands —"AND A ROYAL PAIN IN MY ARSE."

I knew my words would incense him, but I couldn't stop myself; I wished, I needed, to hurl all my frustration, hurt and infuriation at him before my courage failed me, or he inevitably put a physical stop to it.

Lucius's eyes narrowed, glittering dangerously. "You risk much speaking that way to me," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, go on, threaten me some more, you bully!" I snarled at him. "What do I have to lose by breaking your stupid rules, Lucius? Nothing. I have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. I know that you know who I am—there's a picture of me in that drawer you mashed my hands up in!" He was no longer pale, but lividly white. It was a sure sign of violence to follow, but I plunged recklessly on: "But since you're too much of a coward—or maybe just an arsehole—to tell me anything, then obviously I'm going to have to find it out for myself—"

"Be silent!" he hissed warningly.

"I WON'T!" I had finally found my tongue after so long: the floodgates had opened, and nothing was going to stop me now: not the look on his face, not the fact that he was advancing threateningly towards me, or that I was having to dance speedily out of reach. The words tumbled out in an unstoppable torrent: "At the very least you could have the decency to tell me what I did to you that was so terrible that you treat me like THIS!—Yes, and while we're on the subject, you might like to enlighten me as to what it was that evil cow did to me in the dining room this evening—"

"I warn you, mud-blood—"

"Deserved that too, did I? Gosh, I must really have messed both your lives up at some point—"

"You will be silent—"

"—to make you want to hurt me that badly, to—to behave so viciously to me, like—like vicious animals—"

"You will not continue—"

"—not to mention whatever you've done to that poor lady you've got locked away upstairs—"

"SILENCE!"

"I suppose one of them must be your wife, though I wouldn't presume to venture which—"

He lunged forward and struck me hard across my cheek. I staggered back a few steps, slipping and nearly toppling over. Twisting awkwardly, I managed to maintain my balance and I straightened up, cradling my cheek, glaring at my assailant. "Why don't I just stick my hands back in that drawer and you can have another go, you pig?" I said, in a voice low and shaking.

"Do not tempt me," Lucius replied testily. He was breathing hard and a strand of his long hair had
come loose from its binding.

He took a steadying breath, deliberately composing himself. He tucked the loose strand carefully behind his ear, then adjusted the wrists of his shirt, straightening them beneath the wide cuffs of his black jacquard tailcoat. When he finally looked at me again, he appeared quite calm. "Now..." His voice was smooth and light, as if we had been engaging in no more than a polite chat. "You will take off every single item of clothing belonging to me."

A sudden sickening fear clawed at my heart, but I held his eyes determinedly, defiantly. "No."

His mouth curved into a thorny smile and I knew he sensed a crack in my courage. "But yes, my dear. Come, Alice. Either you will execute the task yourself, or I will do it for you. And please believe I will not take kindly to being forced to perform such a chore."

I did believe him. But I sure as hell was not about to back down now. "What's wrong with you?" I spat.

He took a step towards me. "Oh, there's nothing wrong with me, my dear. You may begin with the brooch."

"Why don't you just tell me why you hate me so much?"

Another step and he was close enough to touch me, though he didn't. He leaned in and murmured, "The brooch, Alice."

I held up my ruined, useless hands. "I can't, Lucius. You broke my fingers, remember?" In an elaborately polite voice I continued: "You do remember, don't you? It was about three minutes ago, we were standing over by that dresser—I say "standing" but of course what I actually mean—"

"Would you like another slap, mud-blood?" Lucius cut in roughly.

"Oh, yes please," I returned sarcastically. "But only if hitting a girl makes you feel all big and powerful."

We stood, eyes interlocked and sparking with reciprocal rage—not touching, and yet somehow clashing, gnashing, colliding.

A strange look flickered over Lucius's features, similar to his expression after our altercation against my bedroom wall...a kind of abrasive, resentful desire...so thoroughly interlaced with abhorrence and loathing as to be more offensive than complimentary.

My breath caught as I sensed a dangerous new dynamic in the air...but then he dropped his gaze, and, stooping over me, he began to unpin the heavy jewel from the neckline of my shirt. He was gentle, unexpectedly so. As he released the catch his fingers brushed my bare skin, it seemed caressingly, sending goosebumps all over my body.

I stood absolutely still, cursing my surging blood, my racing pulse. As usual, his near proximity was playing havoc with my senses, and I simply could not control my body's almost chemical reaction to his physical presence, to the electrifying charge he radiated...

After his heavy-handed brutality, his suddenly-soft touch had a lulling, almost tranquilizing effect.

"Please, Lucius," I whispered, my face mere inches from his. I could feel the warmth of his breath on my neck. "Just tell me my name."
His mouth hardened and he did not answer. Instead, he freed the brooch and raised his arm, at first I thought to touch my face—but then I realised he was reaching over to place the jewel on the tall bureau just behind me. Still avoiding my gaze, he brought both hands up to my collar bone, and, hooking his thumbs under the edges of the heavy cape, he slid it off my shoulders.

I felt the costly material billow around my ankles. Wincing regretfully at the uselessness of twenty-twenty hindsight, I thought: *There goes your chance for escape. You should have just run for it.*

I didn’t quite know what I was going to do. Obviously I wasn’t going to let the man strip me naked. Sweet-talk? Beg? Negotiate? A kick in a sensitive area?

There was a brief tug on the back of my neck, as Lucius pulled away the white opera-scarf, again letting it drop in a pile at my feet. There was a palpable, wired tension in his body, like a tiger ready to spring. I realised we were both waiting for me to react in some way. And neither of us quite knew what to expect.

*How many layers, Alice?* I wondered. ...*How many layers before you crack?*

"Lucius," I whispered again, afraid to speak louder, lest he hear the quiver of desperation in my voice. "*Why* won't you tell me my name?"

Still no reply. Encircling both my wrists with one strong hand, he lifted my arms slowly above my head, using his other hand to peel the cashmere jersey up and over. Momentarily I was blinded and bound by the plush material and the intense vulnerability of my situation left me flushed and trembling when at last he freed me from it.

I was almost paralysed with indecision and confusion. It was too, too much like a bedroom ritual, an act performed by lovers—but it was *not* an act of love, it was one of *hate*; an unsoundable, incomprehensible hate, spun through and through with delicately twisted skeins of desire...

After his extreme, blazing violence and rage, I wondered if Lucius was really as in control of himself as he now appeared. Somehow I doubted it. It was always so close to the surface, his anger, like smouldering coal hidden beneath a layer of bone-dry tinder. One spark was all it ever took.

His fingers were working open the buttons of the satin waistcoat, leisurely, I felt—tauntingly.

Still I could not bring myself to react. *What's the worst he can do, Alice? He can't very well hurt or humiliate you more than he already has. Unless. No. He can't be intending to—to—*

The waistcoat fluttered to the floor. Only the shirt, trousers and socks remained and I was excruciatingly aware that beneath them I was completely naked.

As if reading my thoughts, as too often he accurately did, Lucius drawled, "Tell me, Miss Carroll...do you think it *wise* for a young lady to enter a man's bedroom, alone and at night?" His voice was silky. Treacherously so. "Might not she have reason to expect certain...repercussions, for such *indiscreet* behaviour?"

My heart seemed to have launched itself into my throat, and was now doing a very good job of obstructing my words. "No, I d-don't think so," I stammered. "I mean, I th-thought you didn't—didn’t—you said you would n-never..." I trailed off, cheeks burning. What could I say? *You promised not to rape me?* I couldn't say it—not *that* word, not with the huge baronial bed mere feet away from us, not as I was: cornered, wounded and helpless. Not with that glimmering light in his eyes, blue flame encased in ice.

Lucius leaned forward, an almost-imperceptible curve touching his mouth. "A man's actions do not
always coincide with his assertions, Alice. Surely you know that."

"A gentleman's actions should," I countered, in a voice rather higher than I wished.

The curve deepened. "How little you must know of gentlemen."

I glowered up at him. "I know what they ought to be. And clearly you are not one."

"Am I not? How fortunate. Then I need not disappoint your expectations by behaving like one."

I bit my lip. My only real defense against him were my words, and he always, always managed to twist them against me. A cold, clammy anxiety was creeping over my body now, usurping and quashing the magnetic pull I had felt only moments ago. "B-but I thought that you. That I...I disgusted you." I couldn't help gulping a little as I said it, for it was like deliberately knocking an already-so-painful bruise.

The fiery gleam in Lucius's eyes flared and intensified. "Indeed," he murmured softly. I drew in a quick breath as he brought his hand to my face, lightly placing his fingers on my cheek, brushing my lips with his thumb. I pressed them firmly together, but they tingled at his touch. His pupils had dilated fully, like a night-hunting predator's."...And yet...perhaps...perhaps I can perceive...a certain...appeal..."

My heart thudded wildly. This—this was uncharted territory. Uncharted, disorienting and terrifying. For so long I had craved the man's approval or—or anything, rather than endure his prolonged, wearying campaign of contempt and hate...but now I felt like a non-swimmer plunged into waters far too dangerous and much too deep. I wanted respect, not...not...I suddenly twisted my head away, and attempted to duck past him. Lucius's arm shot out to seize and sling me backwards, and then he closed in, bodily crowding and trapping me against the tall bureau. In a subtle, fluid motion his hands slipped under the hem of the shirt and came to rest on my hips, between the layers of overlapping material. He fixed his eyes on mine and within their liquid, smelted-silver depths I could plainly read the mocking query: which garment would you like me to divest you of next?

I had to do something. Anything.

I blurted out the first unedited words which sprang to mind. "You're afraid of me, aren't you?"

Lucius's shoulders stiffened visibly. His pupils suddenly retracted and focused, his expression hardening. "What?" It was barely a whisper. "What did you say?"

I didn't exactly know what I was saying, however I could see my words had distracted him from the task in hand and that was good enough for me to repeat them. I summoned a sturdier, stronger voice. "I said, 'you're afraid of me, aren't you?'"

Lucius's lip curled immediately into a snarl. "That is rather an extraordinary question for a girl to put to a man twice her size and strength."

"You might be b-bigger and stronger than me, but you are afraid. It's obvious." It was a gamble, deliberately igniting his anger again, but I couldn't see an alternative which didn't leave me either stripped naked, or forced into some kind of activity I was by no means prepared to engage in. Or both.

His eyes narrowed and suddenly he pulled me against him, stooping to murmur in my ear. "Afraid, am I? Afraid of you?" His arms wrapped around me in a tight, all-enveloping embrace. "How easily
"I could crush the life from you, pathetic little mud-blood." As if to illustrate his point his arms squeezed me painfully, and if I ever doubted the muscular power hidden beneath the layers of expensive tailoring, I had no reason to do so any longer. "How equanimously, how unrepentantly, could I accomplish such a deed."

I was stifled and overwhelmed to the point of faintness. My ribs felt like they were about to crack and I couldn't breathe, his hold was too restricting, consuming...too close...

"If you're not afraid, then tell me my name," I managed to gasp out.

His grasp loosened. For a moment I thought he was going to release me, but then to my dismay and horror I found he had caught a wrist in each hand and was now manoeuvring me over towards his bed.

"Stupid girl," he muttered and I had time neither to resist nor protest, for he was already gathering me up and propelling me backwards onto the sumptuously-brocaded quilt. "I have no reason to bestow favours upon you." And he used his weight to press me down beneath him.

"No—wait, Lucius! What are you—let me go!" This wasn't going at all to plan, his anger seemed only to have fanned the frightening new flame of purpose in his eyes. Instinctively I brought my hands up to his chest to push him away, then nearly gagged at the pain which shot up from my fingertips—apparently they were only numb when not actually touching anything—and I had to throw them wide to avoid blacking out for a second time.

Lucius's hands tangled in my hair, pulling it back so I was forced to arch against him. Again he brought his mouth to my ear and he hissed, "Stop me. Prove to me what you can do. Show me."

"What do you mean?" I cried. How could I stop him? I couldn't even attempt to claw his face.

"Please don't—I don't want—I can't—"

"Try, Miss Carroll." And then his mouth was on mine, hard and bruising; his tongue was parting my lips, choking away my pleading and protesting cries.

For a moment I was frozen—a sudden, incapacitating claustrophobia seizing my muscles, overriding both fight and flight instincts. But then the crushing pressure, the invasiveness, became too much, and I began furiously kicking, squirming, twisting away. I attempted to bring up my knees, but Lucius merely used his own to part my legs and settle his weight more heavily upon me. I could feel the pressing, rigid, all-too-real manifestation of his desire—but unlike the first time, in my bedroom, my body was not responding in kind—the thrumming elation I had experienced then was completely antithetical to the pure, glacial terror I felt now.

He lifted his mouth a fraction to speak, his lips grazing against mine. "You are not trying to stop me, Miss Carroll...does that mean you do not wish me to stop?"

I was prevented from replying by a second smothering, suffocating kiss. One hand disengaged from my hair and was sliding down my side, down to the hem of my shirt, and then under and upwards. My whole body convulsed at his touch on my bare skin. I jerked my head away, scraping my bottom lip on his teeth as I did so, and then simply screamed my lungs out.

He knew it was useless. Who was there to hear me? The wailing lady?

*The wailing lady and the screaming girl, both helpless as each other.*

But it seemed my screams did have an effect. Lucius relinquished his grip on my hair, and the hand under my shirt was transferred to clamp across my mouth. He waited until I stopped thrashing before
he spoke again. "Well, Miss Carroll, have I sufficiently demonstrated my abject fear of you? You see me, quaking before you."

He took his hand away from my mouth, as if interested to hear my reply. I glared up at him, my chest heaving, gulping back panicked tears. I burned with rage. So that's what all this was about? Him trying to teach me a lesson? "I hope you find yourself incredibly amusing." I snarled at him. "Because I certainly don't."

I tried to sit up, but he pressed me firmly back down on the bed. "Amusing? Ah, perhaps you think I am playing a joke on you, Miss Carroll? Proving a point? No, I'm afraid not."

My stomach churned. "What the hell are you doing, then?"

"I should imagine that to be fairly obvious, my dear."

"Do you mean r-raping me?" I forced the ugly word out, spat it at him. "Because—because that's what this is, you realise! Rape. I'm not a willing partner. I consent to nothing."

"'Rape' is such a tawdry, inelegant term, Alice, wouldn't you agree?"

"What?"

"The English language is so rich; you really should learn to be more creative with it."

Now I was sure he was mocking me—playing with me. But not quite sure enough. "Fuck you," I blurted out furiously.

He smiled, I suppose at the futility of my response. "Well, that would be another way of putting it—not elegant, but a start—"

"NO, LUCIUS—FUCK YOU!—I know you are afraid of me, you coward!" The smile disappeared instantly, but I ploughed determinedly on, "Why are you so scared of my name, Lucius? Don't you know that, fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself—? The very fact you refuse to tell me it, proves to me you're afraid."

I expected some kind of reaction, but not the one I got.

Lucius recoiled back from me, as if burned, releasing me from his grasp. He pushed himself up to stand, and for some moments just stared down at me with an incredulous, even dazed expression. He had paled discernibly and the liquid heat in his eyes chilled and hardened, like molten lava turned suddenly to granite.

I hauled myself up and as I did so Lucius turned and moved away from the bed.

Relief coursed through me, awash with gritty sediments of confusion and fear. I didn't know what it was about those words which had produced such a sudden, startling reaction from him, but I could only be glad that they had.

...Had he really been intending to rape me? ...No...I didn't think so. And yet I couldn't truly know. In fact, I couldn't be sure I was out of danger, even now.

*How long does a cat play with a mouse before its killer instincts prevail?*

I slid off the bed and eyed the door. There wasn't much point trying to make a dash for it, he would certainly catch me. And I had had enough physical contact with the man for the time being, that
much I knew. I gravitated away from the bed, unwilling to be too close to that, either, and ended up standing, shaky and uncertain, in the middle of the floor.

Lucius's profile was stony, unreadable. He had moved over to one of the wardrobes and I watched as he produced what appeared to be a bulky, brown blanket. He shook it out, and I now saw it was a kind of long, thick robe.

Without further ado he threw it at me. It landed in a heap at my feet. "Since you scorn to wear the finer garments I provide for you, you may make use of that."

It wasn't exactly "proper clothes", but it was a step in the right direction. I could see the material was heavy and substantial and quite the opposite of revealing. "Thank you," I mumbled awkwardly, still rather reeling with confusion and fear, and not a little suspicious of the sudden change in his manner.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. "Well? What are you waiting for?"

I think we both remembered my broken fingers at the same time: I gave a frustrated sigh, and he made a low growl of annoyance.

In a small voice I began, "Can't I just—"

"No," he cut in shortly.

He strode back over to me, jerked me around so my back was to him and before I had time to register what was happening he had whipped the shirt over my head. I crossed my arms defensively over my bare chest, but he had already retrieved the robe and was wrapping it around me, with a few brief, perfunctory movements. Then he knelt down, grabbed the fabric around the knees of my trousers and simply yanked them down to the floor.

There was nothing to do but step regretfully out of them. My toes caught on the material and for a second I wobbled unstably and was forced to put a steadying palm on Lucius's shoulder. He took the opportunity to grasp one foot at a time and peel away my socks. For some reason, this gesture felt oddly tender, almost parental. But there was nothing tender or parental in his expression when he stood up.

The old Lucius—the all-too-recognisable, deriding, arrogant Lucius—was back.

And I was relieved. This Lucius did not perceive in me a "certain appeal". This Lucius detested me, was repelled by me. This Lucius I could—not control—but at least predict. Mostly.

For some seconds we stood, eyes locked, exchanging unspoken insults. The curl of his lips, the harshness of the lines bracketing them, told me in no uncertain terms that I should not dare to aspire to the honour of being afraid of his intentions now. My own thoughts were less intricate, but I hoped as clearly conveyed: merely that he was a bullying pig.

He was the first to break eye-contact, but I wasn't allowed to feel victorious, for with the subtlest of grimaces he managed to express that he no longer wished to offend his eyeballs with prolonged exposure to my revolting visage. Just like that, I was put back in my place, somewhere lower than his heel.

I watched silently as the man made a graceful round of the room, gathering up the items of strewn clothing. When he had collected them all, he strode over to the fireplace and heaped them directly upon the flames.

An involuntary cry escaped my lips. "What are you doing?" I gasped. Of course, I could already
pretty well anticipate what his answer would be.

Lucius bestowed upon me his iciest of sneers. "You don't really expect *me* to wear those...*polluted* items again, do you?"

My cheeks burned and my throat ached with insult and anger. Yes, that was him alright. The familiar feeling of resentment flooded into me—but it was now accompanied by a strong, oppositely-flowing undercurrent of reassurance. How ironic that I was *comforted* by the loathing in his eyes. How strange I could feel *glad* for the cutting note of contempt in his voice.

I sensed I was dismissed.

I made a hurriedly stumbling retreat from his room, neither daring nor wishing to catch his eyes. My own were half-blinded by tears. Tears of confusion, frustration, anger, but above all...relief.
Helplessness

I lay on my bed, staring numbly up at the dappled tapestry of light and shadow cast across the ceiling by a wan moon.

I was shaking and chill, but unable to bring myself to get under the covers. My fingertips were starting to pulse and twitch: the pain-killer Lucius had administered was wearing off. I held them slightly splayed, my arms crossed at the wrists, as if I were a shadow-puppeteer producing the silhouette of a ragged-winged bird.

My head felt hot and heavy, the rest of me damp and cold. I curled to one side with a quiet groan. At some point in the evening my reality had veered off its already-twisted, shadowy path and plummeted straight down into a terrain of surreal, frightening nightmare. Now, only my pitifully-crumpled fingers, my bruised face, and the foreign heaviness of my new robe, persuaded me that everything really had taken place—that it wasn't all just an invention of my own disturbed imagination.

Images flashed through my mind, colourlessly bright, like over-exposed photos.

— The onyx-black stare of a beautiful woman—A pale-haired man, princely-clad and handsome, smiling at his companion—An elegant dance in flickering candlelight—

Bringing my knees up to my chest, I compressed myself into a tight ball. My head was beginning to ache, and despite the chill, I could feel my body perspiring. I wondered how long I had before the pain returned—really returned. How was I going to cope? The mere thought of it made me almost retch.

More star-bursting images.

— A grotesque parody of a waltz—Scorning eyes and twisted smiles—A spectrum of purified pain—A hard floor to receive me—

Despite my recent traumas, I had not come close to forgetting the horrific agony I had experienced down there in the dining room, I think at the hands of the woman. Worse, far worse, than my present injuries inflicted by Lucius. At the time, such pain had seemed...incomprehensible. Almost an alien thing, something not meant for human endurance: too colossal, too huge, to fit inside a mortal frame. Something unsurvivable.

But survive I had, only to be left there, on the ground, discarded like a piece of rubbish. Their indifference to my distress had been almost as monstrous as the pain itself.

My teeth started chattering noisily. I wondered if my body was going into some kind of shock...How long before I went crawling back to him, begging for relief? ...I clenched my teeth. No. Never.

The flashes continued to strobe in my head, faster and brighter.

— A door opening—A sumptuous bedroom—Clothes scattered everywhere—A heavy cluster of emeralds—A moving photo—

A moving photo. Photos didn't move. Yet another impossibility. I felt jaded, resigned to the usual wearying doubts: was it real? Was it hallucination? ...I looked down at my hands. Even in the gloom I could see their battered crookedness, the mottled discolouration of blood and bruising—and for a moment I was actually thankful. Thankful for the evidence of reality...
Huh. So, now I was thankful for Lucius's violence against me, was I? How did he manage to do that? What kind of existence was this, with me grateful, not for small mercies, but for deliberately inflicted cruelties?

—Him, vicious and snarling like a white wolf—Silver eyes, glittering with fury—Gleaming with cold contempt—Blazing with sudden desire—

I could feel him, still. His crushing weight, his hands in my hair, on my skin, his bruising mouth. How much of me he had bruised tonight. My lips felt chafed and swollen, and it seemed incredible that earlier in the evening I had seen him kiss that woman's hand and experienced a pang of envy: had coveted that mark of distinction and courtesy for myself... And it hadn't been the first time I'd imagined being kissed by the man, either—in my endless hours of solitude, there was very little I hadn't imagined. But imagined on my terms. In my mind, it had always been a—a reward, not a punishment; something offered, not forced in that crushing, conquering way. Not as the clincher to a violent argument, an argument he had already won with physical brutality.

He hadn't needed to frighten me like that. He hadn't needed to debase me further.

Well, at least that's out of your system now, Alice, I thought bitterly. You know what it feels like to be kissed by him...it feels like yet another insult.

I scrunched my eyes tightly, forcing away the flashing images from my mind. I could feel myself teetering at the edge of exhaustion, and all I could do was hope to fall into darkness, before impending fever and pain found me first. "Please," I whispered aloud. "Please, just let me sleep..."

And for a while I think I did sleep, or at least slip into a kind of blank, numb doze...but at some point a fray-edged awareness infiltrated my slumber...my throat was too dry, my head too hot...my hands stippled with delicate needle-points of pain. I tried to ignore it, the pain, hoping that if I stayed still and breathed normally I might simply refute it, deny it's existence altogether...

...But then the delicate points magnified and intensified, becoming deep, throbbing stabs, and I realized I was no longer breathing normally but with shallow, thirsty gasps, and that I wasn't lying still, but twisting and writhing, drenched in sweat.

Water. I needed to drink something, anything, I needed to immerse my hands, my head, my whole body...

I tried to sit up, but it seemed as if my body was weighed down by an invisible concrete slab. Somehow I managed to roll onto my front, and made a feeble attempt at pushing myself up with my hands—No, don't use your hands!—The thought came too late, and I choked out what should have been a shriek of agony, but which sounded like the whimper of some small injured animal.

The flashes were returning, but now without images: just blinding white knife-strokes carving up the soft matter of my brain. "Make it stop!" I begged no-one, for there no-one to hear me, there was no-one to help—only one person—he hates you, remember?—and I would not go back to him—I would not beg—never—

My whole body was burning up, I was on fire, what do you do if you're on fire? You roll over and over and over and over—I hit the floor with an audible thud, but I didn't feel it, I was burning, burning up, and I needed—I needed help—only one person could hear me—only one—

For the second time that evening, I felt myself losing consciousness to pain...but this time I wasn't relieved by the consuming darkness. I was afraid of it. I drew in a rasping lungful of breath and screamed out with all my strength. "HELP ME, LUCIUS!" ...But it was only a whisper, he couldn't
hear me, and he was the only one who could help...

...no, not the only one...there was another...someone who had reached for me through that array of earlier agony...but I couldn't see his face...and I couldn't remember...his name...

I awoke with the first light of morning, inside my bed, though I didn't remember getting under the covers. In fact I remembered nothing after tumbling off the bed and blacking out. Not for the first time, I felt mildly surprised at still being alive.

The sheets were pulled tightly and tucked firmly, almost restrainingly, around me. I felt head-achy and weak—but no longer burning or feverish. Miraculously my hands were pain-free, but heavy and immobile. Slowly I dragged them from under the coverlets and lifted them in front of my eyes, rather afraid of what I would behold—and I gasped in genuine astonishment. Sometime during the night they had been bandaged: the broken fingers splinted and tightly bound together with medical gauze. Startled tears prickled my eyes.

So, the man did have a shred of decency in him, after all. Typical that he bestowed it on me only while I was insensible to it... I gulped away a swelling feeling of gratitude to him. Why should I be thankful? He broke my fingers in the first place. Deliberately and brutally.

I tried pressing them cautiously, experimentally, against each other. There was no pain at all—in fact, it felt a little like having blocks of wood for hands. I sat up, successfully using an arm for leverage. Despite my scathing internal monologue, I couldn't quite prevent a rogue thought from surfacing: he came for me. He helped me. Then an altogether more dangerous one: maybe he doesn't really hate me after all.

But I pushed both thoughts firmly away. Of course he helped you, Alice, I told myself. He doesn't want to be responsible for your murder. Or maybe he simply needs you alive as a bargaining tool.

Nevertheless, I experienced a surge of unbidden elation, and with that came a much-needed injection of energy.

I pushed back the covers, and as I did I realized I was naked. I gritted my teeth. After everything I'd gone through last night to avoid being undressed by the man, it seemed he had won out on that point in the end, anyway... But of course it had been different, there, in his bedroom. I was still unsure what might have happened if he had succeeded in stripping me bare while he had me trapped helplessly beneath him on his enormous bed. For a moment I had been pretty much convinced that he intended to rape me—and even now I was far from certain that he hadn't been convinced of the exactly same thing...

Well, the crux of the matter was he hadn't raped me, and he had helped me. And right now that was good enough for me, naked or otherwise.

I hauled myself out of bed and headed for the bathroom. As I had hoped, but not quite dared to expect, there were now two garments hanging from the towel stand—the usual filmy silk bathrobe, and the new thick, brown robe. I was relieved. At least he hadn't decided to withdraw that concession.

Bathing and dressing was no straight-forward process, but I managed it with some difficulty. The new robe, which seemed to be made from merino or some other soft, dense wool, was rather heavy
and awkward to don. Most frustratingly, I couldn't fasten the row of buttons down the length of the front. The best I could do was cross the panels and hold them in place with my arms. And not forget to keep on holding.

I deliberately avoided the mirror, remembering the horrible sight that had met me there the last time I had visited it. I didn't want to know what it had to show me now. My face would certainly bear the marks of Lucius's fury...but it was the expression in my eyes that I really feared to encounter. My tenuous sense of self-recognition seemed to be dissolving little by little, each time I met those haunted eyes within the glass. Alice's eyes. Not my eyes, I thought. *I'm turning into her, whoever she is. I'm turning into Alice.*

I remembered Lucius commenting on the name, that very first night, which now seemed so long ago. "Alice Carroll...that rather rings of a little girl who once fell down a rabbit hole...is that what happened to you?"

...Yes, I supposed it was, in a way. I had fallen down into a bewildering, ever-distorting world, trapped by a past I couldn't remember, a present I couldn't understand, and a future I couldn't control. And he...he was the author. My fate was being written by his hand, and I didn't know how to stop him.

I squared my shoulders.

Well, there was no point wallowing in fear and self-pity. If I was going to take charge of my destiny, it wouldn't be by cowering alone in this room, accepting the role of bullied victim. I was going to have to face him again sooner or later, and it might as well be sooner. As far as I could see it, my priorities were clear: Survive. Heal. Escape.

As for today, *now...*I decided that I was going to go down to breakfast, as if this was simply another ordinary morning.

I grimaced grimly at that, as I worked the handle of my bedroom door with my benumbed, bandaged hands. Just another "ordinary" morning in the life of the helpless, lost,crippled, amnesiac prisoner.

*Yeah, good luck with that, Alice.*

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He was there, waiting for me at the table, as if he too had decided to play the "just an ordinary morning" card.

I had made my way down the long stone corridors imagining all kinds of reproving, self-righteous things I could say to him("Congratulations, Lucius! You successfully incapacitated a girl. You must be so proud."—"How's your morning going, Lucius? Beaten up any more helpless females?"—"Sleep well, Lucius? Or did you accidentally grow a conscience?") —but they all disappeared as soon as our eyes met. There was a wary, warning glint in the silver of his irises, and I thought I saw a flicker of self-consciousness—inflexibly unapologetic though it was—as he took in my bruised and battered appearance.

He stood as I approached, advancing towards me with his usual languid, lynx-like grace, his expression both watchful and inscrutable.

I stopped in my tracks, glaring at him as he neared. I was determined to stand my ground, but none-the-less I braced myself for an onslaught of insults or mocking jibes. But they did not come.
Lucius halted within touching distance, and I forced myself not to shrink back from him, although my body was shaking in reflexive response to his violence yesterday.

His gaze swept over me again, and I drew in a small fearful breath as he brought both hands—those damaging, destructive hands—up to the neckline of my robe. For one agonizing moment I thought he was intending to pick up from where he had left off last night...but then wordlessly, purposefully, he began to fasten up the buttons which I had not been able to manage with my broken fingers.

Relief shuddered through me. The gesture was so diametrically opposed to what I expected, to what he had taught me to expect, that I felt my eyes prickling gratefully again.

When he had secured all of the buttons, Lucius took up both of my bundled hands in his and turned them over, inspecting them. "Is there any pain?"

The softness of his tone spun me even further off-kilter. "No," I replied in a faltering voice. "I can't feel anything."

"Good." The word was brief, almost inaudible. Taking my chin in his hand, he tilted my face towards the light, lightly tracing the bruises on my cheek and lips with his fingers. "I will give you a salve for these," he murmured.

I nodded, though I couldn't help frowning with sudden doubt and suspicion. What was his game? Could he be simply...sorry? He didn't look sorry. I detected nothing remotely related to regret in his face—in fact, it was severe in its blankness: as angular and expressionless as a porcelain mask. And although I was not about to reject something so rare as consideration from him, I simply couldn't reconcile it to what I knew of his hatred and contempt of me, to what I had so recently tasted of his brutality and malice. It made me jittery, alarmed. I might be relieved by his altered manner, but I certainly wasn't relaxed by it.

I gave an involuntary shiver, which Lucius evidently perceived. He half-turned, gesturing to the spread of food. "You should eat something, Alice," he said. "You are weak."

Yes, and who's fault is that? ...I didn't give voice to the thought, but I was certain he could read the accusation in my eyes, for I saw a muscle tighten in his jaw. However, he merely led me over to my usual place at the table, and helped me to be seated. The formal courteousness of him holding my chair for me was so foreign, so astounding, that I actually felt somewhat disoriented by it.

That woman sat here yesterday, I thought. My stomach lurched at the memory of her glittering black eyes. I wondered how regular a guest she was to be here. Was this, perhaps, just an intermission to the second act in some dreadful, twisted game of theirs? Was Lucius deliberately toying with me, putting me at ease, in order to intensify some future misery or suffering?

I would simply have to wait and see. And not let my guard down for one second.

As I surveyed the food before me, a sudden tide of mortified anger surged within me. "How exactly am I supposed to do this?" I demanded, my voice quivering with fury. Did he expect me to eat directly from the plate like a dog? Or was he hoping to see me attempt to use my bound hands like blunted shovels?

But then I realized that Lucius was drawing his chair around the table and stationing it next to mine.

I stared, transfixed—shocked, actually—as he deftly selected and proceeded to dice my usual choice of breakfast foods. Then, without the slightest crack of composure in his mask of sharp features, he
brought up a laden forkful to hover near my mouth.

I froze.

Was this really happening? I felt almost panicked with confusion. This was all becoming too much for me. It didn't make sense, there must be a catch to his kindness. And, anyway, I couldn't do it. I couldn't bring myself to...to actually open my mouth and receive food from his hand. Quite simply, it was impossible. The absolute capitulation of power, the admission of helplessness, the acceptance of aid—the very intimacy it entailed—it was all too—too—

...and yet, what choice did I have?

Flushing deeply, I leaned forward and quickly snapped the proffered food off its silver utensil. I kept my eyes firmly cast downwards, avoiding his gaze at all costs, although at this proximity I couldn't help but notice how close his long leg was to mine, and how large the jeweled hand which rested upon it.

I swallowed the morsel with difficulty, acutely self-conscious, but even more conscious of him. I had no way of knowing if his actions were an indication of tacit respect, or a declaration of supreme dominance. Or were they meant to lull and deceive?...I almost didn't want to know.

Why, oh why did everything have to revolve so completely around him? Just when I had been on the brink of asserting my independence from him, of rejecting his control over me, I was suddenly thrown into an even more dependent, subordinate position.

The man had me literally spoon-feeding from his hand.

*It won't be forever, Alice, I told myself. Remember your priorities. Survive. Heal. Escape.*
It took many days to recover from the overdose of trauma I had received.

For long stretches at a time my muscles seemed too frail to support my limbs, my brain too weak to support my thoughts. Most of the hours between meals I spent lying on my bed, threading in and out of a dull, groggy semi-sentience, neither quite asleep or awake. Lucidity came only in the late evening, stealing over me with the inky shadows: it was during that brief hour before bed, sitting quietly on the deep stone window sill, staring out at the moonlit snow, that I could think properly. And there were really only two subjects which occupied my mind: Lucius, and how I was going to escape him.

There was no longer any point trying to convince myself to stay.

What good had it done me, seeking out the secrets of the house and of its master? How far had I got, in my quest to discover my own identity? I had learned next to nothing about either of us...in fact, instead of finding answers, I seemed to be wading further out into a murky, bottomless mire of questions. And all I had received for my efforts so far was a glimpse of a moving photo, a set of broken fingers, and a new, haunting horror which clawed at my mind in the shape of the beautiful, diabolical, raven-haired woman.

As for Lucius's new demeanour of polite formality...it was no real source of reassurance to me. Not so long ago I would have lapped up his courtesy—or lack of hostility—I would have so willingly interpreted it as a sign of him changing, warming to me. But now...the phrase 'once bitten twice shy' didn't even come close to how I felt about the man. I simply couldn't shake the feeling that there was a hidden agenda behind the change, and that I'd be a fool to believe that it came from a place of benignity.

I wanted, I wished so badly to be wrong: to discover that he was changing after all, that perhaps he regretted hurting me so badly, and was trying in his own way to make up for it. But deep down, I knew better than to truly believe it. Just because he was no longer letting me see his hatred, didn't mean it did not still exist.

I was left with no choice. I would simply have to leave as soon as I had the use of my hands again. I had no real idea how long my injuries would take to heal, but it seemed likely that it would be some weeks. Until then I would have to do my best to keep out of trouble, and that basically meant continuing to play the good little automaton for Lucius...

Not that I had much choice in the matter.

I was now in such a pathetically helpless position that Lucius had become even more my ruler. He decided when I'd had enough to eat. He decided whether I was thirsty. He decided when I was to take my painkillers, or when it was time for me to go back to my room. I couldn't argue or disagree with him, let alone spar with him—reluctant as I was to accidentally rekindle his former style of treatment of me.

His casually-assumed control grated on me badly, and, even in my frail state, I sometimes nearly burst with rebellious anger. But I reined it in, determined not to let it get the better of me. Injured and weak as I was, the safest course to pursue was the smoothest one, the one where I bided my time and kept my mouth shut and my eyes open. I was far from happy about it, though.

And eventually, perhaps inevitably, my resolve cracked.
Lucius and I were sitting at the table and as always I was fighting to suppress my resentment at his smooth, almost suave dominance over me. During the process of him spoon-feeding me my lunch, I had spilled some sauce down my chin, and before I could bring my sleeve up to wipe it away he had mopped me up with a napkin—like a baby. Exactly like a baby. This was an indignity too far for me and a tide of mortified blood rushed to my face and stayed there for the duration of the meal.

When it was over Lucius reached for a now-familiar slender glass vial of blue liquid, the top of which he was deftly unscrewing.

Determined to claw some small scrap of power back I coolly declared, "I don't want any pain-killer today."

His large hands briefly halted their activity at my words. Then, deliberately ignoring me, he proceeded to remove the top and measure out the usual dose onto the usual spoon.

He held it up, ready for me.

"I don't want it today, thank you," I repeated, trying to keep my tone of voice as calm and reasonable as possible. "I want to see if my hands are healing. I can't gauge that if I can't feel anything."

But he did not lower the spoon. In fact, he appeared to simply be waiting for me to change my mind. I twinged with annoyance.

"I said, I'd rather skip it this time, if it's all the same to you." I had meant to say the words politely, but they came out sounding sarcastic and I darted an anxious look up at Lucius's face, still instinctively afraid of provoking his anger.

His gaze remained steady and unreadable.

A sudden spark of rebelliousness ignited in me and I sprang up out of my chair, knocking Lucius's hand and causing the spoon to clatter to the floor.

I was fast, but he was faster. His hand shot out and closed around my wrist, jerking me back down towards him. Then leaning over me, he pressed me firmly back into my seat. He wasn't rough, but it was the first time he had used any kind of physical force against me since the encounter in his bedroom and it made me fearful and flustered.

An involuntary tremor ran through me. At this, Lucius released me and drew himself back. His face and voice remained entirely devoid of expression as he spoke. "I must insist on you taking your medication, Alice," he said, calmly selecting another spoon and remeasuring a dose of liquid from the vial into it. "You are far from well and I do not wish for your condition to deteriorate."

"Medication?" I frowned. "I thought it was just pain-killer."

He tilted his head back slightly, eyes still fixed levelly on mine. "It has anaesthetizing properties, yes," he replied smoothly. "But the potion also contains powerful curative, antiseptic and anti-inflammatory agents."

His choice of the archaic word "potion" sounded...strange to me. But then, what wasn't strange about the man? What wasn't strange about the whole situation?

"All the same, I think I'd prefer not to——"

"I'm afraid your preferences do not enter into the equation, my dear," he quietly overrode me.
I swallowed nervously. There was no obvious threat in his voice or manner, yet I had the distinct impression that, one way or another, he would overcome any objection I made.

*Do I really want to disturb our current truce? I asked myself. Is it wise to test the durability of that stony, blank mask? No. No, I knew there was little point going into battle with him. Not over this. Not yet, anyway. Far better to make the most of this cold, polite stranger...because of one thing I was perfectly certain: his mask wouldn't last forever. And I wanted to be properly mended by the time it came off.*

Dropping my eyes—although this time more to hide my anger than embarrassment—I let him administer the tincture, wincing a little at its tartness as I obediently swallowed the dose. "Ugh. How much longer am I going to have to keep taking that stuff?"

"For as long as you require it," he replied.

"And approximately how long might that be?"

"There is nothing approximate about it, my dear. For precisely as long as I say so."

I actually found myself smiling somewhat bitterly at this. The man might have assumed an armour of bland composure, but his arrogance was so innate and irrepressible it shone through as dazzlingly as ever.

... That evening as I sat in my usual place upon window ledge, I stared down at the wads of bandages, trying to imagine what my hands looked like, if they were healing straight, or if I was going to end up with ugly crooked fingers for the rest of my life.

I tried wriggling them, and was startled to actually feel the creak of my knuckles trying to move against their splints. Yes, I could definitely feel my hands, although there wasn't any pain...I only wished I could see them. Almost immediately, a small knot of fiery determination kindled within me. *Why shouldn't you look? They're your hands, after all.*

I turned to the soft light of the moon, and inspected the bundle at the end of my right arm. There was no pin securing the end of the bandage—it looked like it was simply tucked under itself at the wrist. I brought it up to my mouth and tugged it free with my teeth. The bandage immediately loosened, and it did not take me long to completely unwind it. As the last loop came free the material snaked to the floor in a small white heap.

I gazed down at my hand. My fingers were each set against a narrow splint, taped at the knuckles, keeping them rigid.

...But...but there was nothing *wrong* with them. There was no bruising, no crookedness, nothing. The nails were perfect, not even cracked, all intact.

I felt numb. I couldn't quite grasp what it meant. Using my teeth again, I ripped the tape away from my fingers, releasing the splints. Slowly I curled my hand into a fist, then opened it out again. My fingers were stiff, but bore no sign of injury. I turned my hand over, then over again, trying to find something—anything—a scar, or a faint bruise, or—?

But there was nothing.

I began to tremble as a mixture of confusion and anger flooded through me. Quickly, urgently, I used...
my newly-freed right hand to unbind my left one, yielding exactly the same result. Another set of perfectly normal, uninjured fingers. "How is this possible?" I whispered. My thoughts were spinning so fast I felt physically nauseous.

**THINK, ALICE.**

Time—time—there had to be a discrepancy of time. I must have been comatose for a long while, perhaps even weeks. But if that were true, then what about my still-bruised face? My still-healing bottom lip? With utter dismay, the only thing I thought I had a firm grip of—my sense of time here—suddenly crumbled to dust. Each carefully-counted day meant nothing, everything was slipping and warping, reality was dancing away from me like a sly sprite, leading me in dizzying circles, playing with my mind...

Why had Lucius kept me in bandages when my hands were healed? Why had he made me believe I was still helpless? ...The question answered itself. With a perfect, devastating clarity I saw that he had swathed me in bandages as he might have fettered me in chains. To keep me helpless, docile, dependent.

I was shaking badly now, seething and breathless with mortified rage. That utter bastard! Making me eat from his hand like some—some helpless idiot! Making me think he might possibly be changing, that he actually regretted wounding me so badly, when all along he was simply manipulating me, keeping me subdued and submissive, to serve his own twisted purpose, whatever the hell it might be...

I was so angry that it took me a while to realize that my hands were tingling and hot, and I wondered if indeed they were still damaged in some internal way. Instinctively I raised them to press against the cool glass of the window—and I was suddenly hit by a blast of cold air, making me keel backwards in shock, sending me tumbling to the floor.

Hardly daring to believe it, I clambered slowly to my feet, straining my eyes, just staring and staring at the window—or what used to be the window. For it had vanished. Simply vanished. A portal to a shimmering outside world of snow and shadow and moonlight had suddenly, inexplicably, opened up before me.

By now I was far too used to impossibilities to question one more.

*Lucius knew you were going to try to escape all along, Alice, I thought, and by god he was right.*

I was going. Right now.

... Slowly, carefully, I leaned out over the window sill, clinging so tightly to the stone ledge that the skin of my hands grazed painfully on its rough-hewn surface.

My stomach swooped unpleasantly as I surveyed the ground, glistening palely—thirty, perhaps forty feet—below. My heart had started thudding heavily against my ribs and, despite the bitterly cold night temperature, I felt myself breaking into a clammy sweat.

A fall from this height would very likely break every bone in my body. I would probably die.

*Maybe you need to die. Maybe you'll finally wake up, if you die.*

The thought struck me with such force that I gasped aloud. Strange and morbid though it seemed, the
idea that I was trapped within a dream somehow made more sense than any other explanation I had yet arrived at to rationalize this bizarre, surreal, frightening world I found myself in. Maybe that's why the window disappeared, I thought. To lead you to your death...and on to real life...

And the dizzy fear drained out of me, replaced by a kind of calm, focused tranquility.

What are you waiting for, Alice? Either you escape and live to fight another day, or you die and wake up.

"Come on then," I whispered to myself. "Let's do this." I wriggled forwards on my stomach and then patted my hands out and downwards. My fingertips brushed against smooth, cool flags of fluttering ivy, and I remembered noticing how thickly the creeping braids covered the house, when first I viewed it all those weeks ago.

Would a vine take my weight? I combed my hands through the leaves until my fingers found a woody stem. It was knotty and hard, nearly as thick as my arm. Grasping it in both hands I tried yanking it away from the wall, but I could not make it budge, even slightly—the plant was so ancient it had simply knitted into the masonry. I was sure it could hold me.

I pulled myself back into my room and for some moments I stood still, thinking. My woollen robe could be a problem. It was heavy and long, and the loose weave could snag on protruding branches or weathered stonework. Still, I didn't fancy climbing down stark naked.

The silk bathrobe. I darted through to the bathroom and unhooked the slip of fabric still hanging on its place on the towel-stand. Quickly shedding my heavy robe, I changed into the silk one, and tied the sash in a tight double knot. I gathered the woollen garment up and took it back with me to the missing window, piling it onto the sill in a bulky bundle. I nudged it forwards, until it was right on the edge.

If you do this, that's it. There’s no going back.

I took a deep breath and slid it over the edge. It made a faint flapping sound as it fell, settling in a heap at the foot of the house, looking like a black hole in the snow. As an afterthought I threw down the two lengths of bandage after it.

I climbed up onto the ledge and swivelled so I was on my knees, facing back into the room. Well, here goes, I thought. Good luck, Alice. If you die, it was nice knowing you. Well, not exactly "nice"...and not exactly "knowing" either...

I lowered myself down so I was clutching the inner-side of the sill, my legs sticking half-out of the window. You're doing this all wrong, I thought wildly as I began to wriggle backwards, you should be using some kind of rope made out of sheets tied together. You should have constructed some kind of a safety harness—

I stifled a frightened yelp as my hips slid off the edge of the sill and my legs folded down to meet the wall. For a moment my bare feet slid through the mesh of slippery leaves, unable to connect with anything more solid...but then my toes bumped against one of its thick aerial roots and I clamped as much of each leg around it as I could. I jammed my foot behind the stem, just above a knot, giving me a kind-of step on which to put my weight—if I dared.

At first I did not dare.

But my arms were hurting badly now, and I didn't think I could manage to pull myself back into the window even if I wanted to. It was down or nothing.
Oh-so-slowly, I began to worm my body backwards, putting more weight on my legs and relieving it from my arms, until there was nothing for me to do but reach down and grab the thick stem with my hands. With a small, gulping prayer, I released my hands and whipped them down to catch the knotty ivy stem. Before I knew it I was hanging off a sheer wall, forty feet above the ground, with nothing more than a climbing plant to prevent me from pitching over to my probable death. It was a terrifying moment of heady precariousness, in which I would discover if the ivy would hold me, or if I would indeed plummet to the snowy ground...

It did hold me.

I clung to it like a spider monkey, my spine curled and my arms wedged and crossed under the braid. I was gasping and a little giddy, and I waited a few moments to regain my breath and focus.

Cautiously I swept my right leg out to the side, using my toes to feel for more ivy trunks. There was another braid only a couple of feet away, and with a little more feeling around, I realized that not only were there many more of them, but that they intertwined and zigzagged to form an intricate latticework—a natural climbing frame for me. Thanking the stars I wasn't going to have to shinny, I took my first shaky step downwards.

To start with it was very slow going, for it took me some time to build up confidence. Apparently I didn't have a wonderful liking for heights. But after a while I developed a pattern of movement—right leg drop, left arm down, left leg drop, right arm down,—and even developed a bit of a rhythm.

My first mistake came when I was forced to navigate around a window, and realized I had successfully scaled down to the first floor. For one stupid moment I allowed myself a feeling of triumph—and immediately the root I was balancing on snapped, the unexpected jarring making me lose my handholds. SHIT! I almost screamed as I dropped a full couple of feet, madly scrabbling at the ivy—and in that infinitely-suspended split-second I recalled that people were supposed to see their whole lives flash before their eyes, but the only image flashing through mine was a pair of iridescent eyes in an aquiline face, framed by a cascade of pale-blond hair...

My hands closed around a stem and I clutched at it desperately, my legs flailing wildly for a moment, before finally gaining a foothold. I wove my arms tightly into the ivy, hugging it, panting and sickened at my near disaster. For pity's sake, Alice, CONCENTRATE!

It took some time to recover the confidence to get going again. I edged down in painfully-slow increments, making certain that three of my limbs were properly secured at all times before I dared moved the fourth.

As I neared the last ten feet I finally began to relax. I glanced down and thought, You really might just make it—and almost at the same moment there was a horrible, stabbing, tearing sensation—something was puncturing the soft skin of my palms, the underside of my feet, scratching and ripping at every exposed part of me. I had hit rose-thorns. Like the ivy, the plants must have been ancient, for the thorns were hard and sharp as small daggers—they sank into me like fangs.

I didn't cry out, I simply let go. I believe I would have done so had I still been forty feet up.

The fall backwards was strangely peaceful. It could only have lasted a second, but it was a second completely devoid of terror or panic. Snow cushioned my landing.

I lay there, a little winded, staring up at the glittering dark firmament arcing infinitely overhead. Marvelling, revelling in the sheer wonderfulness of space all around me. I gulped in a huge breath of cold night air, sucking greedily in the bracing freshness. The freedom...
You're not free yet, Alice, my sensible voice warned me.

I rolled over and crawled to where my woollen robe had settled and hastily pulled it on. Exertion and adrenaline had kept me warm so far, but I knew it wouldn't last much longer. My skin was stinging all over, but particularly my feet, and even in the muted light of the moon I could see my blood spotting the snow. "Bandages," I muttered under my breath. I found them nearby and quickly bound up the punctures, glad for their rudimentary protection but wishing fervently I had shoes.

Then I clambered to my feet and took stock of my surroundings. The most direct route to the copse was the wide snow-covered stretch of the gravel approach. But it felt too exposed. I knew for a fact that his bedroom looked out directly upon it, and it seemed much too risky to attempt it. Instead I clung close to the wall and crept around to the east side of the house, then followed a zigzagging path of shadows through knee-deep snow, into the border of conifers.

For a moment I turned back to gaze up at the house. My universe, until now.

It looked as it was: an impenetrable, gloomy mass, shrouded in silence. Holding mysteries I would never now resolve, secrets I would never now reveal.

And him. He, who had so humbled and hurt me. He, whose mockery and derision had been so long my daily bread. He, whose strange, cruel beauty had fascinated and frightened me, whose liquid-silk voice had poured like sweet poison in my ears and seeped into my very bloodstream. He, who held the key to my past, but had buried it in a bed of unfathomable hatred...

Squaring my shoulders, I turned my back on everything I knew.

Then I plunged into the inky shadows of the trees.
Running Again

I was running again—but this time I knew why, from what, from whom.

*Thud—thud—thud—thud*—my feet struck the ground with rhythmic urgency,*—thud—thud—thud*—*thud*—my heart struck my ribs with synchronous fear.

I was puffing noisily, unfit from weeks of confinement, weakened further by my recent spell of illness and injury.

The moment I had broken through the copse, a sudden disorientation and confusion had made me halt in my tracks. It had taken me some moments to work out what was wrong with the scene before me...and then I'd realised. *There's no snow.*

It was as if I had simply slipped from one world into another. Even the temperature was noticeably different, still cold but not really bitter.

In that moment it seemed as if the whole incredible episode might never have taken place at all, that if I turned back to see, the man and his manor might simply have vanished, along with the snow. In fact, nothing would have surprised me less. But I did not turn back; I had long since given up trying to tether my experiences to any kind of logic—all I could do was act as rationally as possible within the situations I encountered, no matter how surreal or improbable they seemed.

And so I simply ran.

The grassy plain stretched out before me, rippling in the moonlight like a silvery sea. In the distance I could just make out the great dark cloud of forest from which I had run so long ago. Now I was running back into its shadowy embrace, seeking shelter where once I fled unknown danger.

It seemed to take forever to traverse that exposed plain: every single second seemed laden with the probability—almost the inevitability—of being discovered, seen, pursued. I forced myself to go faster, faster, as fast as I could without tripping over the restrictive bulk of my woollen robe.

As I finally reached the perimeter where meadows melded to trees, my relief was somewhat diluted by a newly rising fear...it was just so *dark*; darkness saturated the forest, seemed to suck the very night into it and bleed it out in a deeper rendering of blackness. As its huge, forbidding shadow fell over me, I slowed right down then stopped, panting hard and stooping over, hands bracing my thighs, trying to catch my breath. My gasps seemed to echo all around, amplified and circulated by the relentless darkness and the stillness of the trees.

Suddenly the idea of losing myself inside the forest seemed...not so wise. Who knew what kind of hungry, nocturnal predators lurked inside? Wolves? Bears? I didn't even know which country I was in. For all I knew there could be leopards or something, silently stalking through the shadows, looking for a midnight snack.

I turned to look back at the copse, now but a barely-perceptible black smudge in the far distance. *...What have I done?* I thought wildly. I had abandoned comfort for hardship, shelter for wilderness, succour for defencelessness.

*Captivity for freedom.*
Freedom? Did darkness and danger really equate to freedom? Was I not simply exchanging one kind of peril for another, perhaps a worse one?

It wasn't too late to return. I could go back now, sneak back inside. If I was caught, I could plead for mercy and forgiveness. Beg.

_Ugh—no. Never._

But neither could I just keep standing on the spot, letting indecision and fear knit my muscles into complete paralysis.

..._Come on, legs._

Sticking to the edge of the forest, I forced myself back into action, settling into a maintainable jogging pace. All I could do was pray that it would lead me on to some kind of civilisation, before the morning brought to Lucius's attention that his unwilling boarder had taken her unsanctioned leave of him.

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...I ran through the night, ran until every last part of me was shaking and sore.

My feet were raw, my calves aching, my lungs ragged. Worst of all was the deep burning in my thighs which turned into a horrible jelly sensation every time I stopped to catch my breath.

I was running from _him_ and yet he was with me every second of the way. My fear, my exhaustion, my pain, did nothing to dull the indelible image of him in my mind, the silken sibilance of his voice in my ears—he seemed so vividly before me that I had the strange idea I was running towards him, and not away.

The wilderness seemed to go on forever, the forest to one side of me, endless plains on the other. I remembered that Lucius had once said we were many hours drive from the nearest town, and I began to despair of ever finding my way to help.

Then, just when I was reaching the point of total collapse, I saw lights.

I think it was a little before dawn. The darkness seemed to have lost its inky intensity, the moon's lustre was fading, although the sun had not yet started to rise. The plains had begun to slope downwards and in the distance I could clearly see a cluster of twinkling lights moving in a swift, smooth line. It could only be a vehicle. A dull rumble confirmed it. I had found a road!

A burst of adrenaline sent me sprinting down the slope. The lights of the vehicle were already disappearing into the darkness, but it didn't matter—I was sure another one would come along eventually, if only I could make it to the road...

In another ten minutes I was there. I collapsed in a heap on the rough tarmac, overcome as much with relief as sheer exhaustion. But I wasn't prostrate for very long: already I could see a second cluster of lights, tiny twinkling pinpoints growing steadily larger, accompanied by the deep rumble of an engine, as another vehicle approached. Within seconds the dark outline of a large freight-truck loomed into visibility.

I scrambled up off the road; I hadn't come all this way to be flattened by a speeding juggernaut. But I didn't know how to alert the driver to my presence in the darkness. I doubted I'd be noticed waving from the side of the road, and I didn't dare take the risk of flagging it down by standing directly in its
I had no time to lose; the truck was nearly upon me. Quickly I stooped over and grasped a patch of grass with both hands, yanking it forcefully upward, pulling out a large clump of roots and mud.

The roar of the approaching vehicle was frightening, but I steeled myself and moved as closely to the road as I dared, and took aim. Three—two—one...I threw the clod with all my might, hitting the darkly-glinting glass of the truck's cab windscreen.

Seconds later I jumped into the road, waving my arms wildly in the truck's fume-filled wake, hoping the driver would check his rear-view mirror for what had caused the impact.

It worked. The brake-lights flared; the vehicle slowed then rumbled to a stop.

I ran towards the front cab, reaching it just as the figure of a man sprang down from the elevated compartment, silhouetted by a bright light which had automatically triggered with the opening of his door. For a moment the light blinded my night-accustomed eyes and I brought my arms up to shield them—but my wrists were roughly grabbed by a pair of strong hands and I was slammed into the side of the truck.

A very angry, very foreign-sounding torrent of words was being directed at me, then suddenly I was spun around and pulled into a tight head-lock. The man was shouting towards the fields now—and I realised that he thought me to be part of a gang of troublemakers or thieves.

"No, please—I'm alone—I'm lost!" I gasped out, pummelling ineffectually at the thickly-muscled arm around my neck. But this only served to enrage him further; he grabbed my left ear and wrenched it hard, making me cry out in pain. "Ow! Let me go!" I yelped furiously, trying to writhe out of his grip, but he was much too strong and restrained me easily. He continued to twist my ear cruelly—it felt like he really meant to tear it off my head—until, in utter desperation I simply screamed out one word: "ENGLISH!"

Almost immediately he let go of my ear, though his arm remained around my neck. He was silent for a moment, breathing heavily down my neck, then in a deep growling voice he said, "En-glay-za? ...Engleesh?"

"YES, English! I AM ENGLISH! I need HELP! Police! Take me to the police!"

He released me from the headlock and pulled me around to face him, his fingers digging painfully into my upper arms. He held me tightly, peering suspiciously down into my face. Then he uttered a rapid sentence, ending with one word: "Poleet-zee-a."

"Yes—police!" I nodded frantically. "Police! Take me to the police, please!"

His grasp loosened and his whole demeanour relaxed. He spoke again, and though I couldn't understand what he was saying, his actions were a sufficient translation—he was propelling me towards the open door of the truck's cab and helping me clamber up into it.

I scooted over to the far side as the man climbed in beside me. My heart was hammering with a mix of relief, gratefulness, wariness and fear. I knew all too well the kind of strife a solitary female could find herself in, when accepting "help" from a strange man...but I had little choice. I had to get as far away as possible, before sunrise.

The door slammed shut, plunging the cab into darkness and the man muttered something unintelligible to me. I drew back in fear as he reached over towards me, but he was only pulling a seat-belt out from behind me and handing it to me to fasten.
I did so, although I noticed that he didn't bother with his own seat-belt as he leaned down to turn the ignition.

Seconds later the engine roared into life.

... 

The driver didn't seem inclined to talk and after I had attempted a few tentative questions as to our whereabouts and destination—which he clearly did not understand, nor appeared interested in trying to—I fell silent.

I stared out the window in a daze, the oh-so-familiar feeling of blurry unreality descending over me. Where am I? I wondered for the millionth time. And more to the point, where am I going? 

The cab of the truck was musty and stifling and very warm. I felt almost nauseous with tiredness, my muscles aching, my bones sore. My eyelids seemed lined with lead. But going to sleep in the company of a strange man seemed downright dangerous. No, I mustn't sleep, I thought. And just as soon as my brain had made that sensible resolution, it was overruled by my exhausted body—and I was out like a light.

I don't know for how long I slept, but it was fully daylight when I was shaken awake.

My eyes flickered stickily open and I jumped in fright when I encountered a pair of black irises staring down at me, instead of the gleaming silver ones I had been dreaming about.

The man drew back, holding up his hands palms-outwards, as if to show me he meant no harm. I sat up and peered out the window. I saw we had come to a halt at some sort of a truck-stop: a shabby, squat little building surrounded by a wide parking area. We were in a new kind of terrain now, mountainous and craggy, rows of pines rising steeply upwards on either side of the road, woven through with wisps of mist. The sky was an unvarying steel-grey and there were a few spots of rain spattering the window-screen.

I scrambled out of the door on the driver's side, for my own one was locked, accepting the man's assistance down from the cab—although I didn't much care for the lingering touch of his steadying hand around my waist.

The air was crisp, stirred by a bracing wind. For a moment I stood still and let it buffet the drowsiness out of me, wishing it could likewise banish the pain from my aching joints and cramping muscles.

The driver had already disappeared into the building, which appeared to be a basic kind of cafeteria and I limped stiffly over towards the door. A little bell tinkled as I pushed it open. I saw the man was speaking to a frowsy but attractive waitress behind the counter and the pair of them turned to watch me as I entered. I was met with a frown by the woman, who obviously did not like the look of me—though I could hardly blame her. I knew I must be a sight indeed, with my long muddied robe and bandaged, shoeless feet.

I stared curiously around me.

The place was empty and had a run-down, tired atmosphere, although it seemed clean enough. The tables were made from formica, chipping at the edges, each bearing a plastic tray of condiments with a dog-eared menu card propped up in the centre. Wood panelling on the walls made the whole place dingy and several cheaply-framed prints of hunting scenes hardly improved the gloominess.
A couple of faded signs hung beneath the counter, of which I could make no sense whatsoever. It didn't seem to be a language I was the remotest part familiar with: there were strange little squiggles, dashes and curving lines above and below many of the letters.

A doorway in the far side had a hand-written sign above it: 'Toaletă'.

That's got to mean "toilet", I thought.

The truck driver was still occupied with the waitress, so I headed over to the door and slipped inside, drawing the thin bolt across to lock it. It was a small, concrete-walled cubicle with a toilet to one side and a sink and mirror to the other. I used the toilet first, then went to the sink to wash my hands and splash my face with water.

I peered into the black-splotched mirror and confirmed what I already suspected...I was a complete mess.

My face was white as a sheet, my lips bloodless and dry, the discolouration of my bruised cheek contrasted exaggeratedly against the surrounding paleness. There were huge dark smudges underneath my eyes and my hair was matted into thick snarls and tangles. I didn't bother trying to comb it with my fingers. There really wasn't any point, I would only be fighting a losing battle.

I looked more like a wild animal than a person—and yet, strangely, I wasn't repelled by my reflection. There was something new in my eyes which I had never seen before, glancing through the layers of my perpetual confusion and fear...something infinitely bright and irrepressible—something wonderful. And I knew what it was. It was hope. Hope that I was finally on my way to discovering my identity, my memory, my whole lost life...

Hope that I was finally going to find me.

...The driver was sitting at one of the tables, his legs stretched carelessly out. He was pouring a stream of sugar into a cup of coffee with one hand and stirring it in with the other, a lit cigarette dangling between his lips.

He looked up as I made a hesitant approach and gestured for me to join him. I saw that there was also a coffee for me and I sank gratefully into the seat opposite him, smiling my thanks at him. He shrugged and nodded briefly, his dark eyes flicking over me before they dropped back down to his task in hand.

I did my own furtive inspection of the man.

Whatever the country we were in, he was the embodiment of a typical truck-driver, very brawny and thickset, with a rough-hewn face and a rather surly expression. Beneath the loose wrists of his leather jackets I could see that his arms were heavily tattooed and the end of some unidentifiable word stretched up one side of his neck. ...I was struck by the difference between him and the man I had just fled from. I'd become so used to Lucius's refined, sharp features and elegant bearing, that this man seemed almost repulsively coarse, though he wasn't actually ugly—in fact, he was good-looking in a swarthy, brutish kind of way. The waitress certainly seemed to think so: her eyes were fixed admiringly on his profile as she ferried over a large tray to the table.

She chatted coquettishly to the man as she unloaded two plates of food and a wicker basket of bread rolls. Then she looked me over with a disapproving expression and muttered something in a very different tone—presumably about my feral appearance—before stomping unceremoniously off.
Whatever she said had clearly amused the driver, for he grinned to himself as he stubbed out his cigarette in a cracked glass ash-tray.

My companion was already making short work of his food and I decided to follow his taciturn lead. Despite its unprepossessing look, the dish was surprisingly tasty, although the seasoning seemed quite unusual—foreign—and once again I wondered where we actually were. The coffee was very strong and there was no milk on offer, but it tasted like heaven to me, parched and fatigued as I was; I gulped it down as if it were nectar.

When he had finished eating, the driver reached into his jacket for another cigarette. Knocking one out of the packet, he casually proffered it to me and just as casually lit it for himself when I declined. He leaned back and watched me finish my food and I was uncomfortably reminded of countless meals under the inscrutable gaze of another man...a man who had surely discovered my truancy by now. ...Is he looking for me yet? I wondered.

Finally the man finished his cigarette. He took out his wallet and slid two notes under his plate, then stood up, beckoning me to follow. I longed to inspect the currency but I didn't want him to think I was trying to steal it, so I decided regretfully to leave it be. Having already sampled a rather-painful dose of his anger, I didn't want to foolishly cause any misunderstandings between us. He didn't exactly look like the kind of man who would be easily placated once provoked.

Following him out to the truck, I watched him stoop to pick up a stone from the ground and hurl it rather spitefully at a crow that had settled on top of the cab of his truck. The bird fluttered up with a loud 'Caw!' of alarm, darting to the safety of the nearby trees.

A shiver of insecurity stole over me at this casual display of viciousness. I wondered if I should simply refuse to go any further with him—if I should just wait here for someone else to come along who was a little less...masculine. I'd had quite enough of oversized, intimidating men.

...But there was no guarantee that such a person would come along. And if they did, there was no guarantee they would agree to take me with them, given the state of me. Could I really afford to be choosy? I had no money, no words, no idea where I was. And I needed to get to a town as soon as I possibly could.

Quashing my anxieties, I climbed up into the cab and fastened my seat-belt, comforting myself with the fact that, so far, the man had treated me with kindness.

I just hoped he didn't expect anything in return for it.
The Truck Driver

...The figure of a tall, pale-haired man darkened the threshold of a sumptuously-appointed chamber...his eyes were fixed upon a high-arched window, around which two heavy curtains stiffly billowed, stirred by a sharp breeze that swirled in through the pane-less frame...the man's black-clad form was rigid, motionless but for the tense rise and fall of his shoulders, bespeaking his deep, agitated breathing...his expression was as stony and cold as the flagstones beneath his feet, but his silver eyes glistered with a smouldering, white-hot fury...

A bump in the road shook me out of my reverie, and I blinked the real world back into focus.

We were making our way over a winding mountain pass. The driver steered his vehicle with confidence and skill, but more aggressively than was warranted, I thought. I hoped he might put on his radio, not so much to relieve the silence, although that would have been welcome, but to give me another chance to glean whereabouts we actually were.

But he seemed to be content to listen to the noisy rumble of his truck. Occasionally he would glance over at me and I would smile encouragingly—for I really wanted to engage some kind of conversation, even if I could only make out one word in fifty—but then he would simply fix his eyes back on the road again, leaving me blushing in self-conscious frustration.

In the end I had resigned myself to staring out the window.

The scenery was really quite breath-taking, despite the overcast weather...or maybe because of it. There was something compelling about the towering trees and jagged, pale rock-faces, although there was nothing gentle about its precipitous, brooding beauty. ...I thought we could well be in some Nordic country, although I couldn't guess which one.

The zig-zags of road gradually lengthened and at last unspoolled from the mountain, until we were once more on flat terrain, though still hemmed in on both sides by trees. The looming periphery created the impression of perpetual twilight. A silver orb of cloud-veiled sun hung high in the meridian and occasionally a stream of light would pierce through the murky stratus.

I half-shut my eyes and drifted back into hazy-edged daydream...

...The pale-haired man's arms braced the doorway, the muscles spanning his wide shoulders were tautly bunched, and his balled fists rested on each side of the frame, as if he had recently thudded them against it in sudden rage...his face was livid, bloodless, his jaw clenched, and a vein in his temple throbbed visibly... through barely-moving white lips and tightly-gritted teeth, he ground out two rasping syllables..."MUD-BLOOD!"...

This time a change in the light brought me out of my doze. The trees had started to thin out, and the road soon melded with another much busier one. We followed it all afternoon, passing through several towns which straddled the highway.

These towns seemed quite peculiar to my eyes, telling two discrepant stories. The more traditional buildings mostly comprised double-storied houses, all of which were certainly old: picturesque, if somewhat dilapidated, like they belonged in some ramshackle fairy-tale village. The architecture was not exactly quaint or pretty, but, like the landscape, distinctive, characterful and slightly melancholy.

Then jarringly, these unusual-looking houses would be suddenly interspersed with ugly multi-storied apartment blocks, bulky and relentlessly generic, from beneath which rows of gloomy shops peered.
out at street level. I could make nothing of the words on the shop frontages, the lettering might as well have been hieroglyphics for all the sense it made to me.

There was also a greater mix of new and old cars on the road and we even passed a couple of horse-drawn carts being driven slowly up the highway, piled high with produce. *It's like history hasn't quite let go here yet,* I thought bemusedly.

It was hard to remain focused and alert as one hour stretched and blended into the next, especially as I was determined not to think about—about him. For what else did I have to think about? Everything that I knew, everything that I could remember was inextricably entwined with him. My jailer, my keeper, my saviour, my tormentor—whatever his true role, he had filled my entire existence. ...Telling myself to forget about him was like telling myself to forget about breathing...

I gazed out the window, watching the shadows lengthen and the setting sun burnish the landscape. *He hated you, Alice, and he hurt you. Let him go...*  

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Finally, we reached the outskirts of a city.

I knew immediately that it was a large one. The sheer volume of traffic, the multi-laned roads, the scale of the buildings, both industrial and residential—everything indicated a place of great size and importance. *Maybe it's a capital city,* I thought hopefully, *one that contains a British embassy.*

The traffic seemed impossibly noisy and confusing to me, with cars pulling out in front of each other with no apparent regard for traffic lights or even basic courtesy. The truck-driver seemed unfazed by the chaos, only occasionally banging on his horn, or muttering what were clearly some choice expletives under his breath.

The street-lamps were already lit, though it was not yet fully dark and a thick grey dusk leaked in between the dark shadows and the artificial lights. The apartment blocks which had so jarred on me in the smaller towns had a towering inevitability here—and there were many of them, street upon street in fact, as if sprung up from a stark dystopian vision of some humourless bygone era. Suddenly I wasn't so sure this was Scandinavia...but where?

I presumed the driver would unload his consignment here and wondered whether he was going to do that first, or drop me off at the police station.

Then rather suddenly, in a matter of only a couple of turns, the noise and traffic dropped away and we were pulling up near the side of a lake, isolated from the road by a thick line of dark trees. It most certainly wasn't the bustling port I'd been expecting. My stomach did a nervous flip-flop.

I sat up straighter and darted an anxious glance at the driver. He was staring straight ahead, leisurely finishing off a cigarette, as if I did not even exist. He seemed as relaxed and indifferent as ever...but instinctively I felt the dynamics in the cab change, become laden with...something.

My mouth was suddenly awfully dry, my heart thudding, as all sorts of unwelcome thoughts leaped into my head. *What the hell have you got yourself into, Alice?*

I tried to size up my chances against the man, if it came down to a physical altercation. *Somewhere between zilch and zero,* I decided grimly. The powerful hands which rested casually on the steering wheel suddenly seemed laden with all manner of grievous capabilities...

I looked surreptitiously about me, in search of some kind of weapon, if things headed that way. But
there was nothing, not even a pen. Apart from a CB intercom radio attached near the driver's side, the dashboard was completely empty. Well, I told myself, if he attacks then...knees to his groin, fingernails to his eyes. If he grabs your wrists, bite his hands, struggle, kick. Then I revised: Unless he has a weapon. If he's got a knife or something, lie still, let him do what he wants, don't fight. Just survive, then run when you can.

I could hardly believe I was having this conversation with myself.

Whenever I had envisaged successfully escaping Lucius, it had always been straight into the waiting arms of help and mercy. Words of comfort, spoken in English. A reassuring female hugging me, telling me it was over, that I was in safe hands now. A pragmatic male wasting no time to notify the proper authorities. Whispers of worry over my obvious distress, a hurried discussion about whether it would be better to take me to hospital first. Me urgently pleading to be driven straight to the police. ...And, in my mind, that was the end. The sum of my ordeal. My imagination could not furnish a reunion with family and friends; it had always simply curtailed at the point of rescue, like the ending of romantic story, with an abrupt yet vague, 'And she lived happily ever after'.

That was what was meant to happen, wasn't it? The traditional risk-to-reward ratio? The rightful balance of things?

This had never figured in any scenario. This was unfair.

You shouldn't have run away! I began to berate myself. You should have stayed with him, with Lucius. Better "the Devil you know"... After all, he hadn't been so very cruel, had he? He'd given me food and shelter, a warm bed, amenities—not just the basics, but everything of a luxurious quality. And he hadn't really hurt me...sneered at me, bullied me, intimidated me, but not "hurt" hurt me, in the physical sense.

Not hurt you, Alice? Who are you kidding? You mean, asides from choking you, shaking and manhandling you, slapping and hitting you, BREAKING your fingers and threatening to—

Okay, so he had hurt me, quite badly. Damaged me both physically and mentally...but at least I hadn't been afraid for my life. As I was now.

The driver flicked his cigarette out of a small gap in the window and turned to fix his eyes on mine. His mouth was curving into a slow smile that sent a shiver to my very soul. I knew straight away what such a smile meant. It meant the ride was not free, after all. The coffee and food were not complimentary. It meant it was time to pay up.

His expression was both exhortative and edgy, as if he preferred my cooperation but would just as readily relish my resistance. Instinctively I realised that my best chance would be to play along, play willing, then...well, I'd think of something. Whatever you do, don't panic, I told myself.

I smiled back at the man, hoping my paper-thin veneer of composure was adequate to concealing my terror. He twisted in his seat and I was shocked to see him sliding a panel across, behind the seats, to reveal a small interior cabin, containing a mini-fridge, a small chest of drawers and...a narrow bed.

I gulped. I knew that once I was in there, I'd have little say in what happened to me.

Damn you Lucius, I thought erratically, irrelevantly, damn you for making me run from you! Damn you for forcing me into this situation in the first place. If you'd just—if you'd only—

The driver leaned over and released my seat-belt catch, the same lazy half-smile curving his mouth.

In that moment, I knew exactly what I was going to do.
Rather than shrinking away from the man, I moved across the long bench-seat towards him, clambering rather awkwardly onto my knees to face him. Then, steeling my nerves, I put my hands on his shoulders, closed my eyes and quickly pressed my lips to his. In less than a second he had hauled me up to straddle him. It seemed like his hands were everywhere, running down my sides, over my hips and thighs, tugging at the knot in my robe, delving down the front panels to roughly squeeze at my breasts. I ran my fingers through his hair—short, black, coarse—and did my best to seem enthusiastic, trying not to wince as he shoved his tongue aggressively into my mouth. I kept wriggling and manouevring until we were pressed hard against the door, then I pulled back a little from him and reached down to pluck suggestively at the buckle of his jeans.

He grinned and began to quickly fumble with his flies.

As soon as his hands were busy I reached behind him, grabbed the door handle and heaved against the man with all my strength. He let out a strangled yelp as he tumbled heavily backwards out onto the ground. Quick as lightning, I pulled the door shut and slammed the lock down.

For a moment I just sat still, panting a little, more amazed than frightened, stunned that I'd had the temerity to try such a thing. Already the man was banging at the door, shouting furiously at me and I snapped out of my daze, wondering just what the hell I was going to do now.

The thumps and shouts were getting louder and angrier and I was terrified lest the man try to smash the window in.

But then suddenly—silence.

I scrambled over to the window and saw him disappearing into the darkness of a line of nearby trees. Uncertainty paralysed me. My instincts were to make a run for it, but if he should be hiding in the shadows, waiting?

My eye caught the CB intercom. I quickly reached over for it, pressed the speaker button and began to babble somewhat hysterically into the mouthpiece. "Please help me! I'm English a-and I'm trapped in this truck down by a lake and if you're listening please, please call the police, because I'm definitely in danger and I have no idea where on earth I am."

There was a click and a buzzing noise, then a man's voice made a brief, unintelligible comment. I stared down at the unit, realisation dawning that unless I knew my exact co-ordinates and, indeed, how to convey them, there was no way I'd be able to summon help. Well, Alice, you're in deep shit now.

Again I peered out of the window, but all seemed still and dark.

Count to twenty, I decided, then make a run for it. And I began to count shakily out loud, "One, t-two, three—"

By 'four' my resolve broke.

It was too, too claustrophobic in the cab, I just wanted to get out. I was so sick of feeling constantly trapped like an animal. Quickly, stealthily, I pulled up the lock, released the door and jumped down lightly onto the stony ground. I didn't stop to look about me but simply turned and sprinted in the opposite direction to the one the man had gone.

There was a masculine shout and the sound of a heavy, running tread on stones behind me—close behind me—and I screeched as a hand grabbed the scruff of my neck and dragged me backwards. I struggled wildly, clawing and biting at the arms tightly wrapping around my shoulders.
"LET ME GO, YOU BASTARD!" I screamed furiously. "I WON'T LET YOU TOUCH ME!"

There was a sudden pressure on the back of my legs, my knees buckled, striking the ground painfully as I was forced into a kneeling position. My arms were jerked behind me and I was all but immobilised, but I still wriggled and resisted, determined to fight to the last.

Gradually I became aware of the man's voice close to my ear, surprisingly gentle. I couldn't understand most of his rapidly-spoken words, but one in particular he repeated over and over: "Re-gu-la, re-gu-la,"—and it seemed as if he was trying to calm me down.

Then I realised. It's not the truck-driver.

A fervent, frantic hope blazed within me. In a ragged voice I stammered out, "P...p-police?" Then, remembering: "—Pol-eet-zee-a?"

Oh, god, please, I thought.

Please.

...

You're going to be okay, Alice.

Perhaps it was a strange thought to have, sitting as I was in the back of a foreign police car with my hands cuffed in front of me, being driven through the streets of a dark, totally alien city.

But I really did finally believe it.

Night had descended now and the city lights looked like blurry orbs through my wet lashes. I listened without comprehension to the low murmurs of the policemen in the front of the car. They seemed relaxed, even cheerful and there was a lack of urgency which I found comforting.

The truck driver had disappeared and not returned. I could only guess that it was not me, but him, or his cargo, which had been the object of police interest. I had just happened to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time...or, really, the right place at the right time.

The policeman in the front-passenger-seat turned to me. He had short sandy hair and a friendly face. "Okay, Eeng-leesh geep-see?" he said with a reassuring smile. Both men appeared to have a very little English and they had immediately latched onto this epithet for me, after I had kept repeating over and over, "I'm English, I'm English!"

"Yes," I replied. "I'm okay, thank you. But I'm not a—a gypsy."

The policemen laughed, as if I had said something very amusing.

"Um, excuse me," I said, leaning forward, "but where are we?" I tried to gesture out the window with my cuffed hands. "Iceland? Norway? Russia—Moscow? Um...Finland?"

Then the sandy-haired man cottoned on to what I was asking. He nodded and said, "Ah, da.—Bucureşti."

It sounded like "Book-resht" and at first I was at a loss. Then, tentatively I said, "Bu-Bucharest?—Romania?"

He chuckled at my expression. "Da—ahhh...yez...Romania." He pronounced it "Romma-neeya."
Then, I suppose seeing the confusion in my eyes, he smiled quite kindly and said slowly, "You be okay, leetle Eenglish geepsy."

I smiled, nodding my thanks, but I felt numb and shocked. Romania. What on earth was I doing in Romania? What could have brought me here in the first place? Had I been on holiday? On a student field trip? A work conference? Or was it simply because...because of Lucius?

Finally the car slowed, then stopped and I was extracted from the back seat by one of the policemen. His touch, firm but not aggressive, reassured me, although my knees shook as I was led in through the main entrance of the police station.

Beyond the electric doors was a stark unwelcoming reception room, glaringly illuminated under fluorescent tube-lighting. The floor was laid with red lino, but everything else was painted cream: the walls and curtainless windows, the rows of bolted-down chairs and the long wooden benches lining the sides. There was a large desk marked 'Receptie' behind which sat a uniformed custody-officer, looking supremely bored.

His expression didn't change as I was escorted over to him by the two officers.

The three men spoke for some minutes, then finally the custody-officer turned his attention to me. "You are Breet-teesh?" he said in a slow, thick accent.

"Yes I am," I said, my voice trembling with a mixture of urgency and anxiety. Then I blurted out, "I was kidnapped!" Although not quite true, it seemed the easiest way to sum up...well, everything.

He was holding a pen and he tapped it a couple of times on the desktop as he regarded me. His green eyes were quite unreadable. Then he reached for a piece of paper, some kind of form. "Please state what is your name."

"I d-don't know," I stammered. "I—I can't remember." As I spoke, I suddenly realised how utterly implausible it sounded.

The man's irritated expression suggested he thought so too. "Of course, you don't know," he said, with a sardonic flicker of a smile. "Every time, nobody can remember his name."

There was another discussion between him and the other policemen, then he fixed his eyes back on me once more. "State to me your name, meess."

"Don't I get to make a phone call?" I said, trying to sound assertive, but unable to repress the quaver of panic in my tone. "I want to call the British Embassy."

The man held up his wrist-watch, indicating it was too late. "Tomorrow," he said, tapping the watch face.

I was unsure how to proceed. There seemed little point in arguing my case, the man seemed entirely unimpressed by my plight. My hope of invoking immediate consular protection was quickly crumbling and I was facing the dismaying realisation that I would very likely spend the night in a Romanian police holding-cell.

"State to me your name, meess," the custody-officer repeated.

"Alice Carroll," I said resignedly, my voice reedy with disappointment.

"Passport?"
"I don't have one."


Lostness. — Was there such a word?

I was alone in a tiny room, surrounded by three concrete walls and a door made of iron grating. There was no window, but an overhead bulb cast a perpetual dim light around the grey-painted interior. It hummed faintly. The room—the cell—was absolutely bare; no sink, no bed, just a metal plank riveted to one wall, long enough to lie down upon. On this I sat, staring dazedly at the opposite wall, clutching a coarse blanket that I had been given by way of bedding for the night.

All was quiet. I wondered if I had been kept deliberately separate from other occupants, or if females were a rarity in Romanian police-holding-cells.

Although I sat still, my heart was beating loudly and my breathing was shallow and fast. I couldn't relax, trying to separate out each thread of tangled emotion that twined around me in a suffocating tapestry. Hope. Frustration. Relief. Anxiety. A sense of...bereavement, which I was afraid to inspect too closely...

And then this—this lostness. Always, this lostness.

So, I thought, you've escaped one prison and ended up in another, less comfortable one. In eastern Europe, for heaven's sake. Another wonderful coup d'état to add to your long list, Alice.

No, not "Alice", I corrected myself. You won't be Alice for much longer.

This thought cheered me slightly. Somehow I couldn't let go of the notion that my memory was inextricably connected to my name—my real name. It seemed that once I discovered it, everything else must certainly return.

I curled onto my side, pulling the blanket over me. I realised I was shivering, although it wasn't really very cold. Closing my eyes tightly, I made a conscientious effort to slow and regulate my breathing. The quickest way to see this night out was to do it asleep.

As I waited for oblivion to come, my closing thoughts were entwined with the lists of girls names that it had been my nightly ritual to sift through since my earliest days with Lucius. Abigail, Aimee...Alisha, Amber...You might be in a prison cell, but at least you're safe, I told myself. ...Blanche, Brenda, Briony...The British Embassy surely will be in contact tomorrow...You'll be out of here in no time...Candace, Chloe, Christie...

By 'Daphne' my eyelids had drooped as exhaustion crept over me like a shadow.

...You'll be fine...

But I couldn't stop shivering.
I woke the next morning to the sound of a door clanging and the echo of footsteps approaching. My eyelids flickered reluctantly open, gritty with sleep. I was stiff, sore and terribly, terribly confused.

"Lucius?" It was the first word to escape my lips, then I sat up with a lurch as the events of the previous day came flooding back to me.

My deep warm bed had transformed to a cold metal slab. My sumptuous, elegant room was now a grey concrete-and-metal cage. The man opening my door was neither silver-eyed or pale-haired, nor was he dressed in black robes. It was the same custody-officer from the night before.

"Good morning, meess," he said through the bars. He looked just as blasé as he had yesterday. "Are you well?"

"Yes," I replied shortly, for I was determined to cut to the chase. "Can I get my phone call now?"

"There is a visitor to you, meess."

I was caught completely off-guard. "A v-visitor?" I stammered. "From the British embassy?"

"No," he said, with a slight smile, "not from the Breet-teesh embassy."

I immediately started to shake, backing into the far corner. Had he found me already? Had this all been for nothing? "I don't want to see anyone," I hissed. "I don't know anyone!"

But then—then I heard a voice, a female voice, ringing with worry and impatience. "Where is she? Where is my girl?"

I froze. My heart seemed to stop, and there was a strange buzzing in my head. Or was that the light-bulb above me?

The words filtered slowly through my brain like a liquid echo, but I couldn't quite grasp them, I couldn't quite make them out, although they were spoken in clear, perfect English. ...Where...is...my...girl...

"M-Mum?" My voice was high as a child's. And then I was half-running, half-stumbling over to the grated door, but my legs weren't working properly, and I ended up on my knees, clutching at the iron bars. "Mum? Mum?"

"Darling..." There was the sound of hurrying footsteps and a slender female figure emerged next to the custody-officer, then swiftly knelt down in front of me. "Darling, I'm here."

A strangled sound issued from my throat, part joyful gasp, part despairing sob. For I didn't recognise her.

My heart felt as if it were being rent in opposite directions by dizzying elation and wretched disappointment. I stared and stared at her through the bars like a caged animal, desperate to forge a connection to my memory, to force an illumination upon my past... But the spark didn't ignite, the nexus failed; all remained dark and closed.

Finally, I blinked. "Are you...my mum?" I whispered.

The lady smiled at me. Her soft-gloved hand reached through the bars and gently traced the line of
my cheek. "Yes, darling," she said. Suddenly, nothing, nothing, nothing else mattered.

The custody-officer unhooked a large bunch of keys from his belt and noisily unlocked the door, gesturing to the woman, to my mum, that she could enter. Moments later I was in her arms, just shuddering and crying like a baby and she was rocking me and crooning sweet nothings in my ear.

"I c-can't remember a-anything," I stuttered between sobs. "I can't even...r-r-remember you."

"It's alright, darling," she said soothingly, stroking my hair from my brow. "It's alright, you will. I promise you will."

"I love you," I blurted out abruptly, fiercely. I couldn't help it, I needed to say those words, to unstopper them from my overfull heart, to give them to someone who would not fling them back in my face. "I love you, mum! And...I'm just so...so s-sorry. I got l-lost...I'm sorry..."

She pressed me tighter to her. "Hush, now, darling," she murmured quietly against my wet temple. "I've found you. I'm taking you home. You're safe now."

Safe...I'm safe... The knowledge of it spiralled slowly through every part of me, warming and calming and unspeakably beautiful. ...I'm going home.

Finally there was a tap on my shoulder and the officer indicated that we should leave the cell. I wiped my swollen eyes and gulped down some steadying breaths of air. For the first time I noticed a numbness in my left forearm, and I wondered if I had slept on it awkwardly. I rubbed it through my sleeve, trying to coax the circulation back into it.

"Come, darling," my mum said softly, helping me to stand. "It's time to go." My legs were wobbling so much I had to lean on her to keep my balance.

Hand in hand, we walked behind the officer down the long hallway and back out to the questioning room, where I had spent the best part of two hours the night before, trying to explain my situation to a skeptical audience.

Everything seemed to happen in a surreal blur. There were forms to fill, more questions to answer, blue-uniformed people flurrying everywhere... It was as if time sped up all around me and I sat alone on pause, just nodding and uttering the occasional single-syllable word, unwilling to take my gaze away from her. I was afraid that if I did, she might somehow disappear.

I tried to etch her image into my brain. My mum. She looked younger than I expected. Her hair was a rich chestnut brown, and her complexion was more olive than mine. Her eyes were hazel, large and mild; to me, she seemed like an angel. She was calm, so very calm, speaking to the officers, answering for both of us, squeezing my hand every so often as if to reassure me that this was real; really, truly real.

I was finally shaken out of my strange reverie when a small burgundy-coloured booklet was handed over the desk to me. I blinked, gasping with surprise. It was a British passport—surely, my passport. Mum must have brought it with her, I thought. Finally, finally I'm going to find out who I am...

Hands trembling, I slowly opened the cover and gazed down at the passport photo.

It was me alright.

But...but it was too much like me. The lost me. My too-pale skin, my too-wild eyes, my shadow-marked, drawn features. The same bewildered, frightened girl that had haunted the gilt-framed
mirrors of the house I had so recently fled. I felt my whole body stiffen and there was a kind of
dreadful coldness in the pit of my stomach. I dragged my eyes over to the small block-capitals
spelling out my details, terrified of what I might read.

And there it was.

**ALICE CARROLL**

"No," I gasped. I couldn't seem to breathe properly. Cold, skeletal fingers of dread were slowly
wrapping themselves around my throat, squeezing my airway, cutting off the supply of oxygen to my
lungs. There was a high-pitched ringing in my head. "No. No. This is the wrong passport. You have
given me the wrong—the wrong passport—" I turned to my mum, fraught with panic. "Tell them,
mum! Tell them it's the wrong passport!"

Her brow furrowed with concern. "What do you mean, darling?"

"I am *not* Alice!" I cried vehemently, gesturing frantically at the passport. "I know I'm not Alice.
Who am I? Please, please, who am I? Just say my name once—quickly, please!"

She shook her head, her eyes full of worry. "But you *are* Alice, darling," she said in her sweet,
chinging voice. "You're my little Alice."

The high-pitched ringing was getting louder. My temples were pounding and my left arm was
tingling, prickling. "I'm not Alice!" It was a piercing shriek, almost a scream. The bustling activity of
the room suddenly ceased, as every head turned to me, every pair of eyes fixed upon me.

I lurched to my feet and my chair tumbled backwards with a dull thud. "I'M NOT ALICE!" Blindly I
turned and staggered towards the door. I couldn't breathe, I needed—needed air—

There was a series of bright flashes behind me and a noise like lightning striking a tree. Screams,
shouts, paper flying, splintered wood, thick black smoke all around—I reeled into a wall and my
mum was suddenly there, next to me—but she wasn't my mum, how could she be?—she was Alice's
mum, and I wasn't Alice—

She grabbed my arm tightly with her ungloved hand, and I screamed in agony as a sizzling burn shot
up from my wrist to my elbow, as if I were being branded along it by a red-hot iron. The loose sleeve
of my robe fell back and I stared in horror at the jagged letters appearing along my pale skin, one by
one, spelling out in indelible scarlet: M—U—D—B—L—O—O—D—

As the last letter formed my eyes turned up to her face and I saw that her hazel irises were changing
colour, darkening and enlarging, darker and darker, wider and wider, until there were no whites in
her eyes, only horrible, gleaming blackness.

Just as my legs gave way, she made a jerking, turning movement and there was that sickening,
squeezing sensation I had felt once before...

...Then I was on a cold stone floor, panting and twitching and dizzy and sick. The passport was still
clutched in my hand, open to the photo-page. A pretty, plump, blonde girl now stared back at me.
The words were no longer in English, but, presumably, Romanian. *YLENIA MIHAILESCU*, it said.
I threw it from me and began to crawl away, to nowhere, to anywhere.

A brutal blow to my ribs sent me sprawling onto one side. I thought I heard the crack of bone,
although I could feel nothing but the unbearable burn in my arm.

The woman stood over me, an indescribable smile on her mouth. I couldn't tear my eyes from her
face, for it was changing, it was literally changing, as if it were made from molten wax, not flesh. I felt myself retching and retching as her features bubbled and blurred, then refocused and coagulated...until finally, she stood there. The Woman. Resplendent in a ball-gown of glossy black feathers, just as beautiful as she had been on that night, when I had watched her dancing in the moonlight with Lucius.

Her voice was as dulcet as it was deadly. "Luci ought to be more careful with his playthings," she said.

Terror and pain courséd through my veins like a fast-acting poison, paralyzing my muscles. I screwed my eyes tightly shut. Please let this be a dream, I prayed. Please let this not be real. But I couldn't block out the horrific pain in my arm, or the annihilating realisation in my heart. I'm not going home. I don't know my name. She isn't my mum.

There was another sharp blow, this time to my stomach, driving the air from my body with a sickening thud.

"Mummy, I love you!" she mocked me in a high, childish exaggeration of my own voice.

My eyelids snapped open and I nearly choked with rage. I wanted to scream at her to shut up, but I had no breath to give the words voice.

"Don't leave me, Mummy!"

"You're a...monster," I managed to gasp out.

The Woman's eyes narrowed. "So speaks the little mud-blood abomination," she said. I could feel rather than see her pupils moving over me, indistinguishable from their black-saturated surrounds. Her expression was different to the one I had become so used to beholding on Lucius's countenance. It was deeper than disgust, more twisted than hatred. It was...malevolent. As if she would like nothing better than to watch me being flayed alive.

"Where is Lucius?" The question tumbled out of its own accord and I was aware that I fervently wished him near. That I would rather spent an eternity in his captivity than a minute more in the demonic presence of this...this fiend.

"Why?" she said tauntingly. "Do you think he will rescue you?" Then, more quietly: "As if he could give two sickles whether you live or die."

Icy, numbing despair swept over me. "He...he didn't send you to find me?"

The Woman's lip curled. "Do I look like I run errands, mudblood? Do you imagine me to be at any man's beck and call?"

"No," I whispered. My heart was drumming heavily. Lucius hadn't sent her. "Then you're...you're not his wife?" I said faintly. I wanted to move, to get up, but felt pinned like a butterfly to a board by her frightening stare.

She laughed, and once again I was reminded of silvery bells. "His wife..." she said the word scornfully. "His wife was a traitorous whore who deserved every misery she brought upon herself. I only wish I had been present to witness her demise. I would have laughed in her lunatic face."

Immediately I thought of the wailing woman locked away on the third floor of the house I had so recently fled. Prisons within prisons, I thought. I remembered Lucius's silver eyes looking distantly through me as he murmured, "I have no wife...not anymore." ...What had he really meant by that?
"What do you want from me?"

The Woman's ghastly black eyes glinted with malice. "How sweet of you to ask," she murmured. For a moment she seemed to be giving the matter real consideration. "...Well, I should very much like to smash you like a vessel, mudblood, and grind my heel into your aggravating little face. How does that sound for starters?" She smiled at my fear-filled grimace, then added, "Luckily for you, however, your master simply hates it when other people break his toys."

I sat up with a lurch, my anger suddenly usurping my fear. "He's not my master," I exclaimed furiously, "And I am NOT his toy!"

CRACK!

White stars shot before my eyes as my head collided painfully with the hard floor. For a moment everything swarmed darkly around me. When I regained focus the woman was standing over me, the tip of her pointed boot stabbing into the soft flesh under my chin. "Do not dare raise your voice to me, you filthy little worm!" Both her arms were outstretched towards me, fingers splayed and slightly curled, like the talons of a bird-of-prey bearing down on its quarry. The black feathers of her dress only added to this disturbing impression. "You only live because I have decided that death is too good for you."

I felt a hot trickle on my upper lip and realised my nose was bleeding. "Why?" I croaked, my voice breaking on that one, pivotal, ever-futile word. "What is so terrible about me? What have I done to you? I don't know what I've done wrong. I don't even know who I am."

She pressed her boot harder into my neck, forcing my head back so I could barely breathe. I could taste the blood from my nose in the back of my throat. "That, mudblood, is half the fun."

Fun. Fun? ...What kind of evil psychopath are you? I was certain she could read that thought in my eyes, for her own glittered with maniacal pleasure before she removed her boot from my throat and turned to move away from me. The rush of air and blood in my windpipe caused me to nearly choke and when I wiped my face with my hand it came away smeared with bright scarlet.

Even in my fear and pain I could not but help notice the grace of her steps, her lovely curvaceous figure and the ringlets of waist-length hair, black and glossy as a raven's wing. With those horrible eyes no longer connected to mine The Woman was beautiful beyond measure...so beautiful she hardly seemed real.

...Perhaps she wasn't real, perhaps she was some spectral figment of my own broken brain, along with all the other impossibilities: my suddenly altered surroundings, the letters branded into my arm, her grotesquely-morphing appearance...surely these could only be the things of dark dreams?

But the pain was all too real.

And my blood was all too red.

"Get up, worm," The Woman said over her shoulder. "Such pitiful crawling offends my sensibilities." Wincing with pain, I obeyed her command, though I half-expected her to strike me down again. Cradling my still-searing arm, I hurriedly took in my new surroundings for the first time.

I was instantly reminded of the strange dream I had once, of waking up in the bowels of a castle. The walls were bare stone and arched over to form a ceiling, the floor was paved with great flags of unpolished stone. Black, wrought-iron lamps jutted irregularly, flaring with naked flames, providing the only source of light, for there were no windows. There was no way to gauge if I was above or
below ground, although the cold, damp atmosphere certainly felt subterranean. The worst thing was the absence of a door. It was as if I had been walled alive in my own private nightmare.

"What is this p-place?" I stammered, unsure I wanted to know the answer.

The Woman turned back to me, locking me into another of her frightening stares. "This was once a...special kind of kennel, shall we say. Quite fitting for the use to which I intend to put it."

A sickly, smothering claustrophobia was descending over me. She was going to keep me here? "Please," I said desperately, "let me speak to Lucius." I could hardly believe I was saying those words, but now he seemed like the last glimmer of light in a swiftly-enveloping darkness. "I have to see him."

Her ruby lips curved. "May a dog demand to see its master?"

"I'm not a—" I began heatedly, but she made a quick gesture with her fingers and my voice suddenly died in my throat. My lips were still moving, I could feel my vocal chords vibrating, but nothing came out. I clutched my throat, attempting to cry out, then to scream—but there was no sound, not even a whisper. Finally I gave up, panting with exertion, my throat aching and raw. I let my hands drop to my sides, bowed my head and waited.

"That's right, mudblood." She sounded pleased at my submission. "You will curb your brattish tongue or I will cut it from your mouth. I'm sure Lucius would appreciate such an improvement, wouldn't you agree?" She giggled, evidently much entertained by the prospect. "You would do well to adopt a respectful tone when addressing your betters." She made another gesture, and I felt my voice released from its unnatural aphasia. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," I croaked hoarsely. I hated the feeling of debasement as I yielded to her, but my survival instincts had gone into overdrive, warning me against bravado. Too well I remembered that devastating agony that I had already endured once at her hands—for now I was certain it had been her hands—and it was something I never wished to experience again...that I surely could not survive again.

For god's sake don't anger her, Alice! I cautioned myself desperately. Be careful, be docile....

"Tell me, little mudblood," the Woman said suddenly, in an insinuating tone, "what did you and Lucius get up to, all that time together?"

Almost blind-sided by the unexpected question, I felt the blood rush to my cheeks. For a moment I was so confused that I simply couldn't form a reply. "Nothing," I said at last.

"Nothing? You never went to his bed?"

"No!" I said fiercely. I couldn't help flinching at the memory of that night in his bedroom...of his hands in my hair and on my body, of him pinning me with his weight, of those frightening, bruising kisses... Trembling, I dropped my eyes to the floor, afraid that she could read every unbidden thought.

"But you...wanted to, of course?"

"No," I repeated, but this time the word sounded strange, somewhat strangled. As if I did not quite believe myself.

"...Did you fall in love with him, mudblood?" Her voice was now caressing. Dangerous.
"Of course not!" I said, too vehemently.

"Why not?"

I gulped, disoriented by the question. "W-what do you mean?"

She waved her hand impatiently. "All that time...all alone, with a handsome, powerful wi—powerful man. I should think it rather strange if you did not fall in love with him."

Perhaps because it brushed too near some complex, ever-distorting truth, I felt my hackles rising. "He was arrogant and cruel and I hated him," I spat angrily.

"You hated him?" Her eyes seemed to pour into me, extracting and scrutinizing my very thoughts.

To my dismay, I heard myself involuntarily amend, "I mean...he...he hated me."

"But of course he did," she said, sounding faintly amused. "But that would not preclude your falling in love with him, would it? Nor would it prevent him taking you to his bed. For some men—perhaps I may say most men—that hatred is even more enkindling than love."

I hardly knew how to reply and so I stood silently, tongue-tied, face burning.

"You know," she murmured softly, "there is something quite...beautiful about you, mudblood." She began to drift gracefully towards me and it was all I could do to keep my knees from buckling. My arm throbbed excruciatingly as she neared. "Really quite beautiful," she continued. "Oh, I don't mean your appearance—that is commonplace unto insipidity..." She was close enough to touch me now. My insides clenched and twisted with dread. "No..." she murmured, "...no...it isn't your face or figure...it is your fear. It is...irresistible. It...almost...shines..."

"I'm not afraid of you," I said through gritted teeth. It was so absurdly, obviously untrue that when I heard her silvery laugh I actually had the strangest urge to join in.

"It is an amusing little creature," she said with a sigh, reverting to the infuriating third-person. "I can scarcely see how Luci could resist it."

"Perhaps I resisted him," I said combatively.

"Oh, no," she said, with a dismissive gesture. "If it had pleased him to have you, you could not have resisted."

"You don't know me!"

Again, that beautiful, horrible smile. "Wrong, mudblood," she replied. "I know much, much more about you than you do...don't I, little worm?"

I could feel my eyes prickling hotly at the truth of her words. It was unfair, so absolutely, overwhelmingly unfair. "You might know more about you than you do, but you don't know me."

I winced as she raised her hand. I held my breath as, slowly, with the very tip of her pointed nail, she traced a line over my lip and chin, I suppose following the smears of drying blood.

"Strange isn't it," she murmured quietly, almost dreamily, "the things we women do for the men we love. We bleed, we suffer, we lie...sometimes we even die." At the last word her black eyes flickered and glowed with amber veins, like surging flames. "We make of them our gods, and of ourselves
"I don't love him," I insisted urgently, although whether my conviction was for my own benefit, or hers, I could not quite tell.

But she seemed not to hear me. "And yet, how rarely they deserve our devotion," she continued. "How often they merit our contempt...even our wrath." Her hand moved from my face to lightly caress a strand of my tangled hair. "...You are so perfect..." she said, in the same, dreamy voice. "So hungry for affection, for love...so full of beautiful fear. You will break him very soon...oh, yes."

Though I had no idea what she meant, her words ran through me like a rapier. Hungry? I wasn't hungry for affection, I was starving. Wasting away. A sudden, gasping sob escaped me and I staggered away from her, unable to bear those black-saturated eyes, reading me, knowing me, any longer.

"Why are you doing this?" I could hear the despair of my cry echoing around the dank walls of the chamber.

"In time you will know the truth," the Woman replied serenely. "And I hope it may destroy you."

The purity of her hatred branded me deeper than the letters searing my arm. "What have I ever done to you?"

"What have you done?" she snarled suddenly, turning on me with such ferocity that I reeled back in terror. With a flick of her wrist an invisible force sent me hurtling backwards through the air to collide with the stone wall behind me, where I crumpled to the ground in a broken heap. For some seconds there was only darkness and the thud of my heart.

...Then her icy-cold breath on my cheek and her voice whispering in my ear. "What have you done, mudblood? ...You dared to exist. And for that alone, little worm, you must be punished."

"I'm n-not a worm," I mumbled through the throbbing, swimming darkness. "I'm a p-person...with a brain and a...a heart and a n-na—" I stopped.

A name? What name?

She was laughing again. I could feel hot tears escaping my closed eyelids, sliding down my cheeks.

"But you have no name, have you?" she said mockingly. "You are still imaginary little Alice, a borrowed identity, a fictional account. You have no past, no future. Indeed, you are not a 'thing'. You are nothing."

I heard the rustle of her feathered dress as she moved away. There was a thunderous, frightening crack, like a gun-shot, and when I finally managed to haul myself up from the floor and blink blurring vision back into my eyes, I saw that she had simply...disappeared.
...I believe I am in a coma, in a hospital somewhere. I have been in a car crash, or knocked off a bicycle. I have sustained severe injuries to my body and brain.

Friends and family come to see me every day. They speak to me as if I can hear everything. They never cry, they want to be strong for me. They wonder if I'm dreaming. They hope so. They hope my dreams are of butterflies and meadows.

They don't know I'm stuck in this world, where impossible, terrifying things happen to a girl called Alice.

And in this world there is a heartless, silver-eyed angel, and he is Life.

And there is a cruel, black-haired sorceress, and she is Death.

The angel and the sorceress have shut Alice in a stone prison, and there is nothing she can do, because she is me. And I'm in a coma, in a hospital somewhere, and the stone prison is my mind.

I'm trapped.

...This is what I have to believe. I don't know what else to.

...I sat propped against the stone wall, dazed, dizzy, fighting wave after wave of cramping nausea that wracked my body.

Pain was everywhere. It seeped into the marrow of my bones, knotted the threads of my muscles, ran through my veins, throbbed with my pulse. My arm was burning, my back ached and my ribs seemed to be stabbing my insides with each shallow breath. My head was pounding like there was someone inside it, trying to break out of my skull with a hammer. Even the lacerations in my hands and feet were stinging badly, although I'd hardly noticed them since I had been on the run. Hope had acted as an anesthetizing emollient in my body, and now that hope had packed up and moved out, there was no more buffer between me and pain.

And I just felt so tired.

I felt like I couldn't remember what it was like to not feel tired, or afraid, or in pain. I was beginning to think that frightened, pain-filled exhaustion was my 'normal'. The default setting for me.

The cold, hard stone was quickly siphoning out what little warmth and energy I had left. It wasn't an unwelcome feeling. Numbness. Numbness seemed a good thing to aspire to. The safest way to cope.

My spine and tail bone began to ache, but I dully consigned the discomfort to the general conglomerate of 'The Pain That Is Me' and stayed put, knees drawn up, staring around the chamber. More like a dungeon than a chamber, I thought. I smiled bitterly at myself. I had gone from sumptuous guest-room, to concrete prison cell, to a stone dungeon in the space of...what?...36 hours?

I was unnerved by the distorting patterns created by the flickering wall-lamps and even more so by the places that their light did not reach, where the shadows seemed like black holes leading into an
infinite of darkness.

...I wondered how long I would be here.

Who would be the next person I would see? The Woman, or Lucius? Or both of them? Perhaps neither of them. Perhaps I would slowly starve to death and one day, a hundred years from now, excavators would discover a small, curled-up pile of dry bones, my bones, and ponder on the sorry fate of the person they once belonged to.

The thought of seeing Lucius again added yet more confusion to the mess in my head that passed for rational thought nowadays.

It was...frightening, but I was more frightened of not seeing him. He was the only person in my relentlessly restricted world I could...what?—trust?...Did you really just think that, Alice?

But, in a way, it was true. I could trust him—not to be kind, or merciful, or even to not hurt me—but at least to treat me as a human being. To afford me some basic decency. I had no such guarantee with her. She was just so entwined in darkness; it terrified me to the point of incapacity. She seemed to reek with it, it leaked from her very pores, clung to her like a shadow. She had...powers. I had seen them. I had experienced them. It was no use trying to deny it, however much I wished to. She was...not of this earth. I didn't know from where she came and I didn't want to know. The mere thought of her inky white-less eyes turned my heart to a cold lump of stone.

By comparison, Lucius seemed a beacon of light and truth. Of course, he was neither.

He would be angry with me, of that I had no doubt. Would I be punished? ...Physically? Mentally? ...Well, either way, I prayed that he would be the one to mete my punishment, to dole out the inevitable 'consequences' that he had threatened me with from the very beginning. I would rather Lucius broke my fingers every single day, than face the untold horrors in store for me at the hands of The Woman. I could only pray that she really did intend to return 'Lucius's toy' back to him. In one piece.

I thought about the strange conversation we had shared, just before she had disappeared. What had she meant, asking those things about how I...felt about him? Implying that I—I was—

And how could I defend myself against her insinuations when I didn't even know, understand, what it was that I did feel? Two days ago I had made the decision to flee the man. At the time it had seemed absolutely imperative to do so...I had felt on the brink of suffocation, smothered by his control, strangled by his secrets...

But now...now he seemed my last, my only, hope...

________________________________________________

"Wake up, mudblood."

Those three words, whispered into my ear, pulled me out of a deep, exhausted slumber I hadn't realised I had fallen into.

I had the immediately-sickening sensation of waking up, not from a nightmare, but into one.

She was stooping closely over me and groggily I registered that she was winding something around my wrists...a thin cord, biting into my flesh.
"You know," she said quietly, "when a female expects a gentleman's company, she ought to properly prepare herself."

My heart leaped with a wild, uncontainable hope, jolting me fully awake.

*Lucius*...

I tried to peer over her shoulder, wondering if he was already standing there, somewhere in the shadows...

The Woman smiled at my blatancy. "So eager..." she said. "So impatient to run back to your prison—or is it to your keeper?"

I didn't deny it. "Where...is he?" My throat was dry and my voice raspy. I realised I was terribly thirsty.

She shook her head and her black ringlets shone glossily in the flame-light. "I told you, mudblood. First, you must prepare."

"How?" I croaked. Immediately I wished I hadn't asked. The points of her pupils snapped open, dilating to the terrifying orbs of gleaming blackness.

"Well, little worm..." she spoke with a kind of tender malice, "when receiving male company, the first thing a woman must do is to ensure she is presentable."

She reached down to the floor and began to drag her palm through the dust, back and forth. Slowly, deliberately, she raised her hand to my face and smeared the dirt down my cheek and across my mouth. Her hand was cold, but the contact seemed to sear, to sizzle, forcing a puff of pain from my lips. I tried to wrench myself away from her, but with my wrists bound together I succeeded only in tipping myself onto one side.

She giggled in that pretty, chiming way that I had come to fear and detest more than any other sound.

"She should also be properly attired," she said, making a small flicking gesture with her hands. There was a sensation of friction on my flesh, then the stark coldness of raw stone against bare skin and an intense feeling of vulnerability and exposure. The realisation that I was completely naked hit me moments later, and I curled into a tight ball.

"Stop it!" I gasped, but she merely grasped a fistful of my hair and twisted my face up towards her.

"And she should be properly arranged." The gleam of a silver blade flashed near my eyes and I screwed my eyes shut, clenched my teeth and waited for Pain.

*Go on, you crazy bitch,* I thought. *Just add it to the pile*...

But there was no pain, only several hard tugs on my hair and a sound like something ripping, followed by another gleeful laugh. There was a tickling sensation on my face. When I opened my eyes The Woman was standing over me, a thick bunch of hair—my hair—clutched in her fist and she was sprinkling it over me in a shower of feathery strands. My bound hands went automatically to my head, patting frantically at the ragged patch where she had hacked off a large clump near the roots.

More than my dirt-smeared, blood-caked face, more than my nakedness, more than the pain I was in—it was this, this last degradation that sent me hurtling towards the precipice of despair.
It's just hair, I thought, trying desperately to hold myself together.

But it wasn't 'just' my hair that she had sheared off and thrown contemptuously back at me. It was something far more precious—my dignity, my very sense of autonomy—that could not so readily be regrown. A strangled sound escaped my lips and my shoulders started shaking with sharp little jerks.

"Snivelling again, mudblood? How truly pathetic you are." She said it so sweetly, as if offering a compliment. "How you fall beneath even my far-from elevated expectations."

She knelt and pulled me back upright. Still wielding the silver implement, she ran it lightly, caressingly, over my collar bone, zig-zagging it up my throat with just enough pressure to force me to tilt my head backwards. She rested the edge of the blade just beneath my jawline, catching the moisture slipping down my cheek. "You should thank me, worm, for preparing you so nicely for company."

"No—please," I whispered through my sobs, as the significance of her words sunk in, "please...I don't want him to see me like th-this...please, give me back my clothes..."

"Why?" she taunted. Her lips were so near mine I could taste the unnatural iciness of her breath. "Are you afraid he may be violently overcome by your charms? Claim you here, on the floor, in the dirt?" She stared into my eyes with a mixture of amusement and revulsion. Then her lips curved up cruelly. "Well, perhaps he may. There's no accounting for some tastes."

My tears fell even more thickly at her humiliating taunts.

Suddenly she shoved me against the wall, knocking my head against the stone. "Stupid little thing," she snarled softly. "Don't you realise? To a man like him, the only thing more appealing than vanquishing a woman, is saving her." Her gaze ran over every part of me, lingering on each mottled bloom of dark bruising, each jaggedly engraved laceration, as if admiring her handiwork. "Don't you want to be saved?"

My head was reeling with pain, confusion and distress. Saved? Yes, I wanted to be saved—I wanted him to save me—from here, from her...but to be forced to crawl back, naked, bloody, shorn, helpless, humiliated?

I hate you, I thought silently, fervently, I hate you for doing this to me.

Smiling, she leaned in closely to whisper in my ear, "I know."

She stood, turned and made a fluid waving gesture at the far wall.

The whole chamber began to rumble and shudder and there was a heavy scraping sound of stone moving on stone. Transfixed, horrified, fascinated, I watched as a section of the wall began sinking into itself, the blocks swivelling and reforming, until I was staring into a door-shaped hole in the wall, an entrance-way, leading into immediate darkness.

The outrageousness of what I had just witnessed was too much for me. I shrugged it numbly off me, washed my hands of it.

...I am in a coma, in a hospital somewhere...

But as soon as that comforting nihilistic thought entered my head, it was gone, abandoned—I was here—this was real—those echoing footsteps were real...

I heard myself make a small gulping noise, my eyes riveted to the sunken opening in the wall.
He emerged from the darkness like an apparition of light and shadow.

In the flame-light his long hair gleamed like a halo, framing that too-sharp, too-beautiful, too-severe face. ...Had I really believed I could erase that face from my consciousness? More readily could I have erased my own...

Our eyes connected, and the briefest flicker of shock passed over his features—and I knew then, that whatever the pretext The Woman had given him to come, it had not been to see me. She was watching his countenance with a complacent smirk and she clapped her hands with mock-girlishness. "But how nice of you to join us, Luci! We've been awaiting your arrival like two giggling schoolgirls."

Almost—almost imperceptibly, he shook his head, as if he were disappointed in me...no, for me. As if to say, 'You escaped me only to end up here, you foolish girl?'

A delicate, golden thread of hope tingled through my body. Did he...could he...care?

He turned his silver eyes from me to her and made a slight, elegant bow. "Good evening, milady," he said smoothly. My whole body thrummed to his voice, though he spoke with suave impassivity, as if he were visiting on the most mundane of errands. "I trust I find you well?"

The Woman glided over to him to give him her hand. "All the better for seeing you again," she replied as he brushed her fingers with his lips. "How very sweet of you to accept my invitation."

"You know I am a selfish man; I never deny myself any pleasure."

His elaborate gallantry set off her tinkling laughter. "In that case," she replied, "how fortunate our pleasures coincide."

Stepping further into the chamber, Lucius surveyed the unprepossessing surroundings. "Charming what you've done with the place," he drawled with urbane irony. "Entertain here often, do you?"

"Oh, now and then. When the fancy takes me. I decorated it myself, you know."

"Indeed? You ladies always have the knack for making an environment feel homely."

I felt as if I were watching a carefully staged drawing-room play. Their witticisms were at once so formal, yet so prosaic, it appeared to me that they were each playing a character—though if it were for each other's benefit, or for mine, I could not tell.

I stared up at Lucius, longing for him to look at me again, to reassure myself that I hadn't been mistaken—that he really did feel something for me, closer to pity than hate...but now he seemed to be deliberately avoiding, not only my gaze, but my whole self. As if I were just another shadow on the floor.

The woman tugged on the sleeve of his long robe playfully. "Well, Lucius?" She smiled archly at him. "Aren't you going to thank me?"

"For what, pray?"

"Don't tease, you naughty boy! You know perfectly well what." She pointed at me. "That."

His eyes brushed over me briefly, but still would not reconnect with mine. "I hardly know whether to
"Thank you or not," he murmured at length. "The trouble it has caused me...I begin to wonder if the effort is worth the reward."

She pouted coquettishly. "Oh don't be like that, Luci," she said. "Look, you've hurt its feelings."

I suppose my face was expressing something of confusion and rising panic. Though I felt he must—surely must be playing a part, I couldn't harden myself against an appalling new doubt...what if he didn't want me back? What if he refused? I thought of my wretched appearance, my pathetic, sorry state. ...Perhaps...perhaps I wasn't worth it...

"I could kill it, if you prefer me to," she said, and she might have been speaking about stepping on a flea. "It was, and still is, my gift to you, to do with what you will."

There was tension in the lines of his shoulders, I could see it even though half the room divided us. I had always been able to read his body better than his facial expressions, which had always been so rigidly fixed into impassivity or contempt. But our close proximity for so long had honed my instincts to tune into what his face concealed, and now it seemed to me he was calculating something, weighing which card to play, which to keep hidden...

"No," he said at last. "I haven't quite...finished with it yet."

I saw The Woman suppress a smile. "Well, Lucius," she said, "if you don't want it back and you don't want me to kill it, I suppose it will have to stay here." She made a sigh of mock-irritation. "I can certainly think of better ways to wile away the hours than bestowing my hospitality on worthless mudbloods...but not much better."

I knew what was coming a split second before she moved and brought my bound arms up in a futile gesture of defense. But I couldn't stop it. The pain smashed into me like an avalanche, poured over me like a tsunami, howled through me like a tornado, and there was nothing to do but try to scream it out of me, scream and scream and—

—scream—for someone—nameless, but not faceless—

—features, pointed and precise—grey-eyes—smiling—beautiful—

—who would save me—I knew, because he had saved me before—before, when I fell, when I was falling—before, when I was—I was a—

"Enough." Lucius's voice cut through the agony; quiet, but not quite calm. And as quickly as it had come, the pain was gone, leaving me twitching, faint and drenched in sweat.

Desperately I clutched on to the image in my head, but, like the pain, it had flared and disappeared and all was black again. I began to sob, not for what I had endured, but for what I had so briefly seen, but could not tether—the glimpse of someone who must have meant something to me, in my old life...my lost life.

"There, there, mudblood," The Woman tutted, and never had I hated her voice more. "You mustn't take rejection so much to heart. We'll have lots of fun together, you and I."

"Please," I whispered hoarsely, through lips bitten and bloody. "Please Lucius...don't...don't leave me here..."

But he wouldn't look at me—he was turning away—moving back to the door—

"NO! DON'T LEAVE ME!" The scream tore itself from my lungs.
He stopped.

Horrified at myself, but powerless to stop, I scrabbled onto my knees and began to awkwardly crawl to him, sobbing, grovelling. "Please don't leave me here! Take me away—please, Lucius, take me with you..." I crawled until I was lying at his feet, clutching at the intricately-embroidered hem of his long robe.

A part of my mind seemed to detach and from somewhere outside of myself I watched the pathetic tableau of a terrified girl—stripped as much of her pride as her clothes, abasing herself at her tormentor's feet—and I felt an acute surge of emotion. Not of abhorrence or self-disgust, but of righteous pity. ...Pride, what was pride? Could you eat it? Did it provide oxygen? Did pride protect you from fear—terror—pain? No. Pride was no prisoner's friend. It garnered punishments, and paid out from a poor purse, scant winnings of false hope and dangerous defiance. To the captive, pride was the lock at the end of the chain. To the condemned, it was the noose at the end of the rope.

Pride was only a luxury for people who had choices, who had power, who had names.

Heartsick, but fascinated despite myself, I bore witness to...me, on my knees, cringing with supplication, doing that which I had sworn I never would. Begging.

My whole body was quaking and shuddering with desperation, for I had no more cards to play. I had sacrificed my last vestige of self-respect to him and if he were to reject the offering, my game was up. There was only pain and death for me here. Of that I was certain.

A glint in Lucius's eyes reeled my mind back into my body. I stopped gibbering and clung to his silver-steel gaze, scarcely daring to breathe.

From somewhere behind me I heard The Woman's mocking voice. "It does fawn on you very prettily, Luci. Leave it with me a while longer and I'll have it licking the soles of your boots."

"I believe she would do so now, come to that," he said softly, but though his words derided, his eyes did not.

"Please," I whispered. "Help me."

Twice before I had plead his mercy. Once, to take away the agony of my broken fingers, and again, when I was delirious with pain-fuelled fever. Both times he had relented, had taken pity on me. I felt that, with that between us, that shared knowledge of his...helping me, he couldn't turn his back on me now. He had, deliberately or not, created a dual role for himself, as both my subjugator and my saviour.

Suddenly he bent down and caught my shoulders, pulling me roughly up to stand. He shook me once then held me still—still and close—his eyes riveted to mine. "Why should I take you back, mudblood?" he murmured, his lips near to my own. "What need have I for you? Have I ever had of you?"

Though his fingers dug bruisingly into my arms, his touch was like an ataractic drug, and I felt my erratic heartbeat slowing and my blood calming. I remembered the first night we had met, when I had broken the brandy glass. Then, his scent had been hypnotic and foreign. Now it was so familiar. Even...reassuring. Vaguely, I wondered why I had ever thought it expedient to run away. It seemed now that the only place I belonged was with him. Hurting me, helping me.

"You d-don't." My voice, like my body, was shaking violently. "You don't need me...but I...I need you. ...Please."
The Woman drifted into the periphery of my vision, just behind Lucius's wide shoulders. I could feel her black eyes, glittering with triumph. "They're capricious creatures, are they not?" she said. "One moment biting the hand that feeds them, the next grovelling and snivelling like spaniels."

Neither of us acknowledged her; at that moment, she didn't even exist.

"I need you," I repeated.

There was something in his eyes I had never seen before. I was reminded of the silver orb of veiled sunlight I had marvelled at yesterday, of the streams of pale light that had broken through the murky stratus.

I was reaching him. Finally. Finally I was breaking through.

Lucius removed his robe and drew it around my shoulders, binding me tightly into it, like a cocoon. The thick material was heavy, and warm with his body heat...so warm...I closed my eyes, trembling. ...

Safe. I'm safe...

He pulled me tightly against him, and I buried my head into his solid, warm chest, shivering. "Please, Lucius," I whispered. "Take me home."

... END OF PART ONE
A New Day

Chapter Notes

A/N Congratulations, dear followers and friends...we have made it to Part II! Let me mentally shake your hand and say how nice it has been to have had you along for the journey so far. I want to thank every reviewer whose feedback I've been honoured with. Your encouragement and support is incredibly important to me, and I cherish every single review. Special acknowledgement and thanks to my lovely beta and friend StoryWriter831, without whom I could not tell this story. JK Rowling owns everything (strew garlands before her and praise her name).

I hope you enjoy the next stage of the journey :)  
xox artful scribbler

...  
PART TWO  
...

Everything was the same. Everything was different.

I awoke in my bed with no recollection of getting there.

The last thing I remembered was the feeling of strong arms gathering me in a tight embrace. …No, that wasn't quite right. The last thing I remembered was Lucius's face close to mine, murmuring something to me in slow-motion...but I couldn't make out his words, I couldn't move, and there was a swarming darkness I could fend off no longer...

I left that nightmarish world, begging and abased: a shivered husk, a fractured doll.

I awoke a changed woman.

I—I was the same, yet different. Both lost and found. I had gone through fire, been twisted and warped and stripped to my core...but what was left was something true. In order not to break, I had been forced to bow. But to him whom I bowed, I owed my life. He had saved me.

I felt I could now face him without fear. If he mocked me, or tried to hurt me, it didn't matter. I was protected by the knowledge that he didn't hate me. Not truly. He had not triumphed in my degradation, or revelled in the shattering of my pride. He had gathered the pieces, bound them in his mercy, and borne them away to safety. Do what he would, he could no longer make me believe that he didn't care.

It was morning. A new day.

With a struggle I sat up, my limbs trembling with feebleness, but not with fear. The terror of yesterday’s events held no more power over me, I felt only relief. Because everything was the same, and yet everything—everything—had changed...
I gazed around me.

My room was as if I'd never left it. The windowpane had been replaced, and all was as grand, opulent and familiar as before...and yet the light had changed. The pale glare was now softer, warmer, for the snow outside was gone. And floating through the thick walls was a sound which had never penetrated them before: a bird's song, heralding the spring.

Ignoring the protests of my aching body, I left my bed, and, as I had so many times before, I limped over to my old foe, the gilt-framed mirror.

It told me a similarly dual narrative.

It was the first time I had seen, really seen myself naked, since that very first morning so long ago. I realised I was thinner now, my skin paler, my hair darker. I combed my fingers through my tangled curls, brushing it forwards to cover the unsightly patch sheared off on one side. My face was marked and streaked with dried blood, and dark bruises blossomed in clusters over my stomach, ribs and back—although I was relieved to discover the welts on my arm had faded to faint scratches, and no longer burned.

The bright hope I had encountered in my eyes at the truck-stop bathroom was quite extinguished now...and yet, it had been replaced by something else, something that made my pupils dilate to velvet pools, and back-lit my irises so they seemed to shine with a tawny glow...there was a subtle rosiness tinting my usually-too-pallid cheeks and lips...despite the battered surface, I looked somehow radiant.

...I turned away from the mirror, afraid lest that oracle reveal too much to me.

Entering the bathroom, I saw that the robe-stand was empty. Before, I would have met this omission with anger and panic, but not today. I moved back into the bedroom and approached the towering wardrobe, then slowly drew open its double doors.

My breath caught.

Just as I had somehow known it would be, the wardrobe was now fully furnished with clothes...beautiful clothes, in that distinctively historical fashion that seemed synonymous with the house and its master. For if Lucius always dressed like some Renaissance prince, these clothes seemed fit for a princess. Voluminous skirts, delicate blouses, diaphanous dresses...the styles spanned hundreds of years of fashion, abruptly curtailling at some point in the late nineteenth century. High-waisted Regency, full-skirted Victorian, even the wide-sleeved flowing lines of the medieval age—all represented in rich, shimmering fabrics, all exquisite to a fault...

An unfamiliar but pleasant scent seeped out into the air, not of expensive perfume, as one might expect from such a collection, but something more earthy and organic...it reminded me of sweet herbs.

I reached out and gingerly caressed one of the garments, wondering to whom it had once belonged. Evidently a woman who had liked the colour green. His wife? The wailing woman? ...The thought was disconcerting, and made me shiver.

I was relieved to see that besides these gorgeous creations, the wardrobe also contained several robes. They were plusher than the woollen one I had worn before, the fabrics obviously expensive, all satin-lined and fur-trimmed. Peeping out from beneath all of these garments, at the bottom of the wardrobe, were countless pairs of delicately-embroidered and beaded slippers. They did not look at all practical, but they would certainly be preferable to padding around in my bare feet as I had for so
many months.

So, Alice, I thought, *he's finally decided to treat you like a human being...does that mean he will start to act like one?*

I selected one of the plainer robes and a pair of slippers. The dresses I left undisturbed. It was enough that they had been offered.

In a strangely pacific state of mind, I bathed and dressed.

The robe I had chosen was of forest-green twill, which clung comfortingly to my body like a soft blanket. I changed the parting of my wet hair to conceal the shorn patch, then braided it tightly to keep it in place.

As I moved over to the door, I had the oddest feeling that I had gone back in time...that I was somehow starting over with a blank slate.

Everything was the same. Yet everything was different.

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The front door stood invitingly open, beckoning me outside.

For a moment I paused at the top of the stone stairs and looked about me. How changed the house now appeared, no longer cloaked in snowy severity! Only days ago, it had seemed a forbidding prison. Now, with the morning sun spilling down its ancient facade, it had a charming and tranquil aspect. Even the climbing roses, which had so cruelly ripped through my bare skin, were now flowering with small, pretty white buds. It seemed incredible that it should change so much in such a short time...or perhaps I was looking at it differently, through newly-enchanted eyes.

As I descended the steps I noticed a small cobbled path leading around to the side of the house, and this I instinctively followed. I passed beneath an arched frame, thickly overgrown with foliage, which lead me through to a wilderness of shrubs and trees. Moments later the the greenery parted to reveal a wide expanse of manicured lawn.

To one side of the lawn was a paved terrace, and upon this a marble table stood, flanked by long benches. A silver tea-service in its centre gleamed brightly in the morning sun.

Also gleaming brightly was the sheet of snow-blond hair belonging to the man seated there.

Lucius was dressed in crisp morning-grey, the lines of his long body relaxed but elegantly composed. He seemed to have been waiting for me: he beckoned me with the slightest movement of his left hand. A wisp of smoke spiralled from his right hand, and I realised he was holding a slim cigar. I had never seen him smoking before.

As I approached him, my heartbeat quickened, but it wasn't with anxiety or apprehension. Why should I be afraid? My life was safe in his hands. My pride, I had already forfeited to him. I had little enough else left to sacrifice.

...I expected to feel a pang of humiliation, remembering that, only hours ago, I had grovelled, naked, at his feet...but strangely I did not feel humiliated. As our eyes connected, I was aware of only a sense of serenity and elation, and...I hardly knew what else.

"Come, be seated," Lucius murmured when I neared. His gaze brushed over me, taking in at a
glance my choice of garment without comment. There was something in his expression that made me glad I had decided not to wear one of the dresses.

He made no directive gestures as to where I should sit, so I stationed myself opposite him. I wanted, I needed, to see his eyes. I had to look for something in them, to search for an answer to the question I had read in my own eyes, in the gilt-framed glass. ...As yet, their slate-silver depths were unreadable...but not cold, like before. Not hard.

At that moment, with the sharp angles of his face softened in the morning light, and a gentle zephyr coiling his silken hair, Lucius had never seemed more beautiful to me. I felt it physically, almost like a pain. He's different too, I thought. This change has touched everything, even him. Especially him.

"Welcome back," he said, when I had settled in my place.

"Thank you," I replied.

"Will you have some—?" he gestured to the tea-service.

"Yes please," I said rather hastily, for I was aware this was the first time he was deigning to join me in the so-pleasantly-ordinary ritual of taking tea.

Unhurriedly, he set his cigar to one side and poured out two cups. His hand was firm as he handed one cup to me—mine was less steady in receiving it.

I heaped in several lumps of sugar and an overload of cream, and, happening to glance up, I was surprised to encounter an expression on Lucius's face, something very unlike the sneering derision I was used to. Flushing, I dropped my teaspoon, and it fell onto the paving with a small clatter.

Once Lucius would have mocked my clumsiness, but today he merely proffered another teaspoon without comment.

For a while there was no sound but the skittering of leaves on stone, and the pleasant chime of silver on china. At length Lucius spoke. "You left so abruptly I was not able to bid you farewell."

There was a note of irony in his voice, which I returned in kind. "I didn't want to create a scene."

"...And yet it was quite a scene I extracted you from, two nights since."

Two nights? Had I been unconscious that long? A sudden shudder ran over my body, and my eyes dropped to my teacup. I nodded. "Yes," I said.

There was another silence, and I sensed rather than saw Lucius resume smoking his cigar. Again he spoke, this time more quietly. "Why did you run away, Alice?"

My eyes snapped back up to his. "You know why," I replied shortly.

"It was not wise."

A resentful smile curled my mouth. "Perhaps in my real life I am not a wise person. I wouldn't know."

Ignoring my sarcasm, he tapped the ash from his cigar and briefly replied, "Perhaps."

"You would have done the same, in my position," I said challengingly, wanting him to concede something to me.
At this he looked amused. "I? I should never have waited so long," he said.

His reply stung me. He sounded so blasé, as if escaping from him should have been the simplest thing in the world for me to accomplish. "No," I replied heatedly, "I guess it would have been an easy thing for—for someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"Yes," I continued, attempting to counteract the sting with a venom of my own, "someone so calculating a-and cold, so...so wholly without feelings."

His eyes narrowed. "Wholly without feelings, am I?" he said, his silvery irises glinting.

I knew I had strayed into dangerous territory, but could not find a way to retreat. Instead, I took refuge in taking a gulp of tea.

"...Well, my dear," he said, and there was now a perceptible edge to his smooth voice, "do you know how I felt, when I discovered you had gone?"

I thought of the vision I had had of him thudding his fists against the door-frame of my room. "You were angry," I mumbled.

"No," he contradicted me. "I was relieved." The harshness of his words made me wince. "I was glad that you had gone. I never sought your company, and, indeed, it has caused me no little trouble over these many months."

I gasped, staring up at him. "I caused you trouble? You can really say that, a-after everything I've been through—everything you put me through?"

"Yes," he replied bluntly. "I have lost count of the times I regretted not leaving you to expire on my doorstep that...fateful evening."

I wish you had, I thought miserably, for I couldn't, couldn't speak.

"However," he continued, "for those two days that you were gone, I waited. Waited for news of what had become of you...if you had made it to safety, or if you had been discovered dead in a ditch somewhere." His eyebrow arched, and the corners of his mouth flicked up in a strange, wry smile. "...And then it occurred to me that I rather hoped you weren't dead."

Warmth spiralled slowly over me as his words sank in, ameliorating the hurt he had recently inflicted. I turned my face away, not wishing him to see the dampness on my cheeks. He cared. He cares.

"And as I waited, I prepared..."

"Prepared for what?" I whispered.

"For prison, of course," he said, almost lightly.

Strange to say, I had never actually thought of this eventuality. My lips felt numb as I stammered, "I w-wouldn't—I never would have—"

My faltering words were interrupted by his sharp laugh. "Oh, believe me, Alice, the moment you know who you are, and who I am—that will be among the last I enjoy as a free man."

My stomach twisted sickeningly. "Then we really are enemies?" I asked. "We really do...hate each
other in real life?"

"Since the moment we met."

"But why?"

He smiled sardonically. "Irreconcilable differences, my dear."

Somehow the bitterness of his words did not match the almost _caressing_ tone of his voice. I shook my head. "No," I said firmly. "I don't believe I could hate you—not now, not anymore. I...I'm...I think that I'm—"

"Close your foolish mouth, mudblood," he said softly.

I did, but I fear my eyes were betraying full as much as my tongue suppressed. A lump in my throat made it difficult to swallow. "Then why take me back? If I'm such a burden—if we hate each other so terribly—why bother saving me from _Her_?"

Lucius did not immediately answer. His gaze detached, unfocused, as if he were seeing something, or someone, just beyond me. Absently he drew on his cigar. "Not for your sake, alone," he murmured.

"Nor for yours," I added.

His eyelids flickered and his pupils trained upon me once more. "...No. Nor mine."

I nodded. I knew—perhaps I always knew—that there was someone else, to whom we were both somehow inextricably bound and beholden.

"Lucius...for the sake of that person, for whom you took me back...will you return me to my family?"

His jaw muscles tightened. "That is impossible," he said.

"Why? Why is it impossible? I swear I would never betray you—"

"No," he cut in, the word bristling with finality.

I gulped. "It's her, isn't it?" I said. My voice had started to tremble. "She has some kind of hold over you—blackmail, or—"

"Be silent, Alice," Lucius interrupted me again, and there was something quietly imperative in his voice which made me obey. "...It is not...safe..."

...to speak of her... I read the remainder of the sentence in his eyes. A creeping disquietude spooled along my spine. Who—_what_ was she? From what terrible, hellish place had she escaped, to hold such dominion over both our lives?

"_She_ is the reason you won't tell me who I am, isn't she?" I hissed.

He did not answer, and I bit my lip, thinking. "What if I were to run away again?"

Lucius shrugged. "I'll not stop you. You may leave now, if you want. But I believe it would be tantamount to suicide, if that's what you wish for."

I felt the truth of his words. _She_ had found me once, when I ought to have been beyond all danger,
and I doubted not she would do so again. Her strange, unworldly powers seemed to be directed through a lens of calamitous hatred towards me. I wouldn't survive another encounter with her, of that I was quite certain.

For a moment I sat toying with the delicate, gilded handle of my teacup, gathering the courage to submit my next question. "Lucius, may I ask you something?"

He waved his hand in a gracefully affirmative gesture.

I took a deep, determined breath. "Is there something...wrong with me? With my brain, I mean?" I blushed for the awkwardness of my question. "I have seen things...so many things, that just don't make sense. Things that couldn't be possible. I'm afraid I might be...damaged in some way."

"We established long ago that you may be suffering the effects of trauma," he replied coolly.

"I know, but...don't...don't you see them too?"

"See what, Alice?"

"All the impossible things that happen!" My voice was urgent now, pleading. "Things, objects—moving, disappearing, changing...don't you notice them? Can't you see them? And the—the things she did to me..." I trailed off, shivering as a chill breeze swept by, rustling through the surrounding trees. "...I just wonder if all this is really happening...or if it's just some kind of hallucination..."

"If that were the case, I would be the first to excuse myself from it," said Lucius, his mouth twisting cynically.

"But then, if I'm not hallucinating, I must be losing my mind," I said glumly. "Along with my memories...soon there will be nothing left."

Then, very quietly, very slowly Lucius murmured, "Did it ever occur to you to simply believe what you have seen?"

"W-what do you mean?"

A strange look passed over his face, a kind of reckless defiance—self-defiance—glimmering in his eyes. "I mean, my dear, that rather than questioning your sanity, why do you not accept the things you see as reality?"

For a moment I stared speechlessly up at him, wrestling with the implication of his words. "Because...because if it is reality...then I live in a world I do not understand...or...or I have..."

"Or you have forgotten," he finished the sentence for me.

I had forgotten? My vision blurred and there was a strange buzzing inside my head. ...Forgotten a world where the impossible was possible?...

A sudden, blinding whiteness flashed behind my eyes and I cried out, screwing my eyes closed and clutching my head. I heard the smash of china on stone as I knocked my cup off the table, and I rocked backwards as a second flash hit me—but this time the outline of a face was superimposed upon the whiteness—a face I had seen in the throes of agony last night—

I opened my eyes, gasping.
Lucius was standing, leaning over the table, his hands wrapped around my wrists, and I realised he had stopped me from toppling backwards. His face was pale.

"I s-saw him again," I stammered out, hardly knowing what I said.

Lucius went paler still. "Who?" he said hoarsely.

"The boy...the boy who looks like you."

Lucius let go of my wrists and I slumped forwards, dizzy and faint.

I heard him moving away, his boots scuffing the tiles as if he were not quite steady on his feet. When the sickening undulations receded enough for me to look up, I saw him standing at the end of the terrace, his back to me. His head was unbowed, his spine ramrod straight...but I could see strain in the lines of his shoulders, as if it were taking all his strength to bear some terrible burden which lay across them. Defeat and despair wrapped about that proud, erect form like an invisible film, subduing the tangible power that had always crackled around him like a live entity.

And for the first time I...I pitied him.

He's your son, isn't he?

I couldn't say the words aloud, but I knew. I had seen that boy every day in the man before me: the same sharply-chiselled, arresting features, the same haughtily tilted head, the same unconsciously arrogant bearing... Their similarities were striking; but more so their differences. For in those brief seconds of illumination, I had also seen a mouth that smiled softly, without the curl of contempt. Grey eyes that shone mildly, and did not glitter with icy rage or burning hatred. I had seen gentleness and kindness, and something like—like gratitude?

And that was not all. I had seen that beautiful face elsewhere, too... The moving photo in Lucius's bureau. I had met those eyes—only for a moment, but now recalled vividly to mind—just before Lucius had slammed my hands so cruelly in the drawer.

There was a painful swelling sensation within my chest, as if my heart was trying to tell me that which my mind could not: the beautiful boy had meant something to me. A lot to me...but it wasn't love, not in the romantic sense. Swirling through my blood, my being, was an innate kind of tenderness and trust, and a fierce protectiveness. And anchoring it all, an inexpressible sadness, a sense of terrible loss...tinged with something metallic, something that tasted like blood on my tongue. Guilt.

We had lost him—we had both lost him. And somehow it was my fault.

I remembered the words that had headlined the photo. "Tragedy At Training College." Tragedy. What tragedy? ...What had I done?

I was still too shaken to move or speak. Vaguely I wondered if it was better not to know what had happened. To never find out. Perhaps, rather than losing my memories, I had actually suppressed them; maybe the truth had been too terrible for me to cope with. Perhaps everything I had gone through was some kind of self-imposed sentence, some kind of extreme penance to expiate extreme guilt.

The dizziness was receding, but there was a heavy ache behind my eyes. To add to the confusion, Lucius's recent words—"Why do you not accept the things you see as reality?"—spun in the dark void of my missing memory, enormously important, and yet frustratingly nonsensical to me. ...But I couldn't think about them, not right now, not with him standing there, as lustreless and burdened as a
monument of Atlas.

Shakily, I rose from my seat and went to his side.

Lucius didn't acknowledge my presence—he did not so much as blink—but somehow, I'm not sure how, his right hand closed around my left one. His skin was warm and smooth, his strong fingers firmly and gently encasing, and I felt his thumb brushing my palm in the lightest of caresses. For such a touch I would have gladly crossed deserts.

Time suspended, the world stalled on her axis; we stood side by side, united in unspeaking sorrow: me, for a loss I could not remember; he, for one he could never forget... In a kind of trance I imagined myself as a second statue, connected forever to this man of marble...long years, decades, centuries passing, moss and lichen gradually covering us over, creeping ivy binding us together...until we were completely enclosed and hidden from the world...never to be found...

This strange reverie was broken by the sudden billowing of the sharp, brisk wind, making my new robe flutter around my legs, and whisking Lucius's hair into a thousand shining rivulets. I became aware of an awful tightness constricting my throat. There was something I had to say now, or perhaps I would never find a way to again...

I forced the words from my trembling lips. "I'm sorry, Lucius," I said, peering up at him. "I don't know what...what I did...but I...I feel..."—my hand pressed to my heart, in a futile attempt to suppress its awful throbbing—"I feel so sorry."

Lucius paled visibly, and I bit my lip, not afraid of incurring his violence, but rather of causing that dreaded stony mask to appear once more. But he didn't, or couldn't, hide his emotion. Pain, stark and raw, suffused his features, darkening his silver eyes to stormy granite. He did not let go of my hand, but his fingers tightened like a vice. "You stupid girl," he said through barely-moving lips, a taut, stricken look on his face. "What am I to do with those words? The words of a mudblood. What are they worth?"

"I don't know," I replied, swallowing his harsh speech like a bitter dram, but determined not to wince for it. "But I mean them, all the same."

His voice had the sound of a warning snarl of a wounded wild animal, dangerously low and quiet. "If you knew what you had done you would not dare insult me with your hollow apology."

"If I knew what I'd done it would not be hollow," I said pleadingly. "Tell me. Tell me what I—"

Lucius turned on me, the suddenness of his movement cutting short my words, and jerked my arm so roughly my shoulder-socket jarred and I stumbled forwards against him with a small cry. His hands clamped down on both my shoulders, and he loomed over me in a way which would have frightened me only days ago, but now it was his tortured expression, not his physical proximity, that made me cringe. "You—must—not—ask—me," he said labouredly, his eyes blazing with an anguish that was full of rage, yet wholly, beautifully, devoid of hate.

At that moment I knew that, whatever part I had played in that unknown "tragedy", however dreadful my crime...he had forgiven me. He, who had only ever looked on me with disgust and loathing, now turned his gaze on me with a grief as pure as it was piteous, exonerating me even as it engulfed me.

Although his grip was painful, instinctively I understood he was not punishing me, but rather trying to express something of his own suffering—as if by sharing his agony he could somehow alleviate it. And so I clenched my teeth and bore his despairing fury, refusing to struggle or pull away. His
fingers dug deeper and deeper into me until I could feel my bone bruising beneath their crushing pressure...and at last I couldn't help gasping in pain.

At this sound Lucius blinked and drew in a shuddering breath, like a drowning man suddenly surfacing. His expression was rapidly changing, relenting, the colour returning to his lividly-pale face. I saw awareness flicker into his eyes, followed quickly by realisation, and he pulled his hands away from me as if scalded, balling them by his sides.

For a moment he closed his eyes; when he opened them he was once more contained. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I did not mean to hurt you."

I stared up at him, stunned to speechlessness.

Never, never had he apologised for hurting me before.

Reading the amazement in my face, a bleak smile touched his mouth. "I had thought you would have learned not to provoke me by now," he said. "But you continue to plague me with your accursed, incessant questions." Though his speech was caustic, something just beneath his brittle tone, subtle as a sound-wave, thrummed to my ear, and his callous words were negated, belied.

The horrible strain that had lain over him seemed to be lightening, dissipating into the ether. Despite his fierce, furious reaction, I knew my blindly-offered apology had done him good.

Lucius had needed to hear those words, as much as I had needed to say them.

The wind had lulled as quickly as it had risen, and all was tranquil and sunny once more, but the intensity of our encounter had left me hollow and shivery. I longed for him to touch me again, to gently take my hand once more and flood me with the warmth of human connection...but he had half-turned away from me, his hands still clenched beside him in tight fists, and I didn't dare reach out my own.

"Do you remember the night I found you in my bedroom, Alice?" He spoke without turning, his gaze fixed somewhere in front of him.

My whole body stiffened at his unexpected words. That night? How could I ever, ever forget that night?

"You mean the night you broke my fingers." My voice sounded oddly flat, but my stomach churned as an alternative sentence flitted at the tip of my tongue. You mean the night you almost raped me. ...But I swallowed it deliberately away. I had to believe that he had only meant to frighten me. He couldn't really have intended to inflict such a damaging, degrading act upon me...

"Yes, Alice," he said, and I could hear by his tone that he knew what I was thinking. "The night I broke your fingers. ...Do you remember what happened after you returned to your room?"

"I'm not sure," I said, a blush beginning to creep up over my face. "I think I fainted."

"Before that. Do you recall...calling for help?"

"I think. I think I called for—you."

"You did call for me," he said softly. "Even after my...abysmal treatment of you, you still called for me. I found you on the floor, half-strangled by your sheets."

"I don't remember."
"You were...in a bad way, barely conscious, delirious. I tended your injuries and returned you to
your bed. When I was about to leave, you whispered something. It sounded like a name. But I was
not sure...perhaps I did not wish to believe it..." He paused, and when he spoke again his tone was
dark and frayed. "I heard that name again yesterday, but this time there could be no doubt. You were
—screaming it." He stopped abruptly.

I waited for him to continue, but he did not, and I could not find the words to press him.

A sharp ache in my abdomen was forcing itself on my notice. I hunched over a little, crossing my
arms over my stomach, trying unsuccessfully to hug away the discomfort.

"You're cold," said Lucius, and I wondered if my ears deceived me, for his voice sounded almost
tender. "Go back inside."

"I think I'm just...really hungry, actually," I blurted truthfully, suddenly realising that I had not eaten
anything since the small meal at the truck-stop cafeteria. I would have blushed for the sheer
mundanity of my comment, but I really was too exhausted, and famished, to care.

With a graceful motion, Lucius turned to gesture to the table. "Then you should eat something," he
said.

I saw, then, that there was a large food-laden platter next to the silver tea-service, although I could
have sworn it wasn't there before.

...Why not accept the things you see as reality?...

Well, that was certainly easier said than done.
We barely spoke over breakfast, but the silence was not awkward or laden—in fact, for the first time ever, I felt completely at ease in his company.

It was as if our exchange had catalysed a new freedom between us, as if we had both been released from the chafing chains that had fettered us so reluctantly and yet so completely to each other, as prisoner and jailer, victim and oppressor. In a matter of a moments, I had learned more about Lucius than whole months confined with him had taught me. I knew now that he had had a real reason to hate me, and that his cruelty to me, though not justifiable, was...at least explicable. I had also witnessed a side to him that I never seen before, never even imagined existed—a fallible, vulnerable, human side—a man capable of great love, who had suffered greatly for it...

Lucius did not partake of the food, instead resuming his tea and cigar, but the contrast between his quiet civility with his former contemptuous treatment of me at mealtimes could not have been more marked. Where before he had dictated, now he only offered, his voice neutral but retaining that subtle something which warmed me more than the rays of the spring sun which shone down upon us.

In reciprocation I conducted myself with careful decorum, wishing to demonstrate that, as long as he treated me with dignity and respect, I could behave with such.

I believe I would have happily stayed there all day with him, but exertion and trauma had taken a physical toll on me, and my hunger was placated only to be usurped by profound exhaustion. Noticing me wilting, Lucius bid me return to bed, and, somewhat reluctantly, I complied.

I dropped into oblivion almost the moment my cheek touched my pillow, and slept the remainder of the day away, a deep, secure, dreamless sleep.

When I finally woke the remnants of a golden sunset were trailing out of the room and dusk was setting in. I sat up in bed, disoriented but rested, and watched the light sinking away behind the shadowy line of conifers beyond the window. When the lamps on the walls flickered autonomously to life, I climbed out of bed and began to ready myself for dinner.

As I dressed I realised my heart was pattering ridiculously.

It was a strange sensation. I had become so used to the oppressive mix of dread and need I experienced, when preparing to face Lucius—the feeling of readying myself for a battle I could only ever lose—that this new state of nervous excitement seemed utterly foreign to me, and somewhat disturbing. I could feel my cheeks flushing unnaturally, and my fingers shook as I donned my robe and re-plaited my hair. The serenity of this morning had completely abandoned me; I was jittery and a little feverish.

What's the matter with you, Alice? I wondered, as I attempted to tie the sash of my robe for the third time. You're like a nervous schoolgirl.

Instantly the memory of The Woman's mocking voice rang in my head. "...We've been awaiting your arrival like two giggling schoolgirls..." I winced at the recollection. I felt as if I were somehow playing into her hands, playing out her words...

I told myself sternly to calm down. I was merely going to have dinner with Lucius, something I had done countless times before.
Ready at last, I made my way downstairs. I hesitated momentarily outside the dining room door, taking a breath, then I knocked softly and entered. I barely had time to register my disappointment that Lucius was not there, for the sight which met my eyes made me gasp aloud.

It was different...all different.

For a moment I stood in the doorway, staring like an owl, suddenly unsure whether I hadn't somehow stumbled into the wrong room. Where was the huge mahogany table? The oppressive dark-wood furniture?

The very atmosphere seemed changed—softer, the ambiance warmer and more welcoming. Where the table had stood was now a wide, empty space, save for a beautiful oriental rug covering the floorboards, intricately worked with vivid, mythical-looking depictions of fauna and flora. Also disappeared without trace was the row of looming, antique side-boards which had obstructed much of the outside view through the front windows. A pair of tall, ornately-branched candelabras now stood in their place, as if sprung up from the very floor, the radiance of their many small flames diffused by the muted sheen of the ormolu chandeliers above.

Between the candelabras, and framed by one high-arched window, there now stood a very different kind of table.

I gravitated towards it wonderingly. It was round, much smaller and...and intimate, was the word that came unbidden to my mind. A tremor ran through me when I saw that it was set for two people, laden with gleaming silver cutlery, a domed serving platter, and sparkling crystal glasses. A decanter of red wine stood next to a vase of flowers of the same deep-ruby hue, and I reached out to caress one of the velvety petals.

"Good evening, Alice."

I jumped, not quite stifling a cry of surprise. I had neither seen nor heard Lucius enter, and retreating hastily in shock away from the table, I managed to back straight into him. I registered his hands on my waist, steadying me, and it made me jump again, this time propelling myself forwards, then whirling to face him. As soon as our eyes connected my heartbeat resumed its absurd flittering.

"Welcome back to the world of the living, my dear. I did not intend to frighten you."

"You didn't frighten me." I don't know why I said so, since he very obviously had.

Lucius did not reply, but a smile hinted at the corners of his mouth. "How are you feeling?" He took a step nearer, within touching distance, his eyes scanning my face, lingering on the marks my teeth had scored upon my own lips. "Better, I hope?"

Beneath the sudden and too-direct intimacy of his scrutiny, I was instantly tongue-tied. Wordlessly I nodded.

"I'm glad." He sounded perfectly sincere. Then, offering his arm to me in a graceful, old-fashioned gesture of gentility, he said, "Would you care join me for dinner?"
I...I was dazzled.

There he stood, resplendent and formidable in that princely attire, priceless jewels sparkling in the candlelight, addressing me as he might a woman of his own lofty standing...me. The small, insignificant, lost waif, who had come to him in 'pitiful rags', who had spent months barefoot and under-dressed; part charity-case, part prisoner, hardly better tolerated than a stray dog... Could it be real? Could he—that handsome, indomitable man before me—have changed so much? For me?

Unable to form a coherent reply, I hesitantly took his proffered arm and smiled my acceptance up at him. The smile felt odd on my mouth, for the first time untainted by any trace of bitterness.

Arm in arm we crossed the short distance to the table, steeped in the warm glow of the candles inside and the softer gleam of the starlight without. I wondered if I was actually still asleep, if this was some nebulous, fairy-tale dream...

But, as Lucius handed me to my chair and assumed his own, I could not help remembering how the last time we'd met here he had physically restrained and forced me to take the medicine for my broken fingers...for my unbroken fingers. My fingers twitched at the disturbing memory, and a small shiver ran down my spine.

Rightly interpreting my thoughts, Lucius said, "I was cruel to you before, Alice. For that I apologise." He slightly emphasised the "that" as if to imply he did not apologise for anything else. Yet it was more than I had ever expected to hear coming from his lips.

I nodded, still not trusting my voice. At breakfast I had felt so comfortable in his presence, but now I was almost paralysed with self-consciousness.

Lucius poured out two glasses of the red wine, while I watched on silently, wondering what on earth I was going to say to him over the course of the meal. I had never had the opportunity to practice the hollow niceties of polite conversation with him, and with everything that had gone before between us, it seemed pointless to attempt it. But to speak of—of real things seemed...wrong, unwise...impossible. Our fierce, fraught encounter on the terrace this morning was like a newly-healing wound, yet too raw to touch... What, then, was left to say?

Lucius regarded me with a quizzical tilt of his head. "Why so shy, my dear?"

I forced myself to make a reply, but it was an inadequate enough one, indeed. "I don't know."

"You were never short of words before."

His gently-mocking tone gave me courage to reply a little more spiritedly. "That's because I was always telling you what I thought of you."

Amused acknowledgement traced over his sharp features. "And now? You no longer wish to tell me?"

I stared into the deep ruby liquid of my wineglass, avoiding his gaze. "I no longer know what to think," I said.

He raised his glass and took a leisurely sip, and I took the opportunity to do the same. The wine was very dry, but I welcomed the instantly-calming warmth coiling through me, unwinding my jangled nerves.

Lucius settled his glass back on the table. "And so..." he murmured at length, "you made it all the way to Bucharest."
"Yes," I replied, uneasily reflecting that he must have been told so by Her. "All this time, I never once guessed we were in Romania."

"You could not have been expected to."

Not for the first time, I wondered what had brought him—and myself—into such remote exile. But, knowing I would be given no answers, I did not trouble to ask.

"You put yourself in far more peril than you realise, Alice," Lucius added, rather sternly. "It was a foolhardy venture."

"Yes, well, it's funny how desperate people tend to do desperate things," I replied.

A charge of energy rippled between us, and I held my breath, half-expecting him to take exception to my sarcastic tone. But he did not reply, and his smile remained, only changing slightly in quality. His eyes flickered lightly over my face again, and I felt my cheeks reddening, not, as in the past, with mortification or defiance, but with a new, very pleasant feeling of being... indulged. Of relying on his indulgence.

A little afraid of the soft-sparking dynamics which our short repartee had already created, I took another sip of wine and cast about for something decidedly commonplace to say. "You've changed things in here," I commented at last, fixing my eyes on the space where the mahogany table had stood before. "It's...I...I like it."

"I'm glad you do. It would have been a wasted effort if you did not."

Did I hear right? Was he telling me he had wished to please me? ...I swallowed thickly, taken by surprise by the sudden, profound gladness that swelled within my breast. My affection-starved, desolate heart, my mutilated self-esteem greedily lapped up the sweet subtext of his words. ...But then my sensible 'other' voice began to admonish me.

"So he changed the furniture, Alice. So what?"

I steeled myself and met his gaze coolly enough. At least I told myself that I did. "Since when did you start caring about what I like?"

Although I said it in a rather churlish way, it sounded exactly what it was: a poorly-concealed appeal to him to continue extending his leniency over me, to prove his ongoing magnanimity. I was like a recently-freed zoo-animal testing the boundaries of my new, expansive sanctuary, still expecting to be electrically-shocked into submission at every turn.

I could tell by his expression that he saw right through me. "A host should always anticipate the preferences of his guest," he replied smoothly.

It wasn't quite the answer I had hoped for—although I wasn't sure what was. 'Host; guest'...they were such impersonal, generic terms. Fit for mere strangers, I thought with a pang. "You never cared to anticipate my preferences before."

"I don't deny it." He watched me take a third rather-large sip of wine, amusement clearly legible in his eyes.

The mixture of strong wine and my reckless reliance on him was going straight to my head. "I guess your sense of hospitality doesn't extend to your inmates."

A flicker of impatience passed across his features. But when he replied his tone remained resolutely mild. "Come, Alice, let us not quarrel. As I told you this morning, you are no longer (as you put it) my inmate. At the moment you are simply my dinner companion." He reached for the domed cover
of the silver platter and removed it in a single, graceful movement. "Therefore I suggest we dine."

So we did.

The food was, I'm certain, exquisite, but I hardly tasted it, so utterly entranced I was by the fact that I was sharing it with him.

How many hundreds of times had I sat before him, like some performing animal, demolishing my food in a rebelliouly messy fashion while Lucius looked on, disgust and loathing disfiguring the harmony of his angular features? And how many times had I fantasised about this very moment: him and me, no hostility, no rancour between us, just two people, face-to-face, dining together, finally, finally as equals—? ...It could almost seem worth it, everything I'd endured, for this moment...

And for a sweet, short while, perhaps it was worth it.

But gradually, as the meal continued, I felt a coldness creeping over me, a dark shadow moving across my jubilance like an eclipse, robbing all the warmth from my so-hard-won happiness... He might have changed, Alice, but it changes nothing. You still know next to nothing about yourself, about him. What about the third floor? What about The Woman? You're back to square one, aren't you? Except now you're indebted to him...now you owe him your life...

"What is it, Alice?"

Lucius's voice threaded through my thoughts, extricating me from their pooling darkness. I blinked and looked up at him, only now realising that I had lapsed into complete silence. I shook my head, seeking the right words. "I just. I don't understand...what does this all mean?"

"To what are you referring, my dear?"

"Everything. All of these...changes. Where does it leave me?"

"You are speaking nonsense, Alice."

"It isn't nonsense. It's a valid question. Because I'm not actually your guest, am I? I'm your gift. That's what she said, isn't it? That she gave me to you, to do with whatever you chose."

"And I chose to take you back," Lucius murmured, his fingertips lightly drumming on the stem of his wineglass. "At the time you seemed quite anxious for me to do so... Unless perhaps I was mistaken?"

"No." I felt my cheeks paling at the mere thought of how close I'd come to being left behind. Left with her. "Of course not. I...I'm sorry. I'm just...confused. Everything is so different," I said. "At the time you seemed quite anxious for me to do so... Unless perhaps I was mistaken?"

"No." I felt my cheeks paling at the mere thought of how close I'd come to being left behind. Left with her. "Of course not. I...I'm sorry. I'm just...confused. Everything is so different," I said. "At the time you seemed quite anxious for me to do so... Unless perhaps I was mistaken?"

"And tomorrow? And the day after?" I unstoppered the words that had been so painfully gnawing at my heart. "What happens when you finally have "finished" with me, Lucius? When you're tired of playing nice with your gift? Will you throw it away? Return it to sender?" A muscle in his jaw twitched, and I knew that I had angered him, that I was indeed coming to the perimeter of his tolerance. But I couldn't stop yet. Not quite yet. "At least before," I pressed on, "I knew what I was, even if I didn't know who...at least I understood my role."

"Your role?"
"As your prisoner! I knew what was expected of me... To fight you, and t-to fear you—"

"Should you prefer to fear me again, Alice?" My breath caught at his tone, like the soft growl of a tiger gently reminding me of his teeth. There was an unmistakable glimmer in his silver eyes, belonging to the dangerous and cruel man I had known far too long, and far too well...

Instinctively I shrank from him, pulling my arms back so quickly that the back of my hand caught the crystal wine decanter and sent it skidding off the edge of the table. I flinched, expecting to hear the smash of crystal upon the floor—but Lucius made a swift, slight movement with one hand, and when I blinked, the decanter was back upon the table, as if I had never touched it. In almost the same moment he had caught my hand, his grip gently restraining, his expression no longer menacing, but serious and entreating. Don't be afraid of me, it said. ...Don't run away.

"How did you do that?" I whispered, though I hardly cared, for his thumb was tracing lightly over the vein of my pulse, and the warmth of his touch seemed to radiate through me, through to my very bloodstream. "You're like her, aren't you? You can...do...things..."

At first Lucius did not reply. His head bowed slightly, his eyes dropped to fix upon my upturned wrist, encircled by his large hand.

Then he spoke. "This morning I told you I would not prevent you from running away. Let me be more specific. If you choose to stay with me, I will do everything within my capabilities to protect you and to care for you, as I..." —he paused, gritting his teeth, then continued— "as I should have done, long since." His hand tightened around mine and he drew me forward, leaning urgently towards me, his eyes fixed intently on mine. "Do you—dare you—doubt me now?"

I was frightened by the wild, surging euphoria I felt at his solemnly-spoken words. How could I doubt him, when he looked at me that way? "No," I said. "I believe you."

He released my arm and drew back from me, and I felt the withdrawal of his touch like an actual loss.

"But—Lucius?"

"Yes, Alice."

My whirling thoughts translated to awkwardly stilted words. "I know that you s-said that you won't...can't...give me any answers, but—" I took a breath, and then the words tumbled out in a torrential rush: "I need to find them—a-and I'm going to go looking for them. I have to...I have to at least try. With or without your permission. Regardless of your consequences." My breathing was erratic, my heartbeat thudding heavily through me. I took a hurried gulp of wine, some of my inelegant defiance of former days resurfacing. Then I met his gaze.

His eyes were narrowed, but not hard. "There are always consequences to our actions, my dear," he murmured.

I began to ask him what he meant, but his hand raised to my face and his fingers lightly brushed my lips, hushing me. My entire body thrilled to his touch, tingling and alight. Not for the first time I thought he looked like some fallen angel, stripped of his wings and cast out of heaven, too beautiful, too strange and powerful to be of this earth...

... I went to bed that night with a head awhirl with fantastical, careering thoughts.
I lay in the dim shadows, softly encased in the long, loose folds of a delicate night-dress I had discovered, among several other ethereal creations, in one of the newly-stocked dresser drawers. I touched its lacy décolletage, still incredulous that this was really me, that the unreal events of the evening truly had happened, and were not simply the conjuring of a fevered mind.

My body felt strangely light, and alight, and I could feel the rapid drumming of my heart beneath my fingertips.

Even exhaustion couldn't prevent my lying awake deep into the night, replaying the minutiae of the last few hours, dwelling on certain words, moments, looks... The places where Lucius had touched me seemed to tingle still: my wrist, my lips, the curve of my waist where he had steadied me, even the crook of my arm which had momentarily entwined in his. Before, his touch had always meant restraint, intimidation, pain. But now...now...

I hardly knew what to make of my thoughts, my feelings. I hardly knew what I ought to make of them. The only certainty I felt was that, when Lucius had looked into my eyes and told me he would keep me safe, I believed him.

How could everything have changed so quickly, so profoundly? And why did it feel so right? As if all the confusion and tumult of my existence had abruptly spun out and away from me, and there I was, standing in the achingly-beautiful eye of the storm, protected by the very precariousness of my position.

All the things that had mattered so much before now seemed to lose their immediacy, their importance, dwarfed by this new, incredible feeling of...being cared for. Cared about.

Briefly, reluctantly, my mind flitted to the strange powers that he seemed to share with...with Her. Who—what was he? What were they? And what would happen when I finally did understand?

I turned over, physically turning my back on that question, and let my mind wander back to pleasanter subjects...

The last image in my head before I finally slipped into sleep was Lucius in his light-grey morning suit, drawing from his slim cigarette, smiling as I heaped spoonfuls of sugar into my tea.
Despite my fine words about "finding answers" I did not immediately act upon them.

I was too weak physically, too-quickly exhausted mentally. There was a perpetual tremor running through me, like the ongoing vibrations that follow a massive earthquake, which sapped my strength so I could stay awake for only a few hours at a time. I soon developed a habit of dropping to sleep in chairs and nooks, and it wasn't unusual for me to awaken with a warm shawl draped over me.

For the very first time, I was...well, not exactly happy, but not unhappy. The days passed like a placid dream, but for once it was a good dream, one from which I was reluctant to awaken.

Lucius...Lucius had changed, changed beyond doubt. Although he was not manifestly kind, or even really amiable, I felt like he had extended a sheltering wing over me, and I wanted nothing more than to nestle beneath it and forget everything that had gone before.

And as the days began to blur and meld together, my inaction slowly turned into paralysis. Simply, I was afraid to upset this new, oh-so-lovely tranquility. I was careful to speak only of trivial things; I asked Lucius no "accursed, incessant" questions, he volunteered no explanations or answers. As for his strange words out on the terrace, hinting at a forgotten, impossible world...I closed my eyes to them, just as I did the mysteries of the third floor, the moving news-clipping in Lucius's bedroom...and, of course, the beautiful boy...Lucius's son. Sometimes, I would recall the boy's face vividly to mind: handsome with the supple, youthful vitality of first manhood... But as days went by this image became less defined; it blended too much with Lucius's ever-present, sharply-focused features—the supple youthfulness morphing into a harder, more angular masculinity, and the vitality changing in quality to something more intrinsic and powerful—until, eventually, I only saw Lucius.

As for the Woman—I was only too happy to erase her very existence from my mind.

But although I was unshackled from Lucius's former tyranny, I was not liberated from his power. Far from it.

In rescuing me he had secured my trust, and in accepting my obeisance he had won my fealty...but in finally, finally, treating me with respect he had struck on the one thing that alone could derail me from my quest for autonomy and enlightenment. After living so long in affection-starved isolation, I wanted nothing more than to receive his benevolence, as a starved animal might receive the smallest portion of sustenance. Compounding everything was the knowledge that I had—although I knew not how—been instrumental in causing his grievances, his grief.

I was now becoming bound to him by a new set of bonds, glistening chains of my own devising, forged out of gratitude and guilt. His forgiveness fastened the lock.

No, I wasn't free from him...but I no longer wished to be. Now I wanted nothing more than to be safe, and to...belong. My identity, my history, my memory—these things suddenly lost their relevance, they seemed like someone else's lost property. My curiosity, which had got me in so much trouble before, now shrivelled into nothingness: Lucius's secrets were safe from me. ...He cared for me, he was not unkind to me. And, for a while, that was all that mattered.

Sometimes I saw Lucius looking at me with a watchful expression, as if he was waiting for me to...ask something, do something. But I did not. Because now that I finally had his so-hard-earned respect, I was frightened, desperately frightened, of losing it again. I felt that if he were to retract it from me now, I could not bear it.
I'd had quite enough of mystery, confusion, fear and angst—far too much, in fact—and now I relished the novelty of this new kind of blankness, filled with serenity, like a sailor enjoying the respite of a becalmed sea, deliberately ignoring the dangers lurking just beyond a red, unnatural horizon...

But it couldn't last. Deep down, I knew it could not.

I spent as many daylight hours as I could out of doors. After months of confinement, the fresh air and light was like an oasis to me, reviving, healing and strengthening.

Lucius would come and go, sometimes appearing as if from nowhere, sometimes emerging through the archway of dark foliage like an otherworldly wraith out of some ancient folklore or fable. Whenever I saw him my heartbeat would quicken and my cheeks flush, though I tried hard enough to appear placid before him.

The weather was changeful, the sunny mornings often turning to showers by afternoon. One day I mentioned to Lucius that I wished I might stay outside, even when it rained. The next time I visited the garden, a beautiful pavillon stood over the terrace, made from a frame of white ornately-wrought iron, and fluttering on three sides with the filmiest of silken materials, which somehow remained dry and warm in even the heaviest downpours and coldest northerlies.

Inside, large, soft cashmere cushions were strewn on deep, plush couches of pale velvet, and all was made to be as comfortable and beautiful as a princess's boudoir.

It was a far cry from the nest I used to make for myself in the library, and I had soon ferried my small hoard of books from their dark nook of 'Profana, Propaganda & Saecularia' to this new abode. Truth to tell, I no longer felt at ease among the towering walls of blank tomes in the library. They reminded me too much of the all the other missing parts of my existence. I abandoned them all.

I began to dream again.

I was always naked, running through a fog-wreathed forest, looking for someone...but whenever I came close to finding them I would tumble backwards down into the heart of a dark, stone labyrinth... The end of the dream varied. Sometimes Lucius would appear and carry me to my bed, sometimes to his, but I never remembered what happened after that point. In other scenarios, a ghostly outline in the shape of a fox would guide me through the maze of stone hallways, then up and up a winding staircase and out into a sunny courtyard, only to disappear as soon as the light fell upon its shimmering presence.

But as time went by, my dreams turned more frequently to nightmares.

Instead of help finding me, I was pursued through the labyrinth by a giant black crow with razor-sharp teeth, who cackled fiendishly at me and screamed threats to peck out my eyes and devour my beating heart. They became a nightly occurrence, and were so vivid that I would wake in the morning, my nightdress clinging to my body with sweat, muscles twitching, and my sheets tangled around me as if I'd spent hours thrashing violently about.

Then one night I awoke from the nightmare to find myself, panting and panicked, standing on the cold slabs of a wide, stone stair-case. With sickening horror I realised that I had been walking—or
running—in my sleep, and that I was well on my way to the third floor. Heart pounding, I fled back
down to my room, and did not dare to shut my eyes for the rest of that night. *What the hell were you
doing, Alice!? Where were you going?* I chided myself, over and over.

I did not tell Lucius about my sleepwalking adventure. I didn't know how he might react to a
confession of my near-breach of the forbidden third floor. Despite his recent gentle treatment of me, I
had certainly not forgotten his violence to me the last time I had made my way up to the wailing-
woman's room. At all costs, I did not want to risk rekindling his anger towards me.

The next evening I dragged one of the heavy dressers across the doorway before I went to bed, not
to keep intruders out, but to keep myself in.

It did not work.

A few nights later I awoke suddenly from my usual nightmare, to find myself standing right outside
the wailing-woman's room. I was literally reaching out for the handle when I came to consciousness.
With a frightened gasp I snatched away my outstretched hand and reeled back from the door.

The eerie percussive noise was echoing all around me, magnified by dark stillness of night-time.

*Crt-crt—crt—crt—crt-crt*...

*So close!* I thought wildly as I ran, stumbling back along the dark corridor and downstairs, my heart
thudding in dread at what I had been about to do. I couldn't understand how I had escaped through
my self-imposed barricade.

On returning to my room, I saw the huge dresser was flipped onto its side, spilling out clothes
everywhere, as if having been tossed carelessly aside by a giant's hand. Immediately I thought of The
Woman, of her terrifying powers, her murderous malevolence against me. Could she have been
here? Was she trying to lead me into some trap? I decided I would, *I must* tell Lucius...

But this time I forgot to stay awake...and in the morning the dresser had righted itself and the
contents of each drawer were neatly folded, as if never touched. When I went down to breakfast the
day was so calm, and Lucius so mild-mannered that my night-time terrors seemed ridiculous,
infantile, and once again I pushed them aside.

...Vaguely I recalled my fears, that very first time I'd attempted to run away from Lucius, how I had
told myself I needed to find my identity before I stopped caring...Well, that moment was fast
approaching. I no longer lay awake at night, running alphabetically through lists of girls' names,
trying to hit upon my own one. I didn't mind being Alice, so long as I was *his* Alice. Lucius's Alice.

Sometimes when I stared at that luminous, enchanted girl in the looking-glass, the chilling, chiming
voice of The Woman would echo in my head *...Did you fall in love with him, mud-blood?...I should
think it rather strange if you did not...The things we women do for the men we love...We make
ourselves their fools and slaves*...

Was I his fool? Was I his slave?
Had I...fallen in love?

...I was running through a jaggedly-twisting maze of stone corridors. My feet were caked with blood and grime, my knees and palms badly grazed from frequent contact with the rough, uneven flagstones that I raced along, naked and drenched from a relentless, stinging rain pelting down on me from the vaulted ceiling overhead.

Somewhere behind me, a monstrous crow with bat-like wings and malevolent black eyes swooped and glided, gnashing its dagger-like fang and laughing demonically at my pitiful attempts to escape it, mocking me each time I fell or stumbled upon the stone floor.

Momentarily I gained enough speed to lose my persecutor, but before I could make my escape a necklace appeared around my throat, tightening and tugging me backwards, its bird-skull pendant biting so hard against my windpipe that I had to follow its dragging force or be throttled to death...

Desperately I screamed out a name, but the only answer was the terrible whooping of the crow as it came closer and closer...

With a shuddering gasp, I woke up.

Then I was instantly unsure if I really had woken up, for I was surrounded by absolute, utter darkness.

I stood, staring wildly and silently into the black void, immobilised with fear.

Where are you, Alice? Oh god, where the hell are you? And who—who else is with you?

A ghastly thought was overtaking me: that I was back in the stone dungeon with Her, that somehow she had snatched me from my very bed and taken me back to her lair, and I would never again see the light of day...I would never again see Lucius...

My lips shaped into a scream that I didn't dare give voice to, as my fear increased with each interminable second, layer upon layer of it, filling me up until there was no room left in me to breathe, I would surely suffocate with it... But just when I felt I could truly bear it no longer and my heart was simply going to fail in my body, a small light above me flickered to life, then another, then a cluster of them, revealing a spindly, silver chandelier suspended from the ceiling...and in its soft light I saw that I was in a room both familiar and unfamiliar, and that I was alone.

I drew a deep, gasping lungful of air, sinking to my knees with dizzy relief.

I was still in the house—Lucius's house (I almost thought, "my house")—the room was of similar to my own, although its furnishings were quite different. It was a pretty, feminine bed-chamber, elegantly appointed with slender-legged fitments and delicate upholstery. A narrow bed, draped with an embroidered coverlet, stood by the far wall. Next to it was a tall window...and with a start of shock I registered several black iron bars obstructing its pane, between two incongruously wispy curtains.

So this is it, I thought dazedly, this is the wailing woman's room...or her...cell... I slowly stood up and moved shakily over to the window, curling my hand around one of the thick bars...But where is she?

As if in answer to my unuttered questions, a voice behind me spoke. "She is gone, Alice. Gone,
before you ever came."

Trembling, I turned to the figure darkening the threshold of the doorway. "I don't know how I got in here," I said, my voice still half-choked with subsiding terror. "I didn't mean t-to—I promise—"

"Calm yourself," said Lucius, coming forward into the light. "No-one is going to hurt you. I am not going to hurt you."

He looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time in a long while. His expression seemed thoughtful, but there was a rigidity to it, as if he were determined to confront a difficult memory with impassivity. Finally his gaze came back to rest upon me. "So you finally regained your curiosity," he said. "I was beginning to wonder if you had lost it forever."

I couldn't stop shaking, nor drag myself out of that bewildered state of the suddenly-woken dreamer. "It wasn't curiosity," I said through numb lips, "I sleep-walked here."

"Conscious or not, it is the same." He moved towards me slowly, as if he didn't wish to startle or frighten me. "Come, sit down. You are still half-asleep."

Lightly he put his arm around my shoulder and guided me over to a chaise of apple-green silk, upon which I gratefully sank. After looking down at me for some moments, Lucius moved away, returning shortly with a glass of dark liquor in each hand. He extended one to me. "Drink this, my dear. You will feel better."

I took the glass, remembering that very first drink I'd had with him, when I had spilled the Armagnac all down my dress. "Like liquid fire and distilled damnation," I said, repeating the words he had quoted to me on that occasion.

Lucius smiled. "Indeed," he said, taking the seat beside me, and we both raised our glasses to our lips.

I could feel the warmth of his body next to mine. It was impossible not to imagine curling up against him and going to sleep. For a while we sat in silence, and I felt that he was waiting for me to speak first. "I thought...I thought that she—the Woman had come for me," I said at last. "It was...just so dark..."

"I told you I would protect you, Alice," Lucius said. "Even if it is only from your own imagination."

I gestured toward the iron-barred window. "Is that what happened in here?" I asked quietly. "You were protecting someone from themselves?"

His jaw muscles tightened, but when he replied his voice was measured. "No," he said. "I was too late for that."

"You said that she—whoever she is—has gone, before I even came here. But I've heard noises...I've heard her crying, screaming..."

"I do not doubt that you believe so."

His gaze had wandered, and I followed it to a place on the wall oppositely facing the bed, just beside the door. There, half-obscured by shadows, hung a portrait of the beautiful boy I had come to recognise as Lucius's son, but as a young child, perhaps only four or five years old, playing with a toy train-set.

Lucius took my empty glass and placed it next to his on the floor, then he stood up. He turned to
offer his hand to me, and together we walked over to the painting. A small, engraved silver plaque was attached to the bottom of the ebony frame. It read, 'Draco, Christmas, 1984'.

"Draco." I whispered the strange name in the hushed stillness of the room. Finally I could put a name to the face of the young man who had appeared in my mind, three times now. The grey-eyed young man who caught me as I fell, who stretched out his hand to mine and called out, "...Hold on to me!..."

Then Lucius made a slight gesture with his hand, and the painting started to move.

The boy was clapping happily as the train travelled along a set of metal tracks, and the wheels made the same distinct, percussive sound that had so frightened me twice before.

*Crt-crt—crt-crt—crt-crt...*

It was so innocent an activity that I wondered how it had ever sounded eerie to me. Puffs of steam emitted from its engine as it made its way around the winding course. Suddenly the boy covered his ears with his hands, and seconds later the train began to whistle out a shrill, wailing noise, getting higher and louder until the whole painting rattled wildly, causing the nearby door to judder on its hinges. When the wailing died down the boy, laughing with delight, turned the train about and began the process all over again.

I accepted what I saw as a matter of course, the strange impossibility of a moving picture no longer causing me surprise or disbelief. Instead, I was ambushed by an acute emotion which pierced me to the heart, as I watched the little fellow, his babyishly-rounded features alive with a somewhat-wilful glee. Because of me, this lovely child was no longer.

Lucius waved his hand a second time and everything froze once more, so now it seemed simply a charming painting of a boy at play.

"He was such a beautiful child." Lucius's voice was tender and just *achingly* sad. "So...perfectly beautiful."

At first I could not answer, for tears were streaming down my face. Then, brokenly, I said, "He s-saved me. I don't know how, or from what, b-but I know that he saved my life."

"Yes."

Lucius drew me away from the picture, and then somehow his arms were wrapped about my shoulders, and my wet cheek was pressed to his heart. His touch, his scent, his warmth was so comforting, so calming; I hadn't realised just how much I'd craved his *nearness* since that miraculous moment in the stone dungeon, when he had enfolded my broken, naked body in his arms and taken me to safety. I could feel my body softening against him, *into* him, and I wished fervently that he would hold me forever, never let me go...

But when the last of my tears had abated he gently pushed me away from him. "You should return to bed," he said, reaching down to brush back a strand of damp hair which clung to my cheek. His own eyes were dry, but even in the half-light I could see them brimming with pain.

I nodded, hastily wiping my face.

Lucius led me out into the dark hallway, pausing to close the door behind us. Together we descended the stone stairs, Lucius's firm grip steadying my shaky steps. When we reached the open door to my bedroom I turned to him, an unformed sentence stuck in my throat.
He bent over me until his face was very close to mine, and I was suddenly self-conscious of standing so close to him in my insubstantially gauzy night-dress. I felt his fingertips under my chin, tilting it upwards. His eyes were strange, unreadable yet intense, glowing with something that I didn't understand...and for one delirious, unreal moment I thought he was going to kiss my lips...

But then he leaned in to brush his mouth lightly against my forehead. "Goodnight, Alice," he murmured softly.

And he walked away into the shadows.
Exploring

It was what I had needed, to wake up—*really* wake up.

To be shaken out of that dangerously lulling, perpetual daydream I had fallen into...I was not going to wait any longer for my subconscious to do my mystery-solving for me. Lucius had been true to his promise: that he meant to protect me, that he did not intend to punish me anymore. At last I could believe it, truly believe it—no longer just in my head, but also in my heart. And the knowledge elated and exhilarated me, for I took it as permission. Permission to explore.

As I made my way to breakfast my thoughts were filled with the previous night's shadowy, hazy recollections, of Lucius holding me in his arms, of his gentle words... "I will not hurt you..." and of his lips so close to mine, so beautifully close I had been certain he would press them against my own...

I shook my head at this image, unwilling to be seduced by it. I was still so conflicted, so confused about what it was I felt for him, although my heart whispered sweet, beguiling things that I was steadily losing the will to fight or ignore. And as for what he felt for me—? That was as dark and indistinct as any of the secrets locked within these mystery-laden walls.

...*Besides,* I reprimanded myself, *he did not kiss you, so how about you just stop thinking about it?*

But as I made my way down the cobbled path and through the archway of tangled foliage, I couldn't *help* thinking about it. I couldn't help wondering what it *would* be like to be kissed by him—not in that cruel, wounding way he had before (for that did not, *could* not count as a kiss)—but tenderly and...and *properly*...

My illicit musings were curtailed as the small pavilion, fluttering and pristine, came into view through the greenery.

My heart skipped as I saw Lucius, and I paused for a moment to compose myself, for I was rather afraid of showing my excitement.—Of all things, I was afraid he would be amused by it.

However, I needn't have worried, not about inspiring his amusement, anyway. Lucius smiled at my approach, but it was a collected, slightly detached smile, of a kind I had not seen for some time. "Good morning, Alice," he said as I took my usual seat opposite him. "How are we this morning? A little tired?"

"No," I said, rather too hastily. "I'm not tired at all. Are—are you?" I cringed at myself, at the awkward way the question sounded out loud.

"No, my dear," he replied calmly. "I am quite well, thank you."

His formality could not dim my elation. If he didn't wish to speak of last night, that was fine with me. What mattered was that it happened, and that it was real.

During breakfast I tried my best to act normally, but I did not *feel* normal, and finally I could contain myself no longer. "I've decided to explore the house today," I blurted out suddenly.

Lucius betrayed no surprise at my words, not even pausing in stirring his tea. "Have you, indeed," he murmured, fastidiously tapping the moisture off his silver teaspoon before placing it on the saucer. His voice was neutral, as if I had simply told him that I intended to read a book after breakfast, and he was replying merely for courtesy's sake.
The thrilling elation surged again, that he was actually sanctioning what he had once expressly forbidden. My own voice was breathy with barely-contained excitement. "You won't stop me?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "I won't 'stop' you."

"Does that mean I may go anywhere at all?"

Now he did turn his eyes to me, and in their depths I detected a sardonic glint. "Would you listen to me if I advised you otherwise?"

I mulled the question over for a moment, unsure of the truthful answer but unwilling to lie. "Maybe," I said at last.

"That would make a refreshing change."

I was too pleased to let the slight sarcasm of his words sting me. "Well, change can be good." I arched an eyebrow at him meaningfully. "You should know."

"There is an old adage that a leopard may not change his spots, my dear."

"No, but he may be—" I stopped short. I had been about to say 'tamed', but a flicker of something in Lucius's eye prevented me, and I quickly back-pedalled. "He—he may change his mind."

A second smile trailed over his mouth, but his expression was still a little flinty. "Ah," he said, raising his teacup to his lips and taking a sip. "I suppose he may."

"Well...then what is your advice?"

Lucius placed his cup back in its saucer and levelled his gaze to my face once more. "I do not believe you are well or strong enough, yet."

I was disappointed by his words, but determined to brush them off. "Oh, I feel fine," I said, with a kind of stubborn, forced brightness. "Really, I feel quite strong today."

There was a slight pause.

"...So?" I said at last. "Do I have your blessing?"

"I have already avowed not to stop you, Alice," Lucius replied softly—perhaps too softly. "What more do you require?"

"I just wanted to be sure that you don't actually mind."

"Who is to say I do not mind?" The sudden sharpness of his voice took me aback. "I do not recall having said as much."

"No, but—"

"Just because I will not stop you," he overrode me, real anger in his voice, in the flash of his eyes, "does not mean I do not mind." The hand which had been so elegantly preparing his tea now balled into a fist on the marble table top.

"Oh," I said, crestfallen, blinking rapidly. I couldn't understand this sudden change...after his tenderness last night, after the weeks of slowly-building accord between us, I was almost blind-sided by this venomous turn. I bit back other resentful words which were making a reckless bid for escape.
My confusion and hurt seemed to register with him then, and his tone relented. "You do not understand."

"Evidently," I returned sarcastically. All my initial excitement had withered away at this backwards step in our relations.

I stood up, intending to leave, but Lucius quickly rose to detain me, without touching me, with a quietly uttered, "Wait—wait." Immediately I felt the tug of his physical presence, that irresistible draw which made me long for contact, irrespective of my emotions, of all other considerations. His expression was much softened. "Ignore me, my dear. I do not mean to hector you. ...Of course you will be safe. By all means, invoke my protection...just do not ask for my blessing."

I looked up at him questioningly, and, reading the lines of his grim countenance, I suddenly understood. In my quest for self-discovery I was also pulling him down a path which would— which must—end very differently for him.

Lucius stepped nearer to me, and the closer we stood, the more I ached for his touch. "Listen to me, Alice," he said. "You must do whatever you must do. Even if it is despite my wishes. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I said, afraid lest he hear the need reflected in my voice, "...but I don't want to do anything despite your wishes."

He gazed down at me, as if searching for something in my eyes. Whatever it was he appeared to find it, for the storm-clouds cleared from his own, and kindled with a breath-taking, engulfing warmth. "Courage, my dear," he murmured. "We must each of us find our own way through this—this—"

For the first time I could ever recall, he seemed unable to find the right word.

Alternatives flitted interchangeably through my head—this maze?—this trial?—this hell?—

But a very different word escaped my lips. "This dream?"

"Yes," he replied slowly. "This...dream." Again he smiled, but this time without reserve, and its brilliance was almost painfully dazzling to me. "Take what you need from me, Alice—my permission, my consent, I surrender it to you freely. If you must have it, I even give you my blessing. Now—go."

I was overfull, brimming with emotion. Impulsively I stretched up on tiptoes, and, clinging to his shoulders for balance, kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Lucius," I whispered, and, not daring to look at his face, I quickly turned and practically ran away, my heart pounding, my face suffused with colour, my body thrilling with exhilaration, happiness, and the sweet relief of physical connection.

...I returned to my bed chamber, a new feeling of determination buoying my steps. My lips tingled from that stolen moment of contact, and the smooth warmth of Lucius's close-shaven skin and the dizzying scent of him crowded out all peripheral thought.

In my room, I searched the wardrobes for a change of clothes. I wanted something less restrictive and voluminous than the twill robe I was wearing, but more substantial than the delicate gowns taking up the majority of closet space. At last I discovered a simple tunic-dress made of a light and durable cambric, its only embellishment being a trim of gold ribboning around its wide sleeves and square
neckline. I slipped it over my head, breathing in that pleasant scent of sweet herbs which permeated every garment. It was a little loose and long on my frame, designed for a fuller, taller figure than my own, and I tried not to think about to whom it might once have belonged.

My breath caught as I surveyed my reflection in the wardrobe's mirror-lined door. ...I thought I looked like some medieval maiden...but one who had tired of waiting to be rescued, and was about to go and fight her own dragon.

*Is that you?* I wondered. *Not 'Alice' you, but the real you?*

My chin lifted as I contemplated this different pair of amber eyes, not luminous and dreamy, but glinting with purpose. *I think I like you,* I decided. *Whoever you are.*

I moved back over to the door and paused outside the threshold, wondering which direction to take.

Immediately I thought of last night's adventure, of the iron-barred room. But I quickly dismissed the idea of revisiting it. It was too melancholy and too...too *personal* a place. Whatever suffering that had gone on in there—and I felt that the prisoner of that cell had not suffered *alone*—it didn't feel like something I had any right, or need, to intrude upon. If I ever set foot inside it again, it would be at Lucius's invitation, if ever he wished to tell me its secret, sad story.

My thoughts turned next to Lucius's bedchamber, but almost as soon as the idea flitted to mind, I balked at it. It was quite possible that he would now be there. My cheeks flamed when I thought about our last encounter inside the room... No, I wasn't ready to return to that dangerous lair...not yet...

*Well, you've got to start somewhere,* Alice, I thought. *How about the ground floor?*

It was the most accessible and least forbidding part of the house, and it seemed the most sensible choice, given that I was still weak and easily tired. It would be a little pointless to go rambling up into the ramparts only to collapse with exhaustion.

I made my way back downstairs, and stood for a while on the bottom step, gazing around the hallway with new eyes, no longer seeing it through the filter of desperation of a prisoner, nor yet through the enchantment of a starry-eyed 'guest'—but, I fancied, with the sharply-focused lens of a detective. I eyed up the several doors interspersing the familiar dining room and library. I had never so much as seen a glimpse behind any of them, although I had tried their handles often enough. A quick test of the nearest one confirmed that it was, as before, as always, locked. I grimaced, annoyed at so immediate an impediment.

*Well, what did you expect, Alice? That Lucius was suddenly going to make it easy for you? Throw open the doors, empty the drawers for your perusal?*

I scanned the hallway for something with which I could prise open the door, but amongst the fragile curios and antiques nothing looked suitable. My eye caught the suit of burnished knight's armour at the far end of the hallway, next to the stairs, and I wondered if he might have something useful that I could employ as a lever.

Advancing towards him, I was surprised by how really impressive and menacing he was at close proximity, how truly daunting a foe he must have made on the battlefield. I had a sudden vision of some fair-haired ancestor of Lucius's, astride a champing charger, wielding that great sword, ready for battle and blood...slightly awed at this vivid impression, I found myself reaching up to touch the tip of his pointed visor...
And then I saw the door.

It was set in under the stairs, completely obscured by the knight's burly mass. It was smaller and narrower than the other doors, more in keeping with the original ancientness of the house. It seemed as if the suit of armour had been deliberately placed to block it off from access and from view.

I looked around, half expecting Lucius to be standing somewhere behind me, watching my movements, perhaps preparing to stop them. ...But no. The hallway was quite empty, and there was no-one to witness my proceedings but the portraits gazing haughtily down at me from the walls. The knight was held up by a heavy iron cross-frame, set on a wheeled platform. It took a good deal of manoeuvring, heaving and tugging, but at last I moved him far enough away from the door to let me slip in behind him.

The door was unlatched—even now a slight draught was causing a slender crack of darkness to appear, as if beckoning investigation. Yet there was also something ominous about that darkness, which caused my heartbeat to thud as I reached for the handle and tugged.

There was a cold rush of air, blowing the loose tendrils of hair back from my face, and I saw before me a winding staircase, leading both up and down into darkness.

A shiver ran over me, as I was distinctly reminded of my recurring nightmare, of running through an endless maze of long passages and winding stairs... But as my eyes adjusted to the gloom I realised it was not completely dark, that a light source from somewhere down below was coiling murkily upwards.

Well, Alice, I thought, I guess we'll go down.

Taking a determined breath, which sounded a bit too much like a frightened gulp, I began to descend the sunken steps.

The flight of stairs was wound tightly around its central pillar, making it both narrow and very steep. As I made my way carefully downwards, the gloominess steadily abated, and the light was of a reassuring pale quality, indicative of natural daylight.

Then, just when my leg muscles were beginning to protest, the staircase abruptly ended. I found myself standing in a low stone passageway, flooded with a bright, almost-blinding light which spilled inwards through an archway beyond. At first, this light was all I could see, but as I advanced towards it I began to make out a dark tangle of silhouettes, and when I gained the threshold at last I understood what I was looking at.

A beautiful greenhouse extended upwards and outwards before me, scintillating with sunlight, refracted through hundreds of intricately faceted panels of glass. This, I realised, must be attached to the back of the house, which I had never been able to see before, as it was blocked on the exterior from both sides by a dense, impenetrable wall of thorny briars.

My first, immediate impression was of a serene but sparkling elegance, but as I stared about me, the atmosphere tangibly changed. The life, the sparkle, came entirely from outside, it was in the play of light alone; everything within was hushed and still with the absolute muteness of death.

Most of the floor-space was taken up by four long, narrow trestles, each table laden with what looked to have once been neat rows of potted plants, but which was now one matted, brown tangle of dried vegetation, withered and wasted for want of water and care. Tendrils of longer-limbed plants had drooped off the tables and coiled across the pale stone floor, like the brittle remnants of long-shed snake skins, and the whole mass was enshrouded by a fine layer of gossamer web, thickly
layered with dust, as if even the spiders had given up and left, or simply shrivelled up and died along with the plants.

It was a strange place, too beautiful to be really eerie, too deathly-silent to be serene.

Hesitantly, I moved further inside, intensely curious, but also unwilling to disturb that solemn silence with my intrusion.

I approached the nearest table and cleared the spider-silk off the first plant. Its withered stem was neatly tied to a small stake, and adorned with a small, white label. I peered closely at the tag, and was wholly unsurprised to discover that it was blank. As blank as the books in Lucius's library.

A stale waft of sweet-herbs permeated the air, and I realised it was the same scent which clung to the clothes in my wardrobe. I looked down at my dress. I could still smell the gentle perfume which the fine fabric emitted, and it did not seem improbable that the wearer of it had spent hours carefully potting, labelling and nurturing hundreds of herbs and plants beneath the dancing sunlight of this chrystaline sanctuary... Something had happened to her—something that Lucius had been "too late" to save her from. Something so awful that she had been locked away, until...until what? Had she recovered and left? Been moved elsewhere? Or was she...gone forever? I wondered if I would ever know.

Sighing, I straightened up, and as I did my eye was caught by a flash of brightness. Sunlight was glancing off a silver object at the far end of the room. I made my way over to it, carefully stepping over the dead plant-tendrils, clearing away fragile sheets of cobwebs as I walked.

It was a cuckoo clock. Small and highly ornamental, its casing covered with engravings, but instead of the usual whimsical depictions, these etchings were macabre little skeletons of different kinds of birds, and across its face the Latin saying, 'MORS CERTA, HORA INCERTA' was painted in black, gothic lettering. I believed it to mean something like, "Death is certain, but the hour uncertain."

Near the base of the clock three initials were inscribed into the silver: 'N.C.M'. I could only suppose the "M" stood for "Malfoy", but as to the other letters?...I had not the faintest clue.

The clock had stopped at five-to-twelve, and I noticed that instead of minute and hour hands, the time was pointed to by two little skeletal wings. This strange, compelling mix of beauty and death seemed very much in keeping with the desolation of the rest of the room. The door through which the cuckoo would presumably appear was tightly shut, and though I tried to prise it open, I couldn't make it budge.

After a while, I left the clock and wandered around the glasshouse again, opening drawers and looking in cupboards, but discovering only more dead plants and bowls of withered seeds. One cabinet proved to be filled with stores of dried herbs; their pungent aroma was so heady and strong it sent me into a frenzy of sneezing, and I had to quickly shut it up again.

As I paced about, my eye was repeatedly drawn to the glint of the silver cuckoo clock, and something about it niggled at the back of my mind...but for the life of me I couldn't think what it was. I returned to it again and again, but the longer I stared at it, the less certain I became of its significance, and at last I decided that it was simply its unusual engravings and mysterious initials which had caught my imagination.

I would have liked to explore outside the glass perimeter, and indeed, there was a sliding door on the back panel, but the briars beyond the threshold had encroached so far that they had swallowed everything up, and blocked the exit like thick coils of barbed wire. I supposed that in time they would completely engulf the glasshouse and extinguish the dancing sunlight altogether.
With this thought, a feeling of intense sadness came over me. This house was just riddled with suffering, overshadowed by death and despair...I felt it everywhere, leaking from the pores of each stone, hanging heavily from the cobwebbed rafters, saturating each glinting particle of sunlit dust...

That I had played some part in the sadness, there was now no doubt. But I knew, deep down I knew, that darker forces had been at work in the obliteration of this family—and that somehow the raven-haired Woman was involved in its orchestration, whether or not Lucius realised it. I recalled Her eyes glittering with triumph when Lucius had picked me up off the floor and enfolded me in his robe...even now, in this airy, light room, the noxious residue of Her seemed to haunt me like a shadow...and I began to wonder. Did Lucius really need to protect me, or did he need to protect himself against me? Could it be that I was simply being used? As a pawn, an instrument...a weapon, that She was wielding against him?

The more I thought about our strange, terrifying encounter, the more I felt convinced of it. 

"...You will break him very soon...oh, yes..." I could hear that sweet, poisonous voice as if she were standing just behind me, and the mere thought of it made me turn hot and faint, then cold and nauseous. Perhaps the safest course of action would be to pull myself back from Lucius, to renounce this confusing infatuation... Surely it was wiser to safeguard us both against such evil machinations, if such existed? To thwart them, by denying my feelings for him altogether?

...Impossible. It was too late. There was no going back for me now, whatever the repercussions. I could no more extract Lucius from my feelings than I could break into my own rib-cage and extract my heart...

Sighing, I decided it was time to leave, and moved back to the archway through which I'd come. I felt...I wasn't sure what exactly, but the place had subdued my initial excitement, and made me pensive and a little depressed.

I came to the foot of the spiral staircase, and suddenly a wave of exhaustion swept through my body, sucking away all remaining vestiges of energy, as I felt how daunting a prospect was the task ahead of me. How, how would I ever find what I was searching for, when I didn't even really know what it was? I might as well wear a blindfold while I was at it.

Overcome with weariness, I slowly forced my leaden limbs to make the steep ascent back up to the ground floor.
I did not tell Lucius of my discovery of the glasshouse, and he did not question me about it.

As he had foreseen, the expedition, along with my recent spate of sleep-walking adventures, overtaxed my strength. But he did not admonish me with the "I told you so" that I did, perhaps, deserve. Instead, perceiving my renewed frailty, he treated me even more gently than before, making sure to keep me warm and comfortable, encouraging me to eat when my appetite waned and sleep when my energy flagged, offering me tonics to promote recovery, but never encroaching upon my autonomy. ...When I compared this to the humiliating treatment during my first illness, when he had spoon-fed me and forcibly kept me in a medicated stupor, I could scarcely believe he was the same man, or I the same woman. I began to think of those days as no more than a half-remembered bad dream, if I thought of them at all.

I realised I was a fool to have hoped this the beginning of a new era, where I fearlessly roamed the house, digging up daily discoveries to bring me closer to finding out who I was and what I was doing here. Instead, I found myself weaker than ever. Too well, I recalled those interminable weeks of recovery, after that first hellish encounter with The Woman.

I knew that I would have to be patient, but patience, it seemed, was not a strong suit of mine. It was frustrating, to have finally rediscovered my curiosity and independence, only to find that I was still too debilitated to utilise them.

But my frustrations were sweetly mitigated by a new, subtle change in Lucius. There was a discernible warmth to his voice and a tenderness in his demeanour which had not been present before. His smiles were less bitter, and more frequent, and when those smiles were directed at me, they caused my stomach to clench and my pulse to flurry with a secret, strange delight.

One evening, at the end of dinner, I found myself staring into my wine-glass, fidgeting with the slender stem, distracted by a particular train of thought. When I looked up, I discovered Lucius's gaze fixed quizzically upon me.

"You have been far away, these past ten minutes," he said. "Dare I ask where you went?"

A flush crept over my face. "I-I was just wondering about something," I said. "Something about you, actually." He did not ask me what, but merely tilted back his head, waiting for me to continue.

I swallowed nervously, but forced myself to meet and hold his gaze. "Are you...or were you...some kind of white supremacist?"

A flicker of a smile graced his lips. "I'm not certain I know what that is," he replied.

I was unsure if he was being facetious. "You know, someone who believes that the European race is better than all other races of the world."

"Ah..." he murmured, "...come to think of it, I believe I have heard of such a term. A ridiculous doctrine, whereby superiority is measured by the paleness of one's skin." He grimaced dismissively. "Utter nonsense, of course." Then he peered down his nose at me rather haughtily. "You don't imagine that I hold such primitive, nonsensical views, Alice?"
I bit my lip at his obvious chagrin. "I...I just...well, I thought it might be why you...that word...that name you used to call me. 'Mud-blood'. Isn't it a racial slur?"

For a moment he stared in genuine surprise. Then he glanced abruptly away. "No," he said.

I hoped he would elaborate, but he did not volunteer anything more, instead reaching for his wine-glass and taking a sip. The muscles had tightened in his jaw, and I sensed his displeasure in discussing the subject. But now that I had broached it, I was determined to extract some answers.

"So it isn't to do with race at all?" I prompted.

He frowned. "I don't think I wholly understand your line of questioning. Do you mean to imply that you are not of European descent?"

"It...it could be possible," I said, somewhat dubiously. "I suppose I could have mixed ancestry. My skin is quite olive...and my hair..." I trailed off, turning my head away instinctively to hide the sheared side, hidden though it was by my plait. A little lamely I finished, "...So it isn't that?"

"Certainly not," he said. "One's race has nothing to do with one's blood status." As soon as the words were spoken, he looked as if he wished he had bitten his tongue.

"Blood status?" I immediately jumped on the strange phrase. "What does that mean?"

An unfamiliar expression crossed Lucius's face. I believe it was the closest I'd ever seen him looking uncomfortable. "It doesn't matter, now, Alice," he murmured.

"It certainly sounds like something a supremacist might come up with."

His eyes narrowed, and I quickly bent my own to the table, afraid I had angered him at last.

There was a long silence as I sat awaiting a terse word or stinging reply. But when I finally risked an upward glance, Lucius was regarding me thoughtfully. "And how would you measure superiority, Alice?"

It was my turn to look surprised. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," he replied, "what, in your opinion, distinguishes a man from among his inferiors?" A rather hard smile formed across his mouth. "His intelligence? ...Or, perhaps, his bravery?"

I considered the question solemnly. "No..." I said. "Intelligence and bravery are admirable, but I don't think they necessarily denote superiority. Someone can be intelligent and fearless, yet still cruel and unjust."

"Ah, so it is chivalry that you prize."

"I...I would say...compassion."

"Some would consider that as a weakness, rather than a virtue, my dear."

"Yes, I suppose some would."

Lucius was momentarily quiet again, but the harshness in his smile had relented and he seemed to be contemplating my words. "Then," he said, "you would not make any correlation between precedence and its outward manifestations? Wealth, for example, or a high position in society?"

I shrugged. "Fortunes can be lost, and pedestals may be fallen from," I said. "But compassion
is...enduring. And anyone may attain it, no matter their position, or wealth, or ancestry."

"Anyone may attain it? If it be so common, surely it elevates no-one?"

"Just because anyone can attain it, doesn't mean it's common." It was strange, speaking what I knew to be a truth from my heart, yet without the reference of memory or experience.

Lucius slanted an eyebrow, as much to say, Go on, I'm listening.

I felt my blush intensify under his attentive gaze. "To...to acquire compassion," I said slowly, "a person must have empathy and understanding...a kind of nobility of spirit, I think, and generosity. And...and the ability to...f-forgive." I stammered a little over the last word, with its weight of personal meaning between us. "It is..." I sought for the right words to express what I meant, "...something even greater than itself."

"Indeed?" Lucius murmured. "How so?"

"Because it enriches both the possessor and the beneficiary. ...It reduces nobody, and uplifts all."

Lucius leaned forward, his smile now as sphinx-like and enigmatic as the expression in his eyes. "What of those deplorable souls who do not possess this rare mark of distinction, which you so favour?" He spoke softly—almost, but not quite, a whisper. "How may they attain it?"

Our eyes remained connected, and I could feel that ripple of energy always present between us—once upon a time only ever crackling with angry volatility, but now, gently tingling and pulsating. "By opening their hearts," I said.

It sounded trite, school-girlish, and I half-expected Lucius to sneer at me.

But he did not sneer. "And what if their hearts are irredeemably hardened? Or irreparably damaged?"

"...I expect those people need compassion more than anyone."

At this, Lucius laughed softly.

I drew my shoulders up, piqued by his reaction. "May I ask what's so amusing?"

"You are, my dear," he replied, the same, mesmeric half-smile lingering on his lips. "With your noble, naïve ideas of compassionating those who would despise and resent you for it. A charming notion—but equally amusing."

My cheeks burned at his gentle taunt, but he spoke so caressingly that I could not feel really affronted.

It wasn't until later, as I was about to drop to sleep, that I realised he had not really answered my question at all.

Gradually, my strength returned, and with it, the foolhardy desire to embark on a second exploration of the house. I decided I would try my luck with the upper branch of the winding stairwell, taking a lamp from one of the downstairs sconces to light my way.
That morning, I took my customary bath, and my thoughts turned back to the discovery of the glasshouse. I could still vividly picture the crystalline beauty and hushed sadness of the place, recalling the braids of overgrown and long-dead vegetation, the little blank labels on the dried-out plants, and the silver cuckoo-clock which seemed to preside over all that death, with its macabre depictions of skeletal birds engraved on its shining surface. There was something about that clock that had captured my attention, had reminded me of...something, but I had not yet managed to puzzle it out.

I mused on the clock's unusual engravings of little bird skeletons. How unnerving, the repetitive and sinister imagery that had haunted me from the beginning: the bird in the forest, the recurring nightmares of the crow, the Woman in her black-feathered ball-gown...and, of course, the bird-skull necklace Lucius had torn from my neck, and which I had last seen in the drawer of his bureau, right before he slammed it on my fingers...

With a loud gasp, I lurched forward to sit bolt-upright, splashing water over the sides with the violence of my movement.

The bird-skull necklace! The cuckoo-clock! That was it! The pendant looked as if it somehow belonged to those very etchings which covered the clock's silver facade. That was what had triggered such a strong sense of recognition when I laid eyes on it! ...In fact, I was willing to bet that, if I could prise open the little door through which the cuckoo was meant to emerge, the bird would be missing its head.

My heart pounded and my mind raced as I sought to understand the significance of the connection.

The pendant seemed to have been secured to me like a tag, a kind of calling card, I could only suppose from the Woman. After all, I had heard from her own lips telling him that I was, '...my gift to you, to do with what you will...'. Undoubtedly, Lucius had recognised the necklace. Even now I remembered the astonishment of his expression upon seeing it and the way he had urgently hissed, 'Where did you get this?', dangling it before my eyes from one fist as he cruelly wrenched my hair with the other.

But...but if I was correct, if the pendant did come from the cuckoo-clock in the glasshouse, then...then what?

My excitement faded as I failed to extract any sense from my revelation. I might have joined two dots together, but the rest of the picture remained stubbornly blank. Soon enough my inner voice began to mock me for it.

...So the pendant might, or might not, belong to the clock, Alice. And? Does that bring you any closer to solving the mystery of your identity? Or recovering your memories?

It might well bring me closer, I countered angrily. All these things may be related in some way, if I can only figure out how. At least it's a start.

Wonderful, Alice! Glad to know that after all this time you're finally getting off to a "start".

I've been unwell!

Oh yes, poor little invalid Alice, can't take two steps together without tiring herself out.

"Today will be different," I murmured angrily at myself. As if to prove it, I dragged myself out of the bath and briskly began drying myself off.

I found the same cambric dress I had worn on my first exploration, and slipped it over my head,
breathing in the pleasant, sweet-herb scent which still imbued its soft folds. I was just in the process of rolling up its cuffs as I moved over to the door, when a sound like a gun-shot from the hallway brought me to a shocked stand-still. A second later the door was flung wide.

Lucius stood on the threshold, his face deathly pale and his eyes blazing with a frightening intensity. Fear flooded through me. My heart began to hammer wildly against my chest, though the rest of me remained petrified. But before I could speak, he brought his finger to his mouth with a shake of his head, warning me to be silent, then he turned to noiselessly shut the door.

Shivering, I awaited his explanation or instruction.

I had never seen him so breathless and agitated before. He took a couple of steps towards me, paused, stepped back, then almost unwillingly he strode forwards again and pulled me closely against him. For a moment, he seemed in the midst of some agony of indecision. His hand gripped my chin and he gazed into my eyes, the muscles of his jaw working, his features strained and taut. Then a terrible, almost a ghastly expression, of bitter self-loathing and defiance crossed his face. He looked like a man who would risk hell rather than let fate take its course.

He bent over me. "Do you trust me?" His voice was low and hoarse and urgent.

"Yes," I whispered. "But you're—" I gulped, "you're frightening me."

"You should be frightened," he muttered, "and you should not trust me." Then he released me and, reaching inside his robe, he drew forth a small glass vial, filled with a dark muddy-coloured liquid. He held it up, and the light of the overhead chandelier set its sharp facets sparkling. "Now I have warned you—will you drink this?"

"What is it?"

"It won't hurt or harm you."

"Is it meant to...protect me in some way?"

He gritted his teeth before replying, "You will be safe."

I was aware it did not quite answer my question. "And if I refuse?" I asked him, although I already knew I would do as he requested. "...Will you force me to drink it?"

He drew closer to me again, and his mouth brushed my ear as he spoke. "Please," he said, with genuine entreaty in his voice, "do not make me force you."

"...Alright," I said, though my voice shook audibly. "If you say I must, then I will. I...I do trust you, Lucius."

He seemed almost to wince at this, but made no reply. Removing its diamond-shaped stopper, he put the vial into my trembling hand, murmuring, "Do not drink yet. Hold it still."

Lucius took hold of one of his emerald rings and flicked the stone up, revealing a locket-sized chamber. Carefully he extracted a single, fine, pale strand of hair—perhaps his own, perhaps belonging to another. Then, steadying the vial by wrapping his other hand around my shaking one, he carefully dropped the strand into the liquid. It immediately fizzed and dissolved, and the contents began to effervesce and change colour. After a few seconds it settled and stilled to a pale-rose tint.

"Now, drink," Lucius said. "Quickly—there is no time to lose."
But I could not comply, for, even as he said the words, he did not release his grip around my hand. I looked at him questioningly, and with another grimace he opened his fingers.

I brought the vial to my lips and tipped it back.

The taste was not unpleasant. It was both tart and sweet, tingling on my tongue, and I finished it in one gulp.

I barely had time to wonder what I had imbibed and why, when my stomach began to lurch and spasm sickeningly. I dropped the vial with a gasp, coughing and retching. I would have doubled over if Lucius had not held me firmly upright. My vision blurred up with tears as I uncontrollably choked and spluttered, hardly able to snatch a breath, certain that I was about to be sick, or pass out, or both.

Distantly I heard Lucius murmur, "It's alright, Alice...breathe...try to breathe," but I couldn't breathe, I couldn't stop coughing; I was hot, burning all over, I could feel my skin literally blistering and bubbling, and somehow stretching, everything was wrong, horribly wrong—and I cried out in horror and fear.

*What have you done to me?* I could not form the words, and a suddenly-flaring rage against Lucius made me strike out at him, and writhe angrily against his grasp, but he pressed his hand to my temple, murmured a single, strange word...and I was aware of him catching me up as I crumpled.

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Voices.

A deep hum of male voices brought me swimming back to the surface of consciousness.

It took me a moment to grasp the enormity of what that could possibly mean. I tried to sit up, but my body refused to comply. Then, with a start of alarm, I realised I could not even open my eyes.

"Lucius?" I called out, or tried to, but all that escaped my lips was an awful, animalistic groan. "Help! Help me!" I frantically cried again—but again, the only sound I could make was a strange lowing.

My breathing became erratic as panic took hold. What was happening to me? Why couldn't I move, or speak, or see? And why did I feel so alien, as if I didn't fit in my body?

Worse than paralysis was the crippling possibility of a betrayal. My soul shuddered, I felt myself withering, curling up like the plants in the glasshouse, I wished to howl, to scream, but all I could do was moan... But then Lucius's unmistakable scent washed over me, I sensed him beside me, and I felt a hand—*his* large, warm hand—curl around my own, and gently caress it. Comforting me. Calming me.

With calmness came focus and clarity, and my brain seized on the words now being spoken.

"You must understand, Mr Malfoy," an unfamiliar voice was uttering apologetically, "that this visitation is a mere formality. It is neither our wish, nor intention to intrude."

"Oh, I understand perfectly, gentlemen," Lucius replied icily. "I'm sure the spectacle of a Death Eater's lunatic wife will furnish you with endless anecdotes around the Ministry water-cooler."

"Be fair, Malfoy," a second, older-sounding voice said. "We are only following policy—"
"I am well aware of your policy," Lucius interrupted bluntly.

"Then you are also aware that we have significantly—and, may I say, generously—reduced the required visitations in consideration of your misfortune, and of your wife's...er, condition."

"We are both much obliged, I am sure," Lucius snarled sarcastically. "Well? Are you satisfied that we continue here in suitable affliction and misery? Or would you prefer to interview my wife personally?"

"No, no, of course that will not be necessary."

"Are you sure? Perhaps you would like to interrogate her on her recent activities? ...Because I dare not hope you have any progress to report on discovering our son's murderer."

The man cleared his throat with apparent embarrassment. "...It is very unfortunate... You are to be greatly—"

"Pity me at your peril, sir." Lucius's voice was dangerously quiet.

There was a pause, which, even in my incapacitated state, sounded awkward and uncomfortable, and I even discerned the nervous shuffling of feet. "Well then, we will leave you in—in peace, Mr Malfoy."

I heard the tread of their footsteps retreating and a door opening, but then it seemed as if the men paused upon the threshold, for the door did not shut. "Ah—Malfoy," I heard the elder voice say, as if in afterthought, "there is, perhaps, one last thing. It concerns the young lady with whom your son—"

"Stop!" Lucius barked sharply at them. "You will not speak of them before my wife!" Then he bent over me, and I felt his lips press briefly to my forehead. "I will be back soon, my dear." He said it loudly enough for the benefit of the visitors, but a pressure on my palm indicated that he really meant to reassure me.

He let go of my hand, and I heard him impatiently usher the men out of the room, with a curt directive to follow him to his office. The door shut, and all was silent.

Time passed in crawling increments, and all I could do was lie still in the imprisoning darkness, and wonder.

I wondered who the men were, and why they believed I was Lucius's wife.

I wondered if I was his wife. His lunatic wife.

No. I knew it was not possible, just as I knew that I was probably the 'young lady' of whom they had spoken.

Soon enough, I stopped wondering and started seething. So this was what Lucius had meant by not trusting him! This—this was why he had looked so haunted when he produced the vial and told me to drink. The liquid was not to protect me, but to protect him! Not to help me, but to hide me in plain sight! To prevent my discovery, my recovery—prevent me from leaving him—again! My heart swelled with silent fury, my eyes burned with sightless rage, but I could not even relieve my emotion with tears.
How could he? Why? Why would he?

But then, from out of my dark, wrathful despair, a sudden question blazed a silvery trail across my mind, like a star shooting across the blackness of night.

...Would you have willingly gone?...

The words suspended in the surrounding darkness for a long, long time. ...And gradually the rage seeped out of me, until all that was left was the tingling of my brow where his lips had brushed against it, and the throb of my hand where his own had pressed it.

And I accepted the truth. I would not, I could not leave him. Just, it seemed, as he could not let me go.

At some point I registered a change in my body, as if I belonged in it once more, although I remained prostrate and blind. I breathed a little more easily, but I was haunted by the notion that something might prevent Lucius from coming for me, and I couldn't understand why he stayed away so long.

As hour bled into endless hour, this fear slowly matured into a real terror. Once more, I was forced to question my trust of him. He had said he would be back soon—where, then, was he? He must know what I was suffering: the fear, the confusion and loneliness, and the terrible, terrible claustrophobia of confinement. Was he inflicting a deliberate cruelty? Could he still be capable of such a thing? ...My heart would not convict him, but my mind doubted and suspected.

Lucius came for me at last.

As easily as he had disabled me, he released me, and at last I could see, and move, and speak. At last I could cry.

He held me as my relief and frustration burst forth in great, wracking sobs.

He did not deflect the punches I hammered on his chest, nor did he try to restrain me, or attempt to justify or excuse himself. He held me until I had vented all my vehemence, and wrung out every tear, then he held me even closer as I forgave him, and clung to him, and told him the secrets of my heart.

And finally, finally he kissed me, as I had so long wished to be kissed by him: his lips seeking and parting my own, softly and searchingly, his arms wrapped securely around my shoulders, locking me into a deliriously spinning, infinitely beautiful world, where I was safe and warm, where I knew that I truly belonged...I was filled with the serenity of certainty; the heat of him became the warmth of me, my heartbeat slowed and trained to his...I only wished the moment would never end, and for a while my wish seemed possible...everything, anything seemed possible...

Then he gathered me up into his arms and carried me downstairs.
I was afraid to see him again. Afraid of encountering some obstacle, some insurmountable barrier of coldness or hardness in his eyes.

The last defences around my heart had crumbled, and I felt vulnerable, exposed and raw, as if a layer of me had been peeled quite away. I was also dazed, and full of wonder. The memory of his lips on mine filled me with fluttering happiness and stabbing doubt. Confusing everything was the shock of information I had received during that brief exchange between Lucius and the two strange visitors.

His son had been...murdered?

Why, then, the profound guilt that pervaded my own fleeting visions of the young man?

And where, where was Lucius's wife? She, who he had spoken of as no longer being his wife, as having gone, before I ever came—? The men had mistaken me for her, that was clear—but it was also clear that they had expected to see her there, in that iron-barred room. Why had it been so important for Lucius, not only to hide me from them, but to present her to them?

...Could he have done the unthinkable to her? After all, he was, or had been, a man of resentful, changeful temperament. I had learnt first-hand of the cruel, occasionally violent streak which discoloured his nature... And the frankly sinister epithet he had given himself ('Death Eater'?!) was suggestive of things which made my hair stand on end...

Had he simply...snapped?

Or, looking at it from a more pardonable perspective, had he put her out of her misery?

I shuddered, and rejected both ideas. Not because I had any proof to the contrary, but because they were simply too awful to suspect of the man who I...I was in love with.

The questions, the doubt, the fear and the wonder all held me hostage in my room well past the time I would usually appear for breakfast. Time and again I made it out into the hallway, only to panic and rush back inside again. I might have stayed there all day, but at last the decision was taken out of my hands with a sudden knock at my door.

My heartbeat pounded arrhythmically. As I moved over to the door and turned the handle with fumbling fingers, I braced myself for the rejection I had pretty much convinced myself to expect.

Lucius immediately, decisively put my doubts to rest.

Before I could so much as greet him, he drew me firmly to him and caught my lips with his...and he did not release me until I was dizzy, breathless and melting inside; pressed pliantly against him and barely able to stand. The same sweet warmth of last night coursed through me, making every nerve, every particle of me, thrill to his closeness and tingle to his touch.

Looking up into his eyes, I was sure I detected an answering glimmer of relief, and it occurred to me then that he was not only allaying my fear, but a parallel one of his own.

"I have heard your door open and close ten times this morning," he said softly, brushing my cheek with his palm. "How much longer did you intend to keep me in suspense?" The caressing note in his voice was indescribably enchanting to me.
Unable to form a comprehensible explanation, I simply replied, "I'm ready now."

His gaze flickered over me lightly, taking in the pretty, lilac robe I had chosen, and I blushed for the compliment reflected in his eyes. "Come, then," he said, holding out his hand with a disarming smile which made my breath catch.

As my fingers met his, I was struck by how entirely different he appeared from the man I used to liken to a ruthless Teutonic prince—that brittle marble mould was broken away, and the man who emerged was as vital and receptive as he had once been inflexible and cold. His aura of power now seemed alight with a new radiance, erasing all traces of harshness, enhancing the intrinsic harmony of his high-bred features, so I felt almost astounded, blinded by his brilliance and beauty...

...But there was still a gleam of the devil-may-care of yesterday lingering in his iridescent irises, which reminded me that, however elated I felt, however tender he seemed, I ought to wade cautiously into the unknown depths stretching out before me.

The hours passed in a haze of sweet unreality.

There was a winsome, beguiling facet to Lucius which I had never seen before. ...No, that wasn't quite true. I had glimpsed something like it before, the first time he had dined with The Woman, when I had wept in despair of him ever treating me in such a way. ...But, whereas that time I had sensed something of pretence behind his captivating manner—this felt real. There was nothing guarded in his voice, no insincerity to trace in his expression...at any rate, I couldn't detect it. And when he kissed me, I could no more doubt him than I wished to resist him.

But at some point during the day, when the whirlwind of elation had finally calmed, a sharply-serrated realisation cut through my delirium. I ought to, I must, once again broach some of the questions which he had thus-far refused to answer. After what he had put me through yesterday, he owed me some kind of explanation, and I owed it to myself to extract one from him—or at the very least, to try.

But the hours slipped by, exquisitely ephemeral, and as evening drew in I still had not managed to submit even one single question. I became anxious that the right moment would simply never present itself, and that if I didn't manage to speak now, perhaps I never would.

It was getting late. We wandered in the garden and came to a standstill in the shadows of the bordering conifers, silently watching the canopy of bright stars overhead. Lucius stood behind me, his arms crossed about my shoulders, and, cocooned in his embrace and lulled by his persistently gentle demeanour, the words seemed to slip naturally from my lips.

"What happened to your wife, Lucius?"

He was silent. I felt his body tensing along me, the muscles in his arms stiffening.

"Please," I said, bringing my hands up to press his forearm entreatingly, "please, Lucius, I—I need an answer. Just this one question."

He let go of me then, and an instant chill pierced my body. I saw that he had turned to face the house, his gaze fixed on the third storey. Though I could not interpret his expression, a light from the house caught his silver eyes, and they glittered strangely. "Be specific, Alice," he said quietly. "What
exactly are you asking me." It sounded more like a resigned comment than a question.

A sudden uncertainty shivered through me. Did I really want to know? Wasn't it better, safer, to not know? But I gritted my teeth and told myself that for better or worse, I must. I must.

Slowly, hesitantly, I said, "Last night, those men mistook me for her...they seemed to believe—to expect that—that she was alive... But she's not, is she? She's not alive."

Again a silence. Then, "...No," Lucius said at last. "She is not alive."

"How did she die?" I asked it quickly, aware I was trespassing with a second question.

"What do you believe?" he said, turning back to me suddenly.

I was at a loss for an answer. I heard myself stammering, "I...I don't know."

"Come, my dear—you must have given some thought to the subject. What conclusions have you drawn? Do you think I have her blood on my hands?"

"No...I mean, I don't...that is, I don't think so."

"Your confidence is overwhelming, my dear." His tone was contaminated with bitterness. "Of what monstrous things must you believe me capable."

"I didn't mean that," I said hastily. "It's just...I know that when a person is very sick, sometimes it is—sometimes it's kinder to—" I faltered, and was silent. I wished wholeheartedly that I had never spoken.

"Ah, I see," he murmured. "You think I may have...assisted nature in her merciful works, so to speak." I was relieved that he sounded thoughtful, rather than angry. His fingertips lightly tipped my face up to his. "Would you understand, if I admitted to such?"

I looked searchingly in his eyes. Slowly, I nodded. "I think so," I said.

"Thank you." It was impossible to tell if those two words were sarcastic or sincere. "But you may rest assured on that point. I was—I am—too selfish a man to voluntarily part with whatever is dear to me."

Yes, I thought, I know you are.

After a pause he said softly, "Perhaps it would have been kinder to...help her find peace. But I had already lost so much, and I was damned if I was going to..." He stopped, and turned his face towards the dark, veiling shadows of the conifers. "...Of course, I had already lost her. Most of her had disappeared into the ground with our only child. ...But in the end, she took that decision entirely out of my hands." He spoke impassively, as if he had reconciled himself to the fact. "She deteriorated so quickly, so completely," he continued. "Towards the end she did not even recognise me. I tried to keep her safe, as safe and as comfortable as possible, but one night she—." He made a resigned gesture with his hands, which I found unbearably pitiable. "I discovered her the following morning. She had... utilised various noxious plants from her collection. I believe you found the place a while ago?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"My wife was a talented botanist. She did not err in the efficacy of her concoction."
As finally I understood what happened, my heart throbbed painfully, both with sorrow, pity and a horrible sense of guilt. For if I was somehow responsible for the loss of his son, was I not also indirectly responsible for this subsequent tragedy? No wonder he had hated me so deeply...

But one thing still confused me. "But why keep it a secret? Those men—"

"Those men," he cut in over me, and I could hear anger return to his voice, "those men..." He gritted his teeth, and seemed to be undergoing some kind of difficult, internal struggle. Then suddenly he turned and began to stride back over the grounds, from where we'd come. "Come, Alice," he said over his shoulder, "I'll get you a drink."

I hurried to catch up with him. "I don't need a dr—"

"I need one," he said bluntly.

He led me back to the pavilion, which was, as always, beautifully warm, and now softly glowing with ambient candlelight. It was enchanting, like a fairy's grotto, and for a moment I wished that he would simply gather me to him and kiss away all my unanswered questions, and I kiss away his tragic revelations, and we could simply exist together in the present moment, without past, or pain, without sorrow or memory...

But he did not kiss me. He installed me in one seat, and took another opposite me.

After offering me a drink, which I declined, he poured one for himself, knocked it back, poured a second, then reached inside his robe for his embossed cigar case. His hands were slightly unsteady as he extracted one of his slim cigars and lit it, though his face remained perfectly composed. Silently, we both watched the coils of smoke drifting upwards and slowly dissipating. At last he murmured, "There was a war, Alice. Do you remember anything of it?"

I actually gasped with shock, so unexpectedly did these words strike me. "A war? As in—we—Britain? Against whom?"

An unintelligible expression flickered over his face, and he replied, "I suppose you could describe it as a civil conflict."

I stared at him, though his face was tilted up, his eyes still following the spiralling plumes of cigar smoke. "I see..." I said, as the dreadful truth slowly dawned on me. "And...we...we were on opposite sides."

"Indeed."

I tried to digest this news, but without any context, I had no way to understand what it really meant. "What was it about?" I asked.

A grim irony told in the brackets of his mouth and he shrugged. "Power and dominion. Fear and greed." He raised his glass, almost as if in a toast, then swallowed a mouthful of the amber liquor. "The usual dogs of war, dressed in the trappings of a noble cause."

"Good versus...?"

Lucius levelled his gaze at me, with a directness which made me tremble. "War is never so simplistic as that, Alice," he said, taking another draw of his cigar. "However...only recently have I discovered that I have been...mistaken in many of my long-held beliefs."

I could not know what it cost him to make such a concession. The subtext was clear. He was
admitting to me that not only had he been on the opposite side—he had been on the wrong side.

Suddenly a piece of the puzzle clicked into place, and I blurted out, "You're under some kind of house arrest, aren't you?"

He took a moment to consider before he replied. "It is a little more complicated than that, but essentially—I am."

"What for?" I felt nauseous as I formed the next words. "...War crimes?"

"Yes."

I couldn't bring myself to ask exactly what that entailed. Terrible images flickered through my imagination, like a whirring reel of old footage, documenting unspeakable atrocities committed in the name of war...and I thought, *I'm in love with a war criminal. God help me.*

"And if it was known that your wife was...no longer alive?"

Another hard, humourless smile. "Then those men will escort me back—back to a country that despises me, to be yolked and monitored, treated like a... They might as well throw me back into..." He grimaced, and did not finish the sentence. Then, softly, he added, "It would be insupportable."

With this, Lucius finished off the remainder of his liquor and turned his glittering eyes on me again. "So, what do you make of me now, my dear? Please, be frank. I should like to know."

I scrabbled about for an honest answer amongst the chaos of my thoughts, intent on being truthful, but desperate for the truth to conform to my feelings. "I think that...the fact you are not in prison means that your...your c-crimes can not have been so very terrible. They could not have been...unforgivable."

As I said the last word, Lucius visibly started, and a strange sequence of expressions passed over his features: doubt, something like shame, then a slowly-spreading gratitude which lit up his face and eyes with a beautiful glow...and I felt my own cheeks flood with responsive warmth. He was up and next to me in seconds, gripping me tightly, and he bent over me and muttered in my ear, "You don't know what you say, sweet, wild little creature—judging me with those serious, amber eyes; recklessly absolving me of my wrongdoings..."

Then he was kissing me again, but it was different this time: deeper, fervent and filled with meaning...truth be told, a little frightening.

I was on the verge of struggling for breath when he finally released me. "One day you will hate me," he whispered darkly, but his arms remained fiercely wrapped about me, as if he did not intend to let this ominous prediction interfere with his present wishes and desires.

...That evening I lay in my bath, submerged to my shoulders in deep water, watching the floral-scented steam curling around me through half-closed eyelids.

My body was tired, but my mind was, as always, a kaleidoscope of images, thoughts and questions as I replayed the day's events in minute detail...and across these fluid, ever-changing abstractions, Lucius's image was indelibly stamped, while his recent words echoed in my mind, deeply troubling to me.
'You don’t know what you say...recklessly absolving me of wrongdoings...one day you will hate me...'

He had sounded so certain about that.

I had to suppress the urge to ask myself, 'Well, what's the worst he could have done?'—for I knew it could only leave me tormented, but wholly unaltered. Because love didn't work that way. It wasn't founded on rational thought, it wasn't convenient, or conditional...it was absolute.

*You're wrong, Lucius,* I thought. *I won't hate you, because it isn't possible to hate and love at the same time. Not truly. You can hate certain things—perhaps everything—about the person you love, but you cannot hate THEM.*

I recalled that first day of my stay, when Lucius had grabbed and brutally shaken me, snarling at me that frightening sentence, impossible to forget. *Don't you know I have killed men for less than what is written on your face?* …Taking those words at face value, he had killed, perhaps more than once. He was a killer.

He was a killer, but love was absolute.

...*Well, what if he killed your family, Alice? Would you still love him then? Yes or no?*

*I told you, I'm not playing that game.*

...*It's not a game, Alice, it's called "facing unpleasant possibilities". ...Admit it: you're scared to answer that question.*

*Yes, I'm scared. I'm scared because I already know the answer.*

I sank further down into the bath, covering my shoulders and neck with the swirling, comforting warmth, until the water tickled the line of my mouth. My lips were still tender, chafed and tingling from the kisses they had received, even a little bruised by the fervency with which they had been imprinted.

My tongue traced lightly over my top lip and I fancied I could still taste him, that strong, bitter-sweet mix of brandy and cigars and a subtler sapor of indefinable spices. My eyelids drooped almost closed and my hands moved weightlessly over me—the curve of my chest, the dip of my stomach—as my mind lingered luxuriously on those exquisite, precious moments of ardent contact...

Vaguely, a little reluctantly, I allowed myself to wonder where this new, physical connection between us might lead...and how quickly. Reason told me that Lucius was not a man to take things slowly. That once his mind was set on what he wanted, nothing would hinder his obtaining it.

...*But what did I want? Did I want him to—to touch me? To...take me?*

One hand drifted further downwards, and my fingertips delicately combed through the wisps of downy curls between my legs.

I didn't even know if I had ever...?

...And even if I had some, any, experience (although something told me it would not be much), I couldn't remember it. All I knew was him. Lucius. He had been the sole player in my few fantasies and my many, many dreams. How far did I wish those dreams to become a reality?

My eyes shut fully and my fingers became his. Slowly, gently, stroking...
I bit my lip, imagining him kissing me again, fiercely, deeply...only this time I was beneath him on a bed and one of his arms was wrapped possessively around my—naked? yes, naked—body, while the other was caressing me...with exquisite finesse...just...like so...

I pictured his lips leaving my mouth and trailing leisurely down my neck, then further down to the swell of my breast, teasing the sensitive tip with his tongue, making me gasp...I could almost, almost feel his silken hair spilling in a feather-light waterfall over my shoulders, arms, across my chest...

Then the vision changed...Lucius was over and above and around me, his eyes glittering like diamonds in the surrounding darkness, his teeth slightly clenched as he parted my legs and readied himself to—

I snapped my eyes open and hauled myself up to a sitting position. I wrapped my hands safely about my knees and began to berate myself for indulging in so dangerously seductive an image...I needed to be able to think clearly, to know that I was going into things with my eyes open, my brain switched on.

*) Oh, which brain was that, Alice? You mean your amnesiac, confused, damaged one? The same brain which has fallen in love with the man who imprisoned and abused you—a man who is a self-confessed killer and war-criminal? That's the brain you wish to think clearly with?

I had no defence to present to that taunting inner voice. All I could do was offer an honest reply: Yes. That brain. My brain.

Sighing, I climbed out of the bath and dried myself, then wrapped the large, plush towel around me before moving back through to the adjoining chamber to flop down upon my bed.

I lay there for some time, teasing out a particular thought which had struck me. Finally, Lucius was becoming...real. He was no longer the frightening, unfathomable spectre who had only ever proved his existence through the pain he inflicted upon me, and the evidence bruised on my skin in the shape of his hands. Nor was he the all-absorbing, fascinating apparition who, after rescuing me from the clutches of darkness, seemed even more disqualified from the realms of reality, by the very suddenness of his changed demeanour.

No, both insubstantial figments were gone—at least nearly gone—and the real Lucius seemed to be taking form in front of my eyes, his touch no longer marking me with its brutality, but defining himself with its tenderness. With each caress he stepped further out of the shadows, with each kiss he was brought more clearly into focus before me.

And now...now that he had relented and finally made that first revelation about himself, I told myself it could only be a matter of time before he made one about me.

Perhaps even my name.
The Black Crow

The next morning as I dressed for breakfast, I found myself blushing at the temptingly sensuous thoughts I had entertained in the bath the night before. ...What if Lucius could somehow read them? He had always had a knack for knowing exactly what I was thinking and I knew very well that my much-too-lucent eyes could hide nothing from him.

And if my eyes didn't betray me, I was afraid my body would. There was a new pliancy and suppleness which had smoothed and softened its wasted lines; the outward luminosity which falling in love had given me was now heightened even further by a bright inner flame, which had blazed to life with Lucius's physical reciprocation; his desire had soaked through to the wick of me and set it alight...everything about me looked so glossy and— I mentally flinched at the word which sprang to mind—ripe.

Yet his fierce, fervent kisses last night had also frightened me. I was afraid of being swept too quickly and too far out into an unnavigable ocean, where I must cling to him or be swept away, or simply drown... But what could I do? There was a saying about wearing one's heart on one's sleeve. Mine covered my whole body, my whole being. Painfully aware of this fact, I went downstairs to seek him for whom I wore it.

There was a moment, as I gained the bottom of the stairs, when I suddenly knew that Lucius had gone.

The great oaken front door, which usually stood open on such beautiful mornings as this one, was firmly, ominously, shut. As I made my way down the corridor uneasiness tingled at the back of my neck like the touch of a cold finger.

At first I blamed my own skittishness, but this changed when I tried the front door and discovered it was not only shut, but locked. I turned towards the dining room, supposing—hoping—Lucius would be there instead, waiting for me.

I moved to the door with deliberate, measured steps, quelling the twisting anxiety in the pit of my stomach.

"Lucius?" I pushed open the door and experienced an immediate pang of disappointment and strengthening disquietude as I saw he was not there.

I noticed then that the table was laid for breakfast—and almost in the same moment my eye was caught by a sheet of white paper resting against my china cup. I ran over to it and snatched it up with trembling fingers.

With a thrill of fascination, I realised I had never seen Lucius's writing before. It was just like him—assured, impossibly elegant, unmistakably masculine.

Alice,

Do not be alarmed by my absence. I am called away on urgent business. For your own sake I ask you to remain indoors. Also to reserve any explorations for another day. I hope to rejoin you this evening. I am,

Truly yours,

LUCIUS

He signed his name with a graceful flourish.
Although not an actual explanation, this message afforded me immediate relief, but it could not quite wash away the uneasiness I felt at being left alone. I wrestled with an irrational sense of abandonment. What had called him away? Why hadn't he waited to tell me in person, or woken me up, if he had to leave so suddenly?

My gaze lingered on those last five words. 'I am, Truly yours, Lucius'.

Are you? I wondered. Are you truly mine?

Sitting down in my usual place, I poured myself a cup of tea, but I had no appetite for food. ...After everything which had recently taken place—the skyfalling revelations, the consuming tempest of emotions; after last night's long rumination, and this morning’s fraught anxieties—this abrupt interruption of momentum jarred brutally against me, as if I'd hit a wall running. I felt almost winded by it, instantly sapped of energy and adrenaline.

I shivered. I supposed I ought to return to bed and read or sleep away the long hours while I awaited Lucius's return. What else was there to do? He had specifically requested that I not continue my explorations—for my own sake. He might as well have said, 'safety.'

I stood up, wearily deciding that I might as well go back upstairs. As an afterthought, I picked up the silver tea-service to take it with me. Then, leaving the dining room, I padded back up the hushed hallway, the tea things clinking softly on the silver tray as I walked.

Once again the touching coldness skimmed the back of my neck, and once again I fought the urge to quicken my pace. Without Lucius, the half-lit corridor took on a looming, dreary aspect which took me quickly back to days I preferred to forget...

A sudden sound ruptured the surrounding silence.

TRING!

I lurched to a stop and swung around to face the direction it came. A little silver bell, hanging some way above the front door and half-hidden by shadows, danced madly about.

Oh look, I thought numbly, I never noticed a doorbell before.

As it jingled, the air temperature plummeted around me and the light visibly dimmed, becoming dark and dismal, as if outside the rosy spring had been suddenly displaced by an unnatural winter. A stream of white mist began to leak in through the cracks of the door, swirling around my ankles and gradually deepening like a rising river.

The tea-service began clattering loudly as my arms started shaking—more with cold than terror. I was too terrified to feel terror. I could see my shallow breaths billowing in small puffs. Disjointedly, I admonished myself for spilling the tea. You should be more careful, Alice. You'll have nothing left by the time you get up to your room...

TRING-TRING-TRING!

"WHAT?" The words tore out of me in a shredded scream. "WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

The bell abruptly stopped ringing. There was a moment of rich, heavy silence.

Then a voice shimmered through the frozen air and roiling, thickening fog. "Knock, knock, little mud-blood..." it chimed, sweetly, sickeningly. "...While the cat's away, the mice may play..."
I recoiled backwards. As I did, the painting that I was passing—the portrait of a pretty young girl—started to horribly snarl and hiss at me, like the one which had frightened me to insensibility on the very first night. With a cry of horror I saw the child's mouth filled with bloody fangs, gnashing and grinning at me with a kind of lustful hatred. Reflexively, I hurled the tea-service at the painting, then turned and blindly ran towards the stairs.

As I ran, each painting I passed leaped into monstrous animation, forming a chorus of snarling and hissing as I fled upstairs, desperate to make it to my own picture-less room. I knew I was screaming, but I couldn't hear it past the horrific noise surrounding and enclosing upon me...

At some point during my wild flight upstairs, my mind switched off; though my body made the journey, my brain simply paralysed, so that when I regained awareness I was huddled beneath my quilted bedspread, like a child sheltering from imaginary monsters.

But my monsters were real. And they were coming for me.

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The dreadful noise ceased with the slam of my door and for a while all was silent, apart from the ragged gasps of my own breathing.

Then the tapping began.

A hollow, percussive tick-tick-tick on my windowpane, like a wind-buffeted tree knocking against glass...except there were no trees outside my room.

I couldn't—I didn't wish to identify that sound. ...But after a few torturous minutes of incessant tapping, I began to feel as if not knowing must surely be worse than knowing, that the uncertainty itself must eventually derange me...until finally, I threw back the covers and sat up, peering over at the window.

A large crow sat on the ledge, pecking at the pane with a sharp, black beak. It immediately fixed its beady black eyes upon me.

Peck, peck, peck, went the sharp beak. Then that voice—Her pretty, feminine voice—spoke to me, not through the window but, it seemed, directly into my head.

{Why so afraid, little worm? Aren't you glad to see your Mummy-dearest?}

"No," I replied aloud, my voice still hoarse from screaming, "Please...just leave me alone."

{But why? I miss our little chats. It's been ever so long.}

An awful realisation struck me suddenly and forcefully, making my head reel as if from a physical blow. "It was you, wasn't it!" I gasped, shuddering violently. "In the forest, that day...you led me out...you brought me here!"

{For which you have yet to properly thank me.}

"Why? Why did you bring me here?"

The bird made a loud, mocking 'Kraa!'. {I promise to tell you, if you just let me in your window.}

"No!" I hissed. "Go away!" I snatched my slipper off my foot and hurled it at the window-pane. It struck the glass hard and momentarily the bird fluttered up, its glossy black wings beating rapidly as
it recovered its balance to settle once more upon the sill.

The crow glared balefully through the pane. *{Still just as impudent as ever, I see. I thought Luci might have corrected you of that by now. Remind me to tell him to give you a good whipping for it later. Or perhaps you'd rather enjoy that?}* 

I felt myself crimson deeply at her taunting jibe. "How dare you—"

*{Spare me your protestations, mud-blood; we both know your pitiful proclivities regarding your master ...but where IS the dear boy, I wonder?}* 

"You know," I said accusingly. "You lured him away, d-didn't you?"

The voice laughed and outside the crow cawed mockingly. *{As I said, I want to have a nice heart-to-heart with everyone's favourite little abomination}*.

"What have you done to him? Where is he?!"

The bird tilted its head and ruffled its jetty feathers, almost as if it were shrugging. *{Why don't you see for yourself?}* 

Immediately I became aware of a movement in my periphery. I started up with a choking cry of terror, which changed to a gasp of fascinated disbelief as I realised that the movement came from the gilt-framed mirror: the reflective surface was clouding up with roiling, dark smoke, which parted seconds later to reveal a new scene...

I could see them—*both* of them. It was as if the mirror frame was glazed with one-way glass looking into an adjoining, unfamiliar room.

Lucius stood with his back to a low-burning fire in a gleaming black-marble hearth, a small crystal tumbler held elegantly between his long fingers. The walls of the room were also dark and the entire room was appointed with ebony-wood furniture and matching furnishings, made distinguishable by the silvery luminescence of an elaborately-tiered chandelier. Lucius's bright hair and pale face contrasted strikingly with the surrounding darkness, but his expression and posture appeared to be relaxed and at ease. A suave half-smile graced his mouth. He seemed to be listening with interest to something—though I could hear nothing—that his interlocutrix was saying to him. 

She was reclining on a sable chaise-longue just a few feet away from him, gazing idly into a hand-held mirror as she spoke smilingly up at him.

My heart seemed to constrict as I stared at the two rivetingly beautiful subjects of this strange, silent vision...but then The Woman waved her hand with a slight, surreptitious gesture and the mirror clouded up and silvered over once more.

*{You see, mud-blood?}* mocked the voice in my head. *{We're having a delightful time together. He hasn't mentioned you even once}*.

With burgeoning fear I tried to make sense of the fact that she was both here AND there, in two separate places, in two parallel forms. Added to my fear was a gnawing dismay at seeing him—Lucius—socialising with that ravishing lovely, despicably evil creature...

*{So, now you know he is safe and well and enjoying such excellent company, tell me—}*"

"I'm not telling you anything!" I interrupted fiercely.

*{...Not jealous are we?}*
"No," I gritted out, though my tight voice and prickling eyes belied the denial.

[Oh, do cheer up, worm. I only want to know how things are getting on between you and your master. Enlighten me.]

"He is not my—"

[Ah, but he is...for he's not yet your lover, is he? No...not yet...]

I pressed my lips together and refused to reply.

Another tinkling laugh in my head, another mocking caw outside. [You are certainly taking your time breaking him, mud-blood. His innate revulsion for you must be strong indeed. How does that make you feel? Rather humiliated, I should hope? Just a little bit worthless?]

I clenched my teeth, filled with rage at her mockery of my innermost fears, her casual desecration of the scriptures of my heart... [SHUT UP!] I hurled wordlessly back at her, shouting directly through the nexus she had created with my mind.

Once again the crow fluttered suddenly up, as if I had thrown another object at the window. This time it took wing and I watched it make a graceful, gliding circle to land neatly back upon its perch.

[No need for such savagery, little one...] the chiming voice chided me. [I was only teasing you. Now, where were we? Ah, yes. You were about to tell me what you and Lucius have been getting up to.]

[Never!]

[Very well. Then you may SHOW me.]

[Show you?—No. No!]

Desperately I tried to break the connection, close down my thoughts, snatch them out of her reach—but already I could feel her sifting through them, the gaze of her black eyes pouring down into my brain like white search-lights flooding a dark room.

Greedily, gloatingly, she found and scrutinised those few, sacred, cherished memories: the beautiful moment when Lucius gathered me against him and kissed me in the iron-barred room; his winsome, passionate manner the following day; and last night's episode, the possessive, almost violent force of his desire, which had threatened to overwhelm me with its dark fervency...

[So it HAS been getting under his skin after all...]

"Stop it!" I cried aloud. "Get out of my head!" I was frantic with fear of what else she might discover, and mock, and use for her own twisted purposes...

But she did not stop. With methodical, ruthless perseverance I felt her penetrate the deepest, most private recesses of my mind; leisurely inspecting everything which had happened since that last shattering, devastating encounter in her lair: witnessing my changing, growing feelings for Lucius, the fragile flames of gratitude, trust, repentance and forgiveness, stoked and nurtured by his clemency into something vital and life-sustaining...and forged from the very heart of that blaze, the linkless chain which now bonded me entirely to him, for which there was no beginning nor end, neither lock nor key...

[How amusingly pathetic] she scoffed derisively, as though my love was some kind of ludicrous, scorn-worthy deformity.
Then, to my utter horror and mortification, I sensed her latching onto last night’s intimate moment in the bath, when I had touched myself and fantasised that my caressing fingers were Lucius’s...and the other images I had indulged in...of me, beneath him on a bed, entwined in his ardent embrace...naked, ready for him...

*Quite the little bitch on heat, aren’t you, you disgusting animal?*

This final, degrading insult was too much. I leaped off the bed with a cry of fury and ran to the window, hammering it with both fists, sending the bird squawking into the air for a third time. Immediate dread of some kind of retaliation sent me staggering back to the furthest two wardrobe, where I sank down into the recess between them, huddling with my knees pressed to my chest.

I could feel my left arm tingling and burning, but I refused to look at it. *Please, come back, Lucius*, I prayed desperately. *Please, please...*

But my pleas were only answered with three mocking, hollow taps on the window pane.

*Well, this certainly has been most...enlightening* said the chiming voice. *I believe things are coming along just splendidly... Don’t worry, you’ll get to act out your tawdry, vulgar little fantasy soon enough. He is so close to falling...maybe I’ll help him along with a nice dream or two of what you get up to when you’re taking a bath...*

"I won’t let you use me against him!" I cried out, my voice hollow and agonised. "I’ll tell him—I’ll warn him not to t-touch me!"

*I’m afraid that will be quite impossible, little worm. ...You shall see. ...It’s going to be our special secret, mud-blood. Just between us girls.*

There was a scrabbling noise as I heard the bird launch off the sill and take flight. I gasped with relief as I felt her dark presence withdraw from my mind...

But for a long, long time I remained where I was, curled between the two wardrobes, my head sunk on my knees, my teeth chattering uncontrollably.

...A soft tread on the flagstones outside my room. A gently enquiring tap at my door.

Finally, Lucius had come back.

Relief swamped me so entirely I felt as if I might drown in it. But even as it crested, it crashed, leaving me shivering in its wake.

I turned over, away from the sound, and emptily stared at the tapestry on the opposite wall. A strange depiction of a serpent entwined in a tree, heavily laden with golden pears. The encroaching gloom of dusk had smudged its intricate detail and dulled its sumptuous colours.

I had crawled back to my bed some time ago. A lifetime, it felt. But I was still shaking.

There was a second gentle tap at the door. The brass handle twisted and there was a swirl of cooler air from the hallway as the door opened. I wanted so badly to turn towards it and indulge my senses with the simple reassurance of seeing him...his face, his eyes.

But I couldn’t. I mustn’t.
"You, Alice, must grow an impenetrable barrier around your heart of briars and thorns, like those engulfing the glasshouse, slowly extinguishing its light..."

"Alice?"

Despite these bleak thoughts, Lucius's voice was immediately healing and reviving, it coursed through me like new blood. I heard him approaching the bed, and my pulse fluttered responsively. "Are you awake, Alice?"

Lucius moved around the bed, and I snapped my eyes shut.

I mustn't.

There was a muted rustle of heavy, expensive material as Lucius bent over me; I felt his fingers brush a tendril away from my face. A tremor vibrated through me. I could smell the pleasant, layered subtleties of him, and the ache in my heart increased.

"Alice," he said. His tone was soft, caressing. "Open your eyes."

Unable to help myself, I obeyed.

So beautiful, that face.

Lucius looked a little weary, but his mouth curved up when our eyes connected. Mine stayed in a tight, drawn line. It was my turn to wear the impassive facade, to be taciturn and secretive.

I let the silence stretch and stretch between us.

A shadow crossed Lucius's features, and his head tilted as he attempted to interpret my reticence. Again he tried to engage with me. "How was your day, my dear?"

Terrifying, traumatising, horrific, were the words which sprang readily to mind. But I just carried on looking up at him, silently drinking in his unearthly beauty.

He took a seat beside me; the substantial weight of him causing me to incline towards him. Swiftly he leaned over and brushed my cheek with his lips. "What is the matter with you?" he murmured softly. "Are you unwell?"

My breath caught slightly at the prohibited contact, the intimate proximity. I couldn't help but think of my bath last night and the seductive vision I had entertained of us, entwined upon my bed—this bed.

My 'tawdry fantasy', as She so contemptuously termed it.

Lucius frowned as he closely inspected my face, no doubt pallid and strained. "No..." he murmured. "You're angry. ...Or afraid?" Some fear of his own flickered within his silver gaze, and his jaw tightened. "What is wrong, Alice?"

Still I did not answer, instead letting my teeth sink a little into my tongue, relishing the sting.

"What happened to you while I was away?" Lucius's fingers curled around my upper arm, and he gently shook me. "Why is the tea-service on the floor downstairs?" A note of frustration sharpened the timbre of his voice. He never was a patient man. "Answer me, Alice."

I swallowed a suddenly-rising sob. I wanted to round on him, to shout at him, What happened to me? What happened to YOU?! To your promise to protect me? You were with Her, consorting with Her—or was that flirting with Her?—while She taunted and terrorised me! And then She rifled...
...But my lips did not form those accusations. Because She hadn't put things back properly.

And in that moment I realised that it wasn't simply a case of 'I mustn't', but of 'I can't'. My throat clammed up, obstructed by the words I was not allowed to say, the subject I had been banned from broaching. I could feel myself sweating now, revulsion filling me as I recalled the time in that horrible dungeon, when She took away my voice altogether.

The fingers around my arm tightened and Lucius's eyes darkened. Even now, I found myself fascinated by how quickly they altered with his mood. They were not quite the colour of storm-clouds.

Something in his expression triggered another, more distant memory—of our very first encounter when he pinned me under him on the wet gravel, and somehow delved inside my mind to read my thoughts. ...He looked as if he were contemplating doing do so now. The mere thought of it sickened me. To be invaded again, so soon after She had wrought such havoc inside my brain...no, I couldn't bear it. And what if he were to see those images for which She so cruelly mocked me?—No. NO.

I jerked my head to one side, ripping myself out of his engulfing, scrutinising gaze.

Conceding defeat, I gave up the struggle to speak of Her frightening visitation this morning. As soon as I did, my tongue unlocked and my voice returned. "Nothing," I replied flatly. "Nothing happened today. There is nothing wrong with me."

I felt the bed move again as Lucius drew back from me. "We must have very disparate an understanding of the word 'nothing'," he said with obvious displeasure, removing his hand from my arm. My heart seemed to lie still in my rib-cage, cold and heavy as a lump of marble.

Another silence fell between us.

"Where were you today?" I finally asked in a half-whisper.

Lucius paused before replying, as if considering exactly how to answer. Surely...surely he wouldn't lie?

Oh, but he would. He did. "I was summoned by my caseworkers for some further questioning," was his smooth rejoinder.

Dismay robbed me momentarily of breath. There was a strange toppling sensation within me, like a tower of blocks falling down. Even though I was lying down, I felt somehow destabilised, precarious.

Never mind 'why'—how, how could he lie to me? And how could he make it sound so easy, so much like the truth?

"I don't believe you." The words were muffled by my pillow, hardly audible, but the atmosphere immediately and palpably altered, from one of strained tension to downright icy frigidity.

"Is that so," Lucius said. I could tell by those three, clipped words that he was angered and offended. "And where, pray, do you imagine that I have been, my dear?"

With Her. You were with Her. She showed me in the mirror. I saw you.

But once again, my thoughts were segregated from my tongue. "I don't know," I replied instead,
turning back look at him, daring him to lie to my face. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I am not used to having my veracity called into question, Alice," Lucius said thornily. "You must know that it is not in my nature to tolerate such aspersions." He paused as if awaiting an apology.

Where his deceit had wounded, his arrogance enraged, and my heart swelled with mutiny. How dare he take offence, when he was the one lying? I was so utterly confounded I could only heave a gasp of rage and try to blink away the tears which threatened to spill.

His tone softened at my evident distress. "For you I will make an exception, Alice," he said with a brief sigh. "I assure you—I promise you: only the most pressing of summons could have induced me to leave you here alone."

Oh, I'm sure you were summoned, Lucius. But by whom?

A sudden irony flickered across his expression as he continued. "It appears my case is being considered for a reduced sentence, on grounds of compassion." He brought one hand up to cup my cheek, but again I jerked my head to one side, angrily avoiding his touch.

Stop lying to me! I thought, almost beside myself with futile frustration and rage at his ongoing deception.

But almost in the same moment I was struck by a new, revelatory possibility. ...Maybe Lucius wasn't lying. Perhaps the vision The Woman had revealed in the cloudy looking-glass—perhaps that was the lie. Literally smoke in mirrors. Maybe Her endgame wasn't to force us together, but to drive us apart?

...The thought went some way to calming me, but I was far from certain. Once again I felt myself slipping and sliding backwards into that familiar, muddy habitat of confusion and uncertainty, where there was no comfort in the familiarity, only an inexorable sense of being sucked down and down, like a creature struggling in quicksand...

I moved, intending to turn over, away from him, but Lucius suddenly leaned in and snatched me up against him, wrapping his arms around me and pressing his mouth down on mine, as if determined to melt away my frozen rigidity and pervading doubts with the sheer force and heat of his kisses. To thaw me.

For a moment it worked.

I yielded, I softened, I melted.

My mouth opened to his, my back arched and I cleaved to him...and for a brief few seconds the uncertainty fell away, everything was made right and whole; my heart un-petrified and leaped into joyful, pulsating life.

But then, with a shudder, I remembered Her words. {...You will break him very soon...He is so close to falling...} I stiffened, resisted, and twisted my head away. "STOP!" I cried out, shoving Lucius's chest as hard as I could with both my hands, attempting to wriggle out of his grip.

Immediately he ceased, and released me.

I scrambled to the middle of the bed, out of immediate reach—not because I didn't trust him, but because I didn't trust myself. As I tried to steady my erratic breathing, I fixed my gaze on the embroidered coverlet. I was afraid to meet Lucius's eyes, because I couldn't bear for him to read anything like longing in mine, or for me to see anything like pain in his.
"Forgive me, my dear," Lucius said coldly, turning to stand. "I see I have...over-reached my privilege. It will not happen again." I did glance up at him then, and there was no pain. Of course there wasn't. This was Lucius, after all. The master of icy composure.

Already I could see a layer of that former, hard veneer reforming over him, and my stomach twisted horribly. "I'm sorry," I uttered softly. "I just...can't."

Lucius did not reply. Straightening to his full, imposing height, he gazed inscrutably down at me for a moment, then moved gracefully out of my vision, back to the door.

Before exiting, he turned to address me one last time. "It is past eight, Alice. Dinner is served, if you will deign to honour me with your presence." There was a measure of superciliousness underpinning the formality of his tone, although it was, thankfully, untainted by sarcasm.

The door closed. He was gone.
I listened to the fading click-click-click of Lucius's boots as he retreated down the stone passageway. His tread sounded perfectly measured and calm; neither unduly hurried nor unusually sedate, and I could easily picture the innate grace of his movements that no amount of emotional turmoil could divest him of.

Listlessly, I climbed off my bed and made my way to the bathroom. Running the tap, I bent over the basin to splash cold water on my face.

My thoughts rewound to this morning's episode, as questions and fears began to prey upon my sense of reality. My eagerness to exonerate Lucius from any practice of deceit was being dearly paid for by a revived sense of mistrust in my own mind, as I wondered if the whole ordeal had merely been a feverish hallucination—perhaps a hysterical response to discovering that Lucius had left me all alone. Could the very fact that I couldn't speak about it be an indication it had never taken place?

...the madly-jingling doorbell...the plummeting temperature and rising fog...my wild run past a thousand snarling portraits...

It had certainly felt real—all too real. In fact, every frightening moment of it seemed freshly branded across my memory, as if mere seconds, not hours, had passed.

...the tap-tap-tap on my window...that mocking voice in my head...the snake-eyes perusing the contents of my mind ...

Shuddering, I pressed my damp hands against my eyes, trying to rid myself of the sickening disgust and horror that clawed at my insides as I recalled Her poring over my most private thoughts and memories, my most secret fantasies. The same ones She pitilessly derided then threatened to use for some horrible purpose I could not yet fathom.

I scooped some of the icy water to my lips...lips which still tingled from Lucius's forceful, doubt-conquering kisses.

Of course I believed him. I trusted him—I had to. What possible reason could he have to lie to me?

Don't care to inspect that question too closely, do you Alice? Your reformed-war-criminal sweetheart couldn't be hiding something from you, could he? Acting a part, perhaps? He could be in collusion with Her—

"NO!" The word echoed hollowly around the bathroom. "No," I murmured again, quietly but fiercely, reiterating it to myself. Whatever nagging doubts my mind tried to sell me, my heart refused to buy them. I would not, I could not believe Lucius would purposefully betray me.

No, my concern was not against him, but for him. How could I convey my misgivings that She was luring him into a trap, and that I was the unwilling bait? That if we were ever to—to be together...

Raising my head to peer in the bevelled mirror above the basin, I watched my cheeks redden at the clumsy euphemism.

Too late, Alice! I upbraided myself. You waited too long to voice your fears, and now it's too late!

There was no use fooling myself. I had suspected all along that something like this would happen; I had been waiting for, even expecting it. Ever since that terrifying interview in Her subterranean lair I
had known that it was The Woman's hand pulling the strings of our fate—but I had turned deliberately away from the truth, blindly basking in the warmth and sweetness of Lucius's changed, protective demeanour; the growing trust which brought us closer and ever closer... Was it stupidity or stubbornness with which I had convinced myself that Her threats were empty and irrelevant? That in finding our solace together we were somehow safe from Her interference?

As I stared into the glass, a new question crossed my mind. Leaning in close to the mirror, I breathed on its surface, misting it over. Then quickly I wrote across it with my index finger: SHE WAS HERE.

I drew back to survey my handiwork; blinked, gasped. Instead of three concise words as intended, I had scribbled an illegible mess of characters, like a child's doodle, into the quickly-disappearing haze. I could have screamed with vexation. Damn Her! She is not going to win this! I thought furiously. "Just say it, Alice," I told my reappearing reflection. "Say it out loud."

...The Woman...She was here...

I could hear the words in my mind; I could feel the shape of them forming along my tongue, almost taste them in my mouth...but there they remained, lodged in my throat and stoppered behind my sealed lips. I clenched my teeth and stared at myself, my eyes burning with concentration and determination. Say it! Say, "That Woman was here TODAY."

My cheeks were crimsoning with exertion, my face shining with perspiration, and I had to clutch the sides of the marble basin to stop my hands from shaking. **SAY IT!**

...CRRRICK...

There was a prolonged crackling sound as my reflection webbed over with jagged lines, and the glass began splintering before my eyes. I jumped backwards with a cry of alarm, a split-second before large shards of broken mirror fell out of its scrolled frame and smashed upon the surface on which I had been leaning.

"Oh my god!" I gasped. For a moment I surveyed the destruction in frozen horror, then I whirled about, half-expecting to see Her behind me, gloating over my fear... But no, I was alone.

My terrified gulps abated as I forced myself to calm down. Still trembling, I took one of the thick towels from the bathroom stand and used it to sweep up the broken pieces, depositing them into a pewter receptacle which stood in one corner of the room.

I didn't know what the hell had caused the mirror to suddenly crack, but of one thing I was now pretty-well convinced: I had no way to warn Lucius of the diabolical intentions I suspected The Woman of orchestrating against him. There was no choice left for me. All I could do now was to sacrifice my one, my only recourse to happiness—at least until this nightmare was somehow resolved. If that were even possible.

No more physical contact, Alice, I told myself firmly. No kisses, no caresses, no embraces...not even a touch. Nothing. You cannot risk it.

At this thought, all bodily warmth seemed to sputter out of me. I'd come so far with Lucius...fell so deeply...how could I revert back to those days of hopeless longing and dreadful loneliness? And just at the point of making some kind of break-through with him, with the keys he still held to my past so tantalisingly within reach? To have it all—all that newfound hope and happiness—snatched away in a moment, just like that. ...How could I endure it?
Could I endure it?

That was the question uppermost in my mind as I prepared to descend to the dining room.

Approaching the dining room, I felt at once leaden and hollow, like a clockwork toy in need of rewinding, inching along with faltering steps. The hallway was eerily still and silent after the morning’s horrifying clamour, and my footsteps echoed back at me as if an invisible entity walked just behind me, slightly out of synch. The house, so recently a haven of security, seemed once again so dark and forbidding...once again so ancient and secretive.

As I neared the open door of the dining room, Lucius suddenly appeared beneath its threshold, the bright immediacy of him repelling the gloom. His expression was one of gentle enquiry, as if he was willing to forgive the recent injury to his pride for the sake of reconciliation. At the unexpected softness of his look, it took every ounce of self-control not to rush into his arms and throw myself against his chest. Perhaps he expected me to; at least, he extended his hand out for me to take.

But I did not take it. I would not risk taking it.

Burying my hands in the folds of my robe, I ignored his courteous gesture and moved deliberately past him, careful not to let any part of me brush against any part of him. I sensed his body stiffen and straighten, and I winced internally. I wished not to offend, only to repel him; yet I knew that at all costs I must establish a...a safe distance between us.

I heard him softly close the door and turn to follow me to the dining table, set with its usual elegance and abundance. Despite the lateness of my arrival, the food appeared freshly steaming, as if it had been served mere moments ago.

We took our places opposite each other. A hasty glance at Lucius's face now showed me a mask of polite indifference—but a certain dark glint in his eyes and a heightened colour on his pale skin betrayed his real resentment to this style of treatment, tightly contained though it was. I felt almost sick with the thought that he believed I was deliberately affronting him.

I hadn't eaten since the evening before and should have been absolutely famished, but as I sat before the array of delicious dishes all I experienced was a feeling of dull nausea and an intensification of that heavy hollow sensation weighing my limbs.

How to act? What to say? I felt utterly unprepared to face this new trial. I wished I had listened to the danger-signals and readied myself; met the approaching ordeal fully armoured like a warrior maiden, instead quaking before it like the heart-stricken, desolate creature that I was, forced to shun the one cherished treasure of my possession: my love for this man.

I should've known better than to expect those moments of exquisite belonging to last.

As I picked at the morsels on my plate I silently and bitterly mused that The Woman's cruel species of torture was surely more endurable than this. The chill between us seemed to seep through the whole room, dulling the light and fading the colours, draining the atmosphere of that sweet, warm glow which had so recently settled over everything.

For some time we commenced dining in silence, and though Lucius did not look at me, I felt as self-conscious and over-aware as those days when his eyes had burned loathingly down upon me. Desperate not to make any untoward noise I found myself doing exactly that, clattering my cutlery and bumping the table so that the crystal glasses shivered on their slender stems.
Finally, Lucius stirred and cleared his throat. "Are we to spend the entire evening enjoying this profound taciturnity, Miss Carroll?" he said, with drawling politeness, an exquisite edge to his softly-spoken words.

My blood ran cold at the mocking elaborate style of address, reminiscent of bygone days. Somehow my numb lips formed a reply. "Only if you wish to."

"Very well—let us suppose that I do not wish to." His eyebrow arched enquiringly. "What then?"

"Then I suppose we should find something to talk about."

"I suppose we should," he said. Bringing his wine to his lips, he paused to add, "I leave the subject to you." Then fixing his eyes steadily on my face, he sipped from the crystal glass.

I flushed. I had wanted to somehow mitigate the hurt I had caused him, but instead, I found myself rising to his subtly-lacerating tone. "Alright, then..." I replied, with an answering acerbity in my voice, "...why don't you share some details about this meeting you had?"

His eyes instantly narrowed and I knew he believed me to be testing him—doubting him. His mouth curved with a scathing wryness and his eyes glimmered dangerously. "I was under the impression you had already constructed your own version of that."

My own anger instantly dissolved in the causticity of his tone. I was frightened and dismayed at how quickly we were descending into the old combativeness. "That isn't fair," I protested pleadingly. "I...believe what you told me, up...upstairs," I stammered over the word a little, as the memory of Lucius forcefully kissing me on my bed vividly crowded my mind, making me press my still-tingling lips together involuntarily. A flickering glance over my mouth told me he knew on which moment I dwelt, and the heat on my face intensified. I added quietly, "...and I'm sorry if it seemed that I...doubted your word."

His expression relented a little at my apology. The simmering gleam in his eyes cooled, replaced by an inscrutability which I found even more unnerving. Hastily I continued, "I was just wondering about something you told me...something that I wanted to ask you about." I held my breath, praying that he would meet me halfway in extinguishing the flames of antagonism rekindling between us.

His head tilted back and he regarded me warily for several moments, then gave a brief nod. "Of course you have questions," he said in a much-softened tone, though his eyes remained quite unreadable. "You always do."

Relief flowed through me, but I knew I must tread carefully or risk offending him again. "You said that these...people might grant you a pardon? On grounds of compassion?"

"A reduced sentence," he corrected quietly.

"Reduced by how much?" I asked. "When would you gain your liberty?"

"If approved, I believe it would take effect immediately."

"So you'd be free to go back? To go...home?" The word sounded strange to me, as if I was uttering the hallowed name of some mystical, mythical land.

Lucius's gaze unfocused and dropped introspectively to the ruby liquid of his glass. "Yes," he murmured, "if I wished to do so."

"And would you?" I pressed him, unable to resist the sudden urgency which forced the words from
my lips. "Would you go?"

The lines bracketing his mouth deepened. "Never."

"But why?"

Lucius's gaze lifted once more to fix searchingly on mine. "Because I have nothing to return to."

"You mean you don't have a house or...or you don't have any family?"

"I mean, I have nothing." He looked as if he were about to elaborate, then abruptly he pushed back his chair and stood up. "I have no appetite tonight," he muttered, picking up his wine glass and swiftly stepping away to stand by the fire, one arm resting on the mantle, his head a little bowed as if staring into the flames.

I followed him, abandoning the table and installing myself in one of the large velvet-upholstered chairs, avoiding the brocaded couch which seated more than one person. Lucius turned his head to observe me make this unsubtle choice, then, with a faint grimace, looked back at the fire.

A lump formed in my throat as I stole an indulgent glimpse of his tall, imposing silhouette, remembering how safe and secure I felt pressed against his solid chest, wrapped in his strong arms... He was dressed in an exquisite ensemble of charcoal brushed-silk, skimming over the dynamic lines of his body like a second skin, the dark muted colour at once contrasting and complementing that mane of blond hair flowing down his back like a silken cape. He seemed so...so inflexibly poised, so unassailably elegant, and yet I knew the ardency, the flammability of the blood which coursed through those veins. Oh, I knew—and the knowledge only made the lump in my throat swell more painfully.

The sound of his voice distracted me from the hot moisture prickling my eyes. "You wish for details," he muttered quietly, more to himself than to me, "—I shall give you details."

He took a deep draught of his wine then, still facing the fire, he began to speak. "After the war ended, I lost almost everything," he said in a curiously detached tone, as if beginning an account of someone else's history. "My career was over, my position in society destroyed. I only narrowly avoided prison—a return to prison,"—he emphasised the word deliberately, as if wishing to make clear that I might add 'Ex-Convict' to 'War-Criminal' amongst his list of appellations—"by making extensive reparations to our government, including the forfeiture of three-quarters my fortune...such vast sums as you could never dream of, my dear."

Recalling that top drawer of the bureau in his room, brimming with precious gems and heavy gold jewellery, I tried to picture the hoard it must have originated from, if that belonged to but a fraction of it. It was impossible to imagine.

"A fortune amassed over a thousand years of prosperity, signed away in a single moment..." His shoulders lifted in a brief shrug. "And yet, in many ways, I was...grateful. Grateful that my family had survived that precarious time of war—miraculously, it appeared to me. My son and my wife were safe, and I still had my home, a roof for over our heads..." He lapsed into silence, and I watched him absent mindedly extend his left hand down towards the flickering fire. My breath caught as I saw the flames stretch and grow, almost as if he were pulling it up to his fingertips...but it could have been a mere trick of light or stirring of air from the chimney.

"Then why did you leave?" I prompted gently, afraid he might curtail his story there. Having subsisted so long in a world without context, with a man so shrouded in secrets, every new revelation was infinitely precious to me.
Lucius seemed deep in thought. At length, he resumed speaking. "My home had not been a happy one for many years," he said. "It held memories better forgotten...a past better left behind. My wife urged me to sell up and start our lives anew; she could see it was the only way for us to move forward...she was always wiser than I." His hand made a gentle movement, and again the flames seemed to respond to the motion, spiralling around the hearth in slow swirls. "...But, in my stubbornness and obtuseness, I refused. It seemed that my Manor was all I had left of my ancestral legacy, and I would not part with it willingly."

Lucius abruptly straightened and let his hand drop to his side, and the fire immediately shrank back down to a lowly-burning glow.

"I suppose it was only a matter of time that my son left," he murmured. "He was now a young man, no longer a boy I could hector and control. He announced a desire to go into, of all things, law enforcement." Lucius turned and cast a glance at me, full of bitter intensity. "...Perhaps you know enough of my nature to imagine I did not take the news well." His smile through gritted teeth seemed to reference every cruel word or deed I had ever suffered at his hands.

"You believed he was deliberately taunting you," I said softly.

"Yes," Lucius replied. "I thought he was making a mockery of the fact I was being kept under strict surveillance by the authorities and would remain so indefinitely—perhaps for years, even decades, to come. Although my money had kept me out of prison, it did not buy my freedom. I would have to report to, and be monitored by, the very people my son now wished to join."

Another deep swallow from his wineglass, quite unlike his usual savouring sips, betrayed the agitation of his mind, although he remained outwardly dispassionate.

"...In the first throes of rage, I threatened to disown and disinherit him. I was still arrogant enough to believe I could bully or threaten him into changing his mind. Instead, he told me plainly that he had no wish to inherit the Manor, or what was left of my money—still a considerable fortune, despite its depletion. He called it a "tainted legacy"; he told me he despised his family name and all that it stood for, and blamed me for ruining his life—in short, he wanted nothing more to do with me."

A final swallow of wine finished off the glass. Carefully, deliberately Lucius placed the empty vessel on the mantelpiece and fixed his eyes on his own reflection in the mirror that hung above it.

"I cut him off with only the clothes on his back," he said bluntly. "I absolutely forbade my wife to speak of him, even to mention his name. I could see how deeply it hurt her, but I wouldn't, I couldn't back down. ...She tried everything to broker a reconciliation. She would leave his letters lying open for me to read, and I would read them—and then burn them." His head shook slightly, the movement only perceptible in the brief shimmer of his beautiful hair. "...I couldn't forgive him for being so...so happy. It was abundantly apparent that he was flourishing, that he relished everything about his new life: his training, his tutors...his new friends..." His eyes broke momentarily from his own gaze to flickeringly meet with mine, causing a thrum of inexplicable emotion to flood through me. "He made it absolutely clear that he didn't need me or my money...or my love. He didn't need a father at all."

His voice finally faltered on that last sentence, and I had to forcibly bite back the words which rushed to my lips. ...That's not true! Of course he needed your love. I know what it means to need your love... But to speak those thoughts aloud would jeopardise my self-control, and once I lost that, nothing, nothing could stop me from going to him. So I folded my arms, physically repressing that dangerous compulsion, and simply prayed that his story would not end the way I feared it would. I didn't want to bear witness to any more of his grief and guilt, when the power to comfort him was totally denied me.
Now his impassivity had broken, pain bled through the cracks between each brittle syllable. "After a year, she—my wife—tried again to make me see reason. She begged me to attend my son's first-year graduation ceremony, she said it would mean the world to him..." He gritted his teeth and forced the words slowly, deliberately out. "...I told her that...that he...my son...was...dead to me."

I couldn't repress a gasp of dismay. Good god, was there no end to this man's misery?

"I said those words...those very words...to the mother of my son. ...And a week later he...was gone forever." He stopped speaking, but his gaze remained fixed unflinchingly on the mirror. He seemed to be searching for something within himself, but what it was, or if he found it, I could not tell. The shadows thrown up by the fire emphasised the pallid angularity of his face; his reflection seemed so harsh and haunted, and I was tortured with the need to go to him, to be the one to bring him out of this too, too painful past and offer him whatever comfort I had within my means to give...

But I had no means. So I sat there, frozen; so utterly paralysed by my helplessness to help him that I could not even cry, though my heart smote me and wrung blood for him. And the longer I sat, the stonier and harsher Lucius's face became in the reflection of the glass.

Suddenly clearing his throat, he addressed me once more. "But that's all history, my dear," he said coldly, surveying my crossed arms and closed body language with a curl on his lip that made me tremble and drop my eyes from his reflected gaze. "So...in answer to your earlier question: even should I be granted my liberty—no, I will never return home. I have far more persistent persecutors there than the men with whom I spoke today. One cannot so easily escape one's memory, conscience, and regrets."

He turned away from the fire, his eyes avoiding the shadowy spot I inhabited, and I could hear the click of his boots on the wooden floor as he moved over to the door. "You will forgive me if I retire early. I am...tired." He paused as if granting me this one last chance to respond; to give him something, anything, in return for granting me his heartbreaking confession. When I continued voiceless and motionless, he simply added, "Good night, Alice." His voice sounded unexpectedly tender—and it cut me to the quick, more so than all the previous inflections of bitterness, impassivity and self-loathing.

Wait—please! Don't go, please come back! For the briefest moment I envisaged what should happen if I were to spill out what was on the tip of my tongue; I imagined him swiftly coming to me, stooping to gather me to him, I pictured myself clinging to him, whispering words of comfort and consolation even as he stopped them with his mouth...

But the words that slipped from my lips were quite different, so brief, so cold. "Good night, Lucius."

I heard the door sweep shut with a soft click.

For hours I sat, staring into the flames which shrank but never died in the hearth, mulling over the things Lucius had told me tonight and the secrets he had already revealed.—Scant knowledge though it was, it occurred to me that I now knew more of his history than I did my own. This thought only saddened me the more.

When the silver mantle clock struck one, I forced myself up from my seat and made my way out into the hallway. I was glad to see that the hall lamps were still lit, but as I passed them, one by one they fizzled and died, as if they had been only waiting to light me to bed before extinguishing themselves. I did not look back. I felt too tired and oppressed to feel any fear at the trail of stretching darkness left behind me.

Retracing my earlier steps, I felt just as leaden and hollow as when I had descended. As I walked,
one weary, sad thought fell like the shadow of a tombstone over my mind. ...Perhaps hell is simply the void that remains after heaven is snatched away...
Sleep was hard won and came fitfully that night, as I tossed and turned in my bed, my mind reeling sickeningly with splintered fragments from the day's devastating events. *Glossy feathers, cracking mirrors, visions in a clouded glass...snarling portraits, kisses on the bed, eyes in my head...tap-tap-tap, 'our special secret, little worm'...'where were you today?'...'one cannot so easily escape one's memory, conscience, and regrets'...

Exhaustion finally over-ruled the over-activity of my troubled mind, and I found oblivion at last.

It seemed only moments later that I was dragged from slumber by a tapping on the window-pane, and I lurched up in terror...but then I realised it was only the staccato patter of rain on the glass, and it was morning.

Getting up to draw the curtains, I observed the moisture-laden clouds hanging heavily over a dreary sky. It felt more like autumn than early summer, as if the weather was mirroring the gloominess in my heart. Wearly, I went through to the bathroom and saw that the shattered glass had been replaced at some point during the night. I was not shocked, only imbued with a numb uncertainty as to whether the incident had really happened.

I bathed slowly, turning over and over in my mind how I might have handled things differently with Lucius. I regretted wounding his pride, and spurning him so abruptly and completely. But I had acted instinctively, overflowing with terror, frustrated by my inability to speak of what had happened, and confused by his apparent duplicity. In hindsight, I had gone too far, too suddenly, and I was afraid the rift might be difficult to repair.

I thought of those heart-breaking confessions he had made. ...How terrible they were!

No wonder he had hated me so deeply. No wonder he had treated me so cruelly from the moment I first arrived. ...God, I had been so scared of him back then, half-convinced I had run into the lair of some murderous psychopath or rapist...and I had been right to be afraid of his cruelty. During the ensuing months he had given me a fair taste of it: I had known the vicious sting of his words, I had worn the marks of his brutality on my skin, I had felt the terror of helplessness when he forced me onto his bed and threatened the worst... But his cruelty was beginning to make a kind of sense, now; with every new, tragic revelation his mistreatment of me gained a context that I had no way of understanding before. I knew, now, that it had not been the calculating abuse of a sadist, but the burning rage of a man half-consumed with grief. A man who found, literally on his doorstep, the person whom he blamed most for his misfortunes. ...Perhaps I shouldn't wonder that he had hurt me; it was rather a wonder he hadn't murdered me outright.

...Had that been Her original intention? Did She guide me, like a lamb to slaughter, through that fog-strewn forest, with the design that I would meet my demise, my 'punishment for existing', at the hands of a man who had every reason to wish to mete it out?

I trembled at the gruesome idea. Perhaps 'Alice' wasn't supposed to have made it past that first night. Perhaps 'Alice' should have been buried somewhere in the frozen sod, the victim of a brutal, vengeful murder.

But murder me, he had not. This sworn enemy of mine, who hated me so thoroughly and despised me so deeply, had learned not only to tolerate me, but to feel something for me. Perhaps even
Don't, Alice! Don't even think the word. You can't, remember? Not anymore. It's too dangerous.

But I could not help at least thinking about him. And the more I thought, the more I regretted how I'd left things with him last night... I should have offered him some words of comfort, but I had not trusted my precarious self-control. It was wrong of me; Lucius deserved more from someone who professed to love him.

I would apologise to him at breakfast. I owed him that at least, even if I could not change my resolution.

As soon as I came to that decision, I felt an almost frantic desire to fulfil it as soon as possible, and hurried to complete the rituals of dressing.

Quickly selecting a pale-green dress from the wardrobe which I had never worn before, I slipped it over my head, breathing in the now-familiar waft of sweet herbs. I fastened the tiny buttons on the front bodice, noticing as always how slack the fabric was around my frame, and how it heavily swept the floor instead of whispering elegantly about my ankles. How slight and insignificant I must seem, compared to the rightful owner of the garment...

I smoothed out the folds of fine material. But as I did so, my hands encountered a hard little lump near one hip. With a start of surprise I realised that there were pockets sewn into the side-seams of the skirt, and that one of them contained a small, round object, about the size of a walnut.

I fumbled in the narrow passage of material and my fingers encountered something cool and metallic. Drawing the object out, my eyes widened and my breath caught as I discovered I was holding a little silver locket. There was nothing sinister in the design, not like the bird-skull pendant that Lucius had ripped from my neck; rather, it was pretty and feminine, and seemed almost to hum in the hollow of my hand—or perhaps that was just my nerves, thrilling with the excitement.

Three words, in exquisitely scrolled, miniature lettering, were engraved upon its lid.

"Happy Birthday Mother".

Turning it over in my palm, the other side revealed more elegant engraving.

"To N.C.M with love from D.L.M".

At its apex, there was an empty loop meant for a chain. A small hinge was fixed to one side of the rim and a little button to the opposite. Barely breathing, my fingers trembling, I pressed the button, and the locket sprang open with a small click.

Who knows how long I stood there, gazing at the two monochrome photographs resting in their twin frames? My eyes drawn back and forth, back and forth, in a kind of trance of fascination.

Two sets of eyes looked steadily out at me, occasionally blinking. One was a perfect stranger to me; the other, seen only in brief flashes and blurred dreams—and once in a younger form, playing with his train-set upon a moving canvas. They were unmistakably mother and son.

So this...this was she. Lucius's wife. The woman whose dress I wore, whose scent clung to me, whose sad fate haunted me...

She was all I had imagined her to be. A woman with a face as lovely as a Venus, of the same fair ilk as Lucius, her tresses falling in a long mane, as smooth as my hair was unruly, as lustrous as mine
was mousy. A pair of large, limpid eyes, their expression cool yet not unkind, her demeanour rather poised than haughty. The perfectly fitting feminine counterpart to her imposing husband.

...'She was always wiser than I'... Recalling those words spoken last night, I knew that Lucius had respected his wife; by the softness of his tone with which he said them, I believed he had also loved her. Of course he had. Besides her breathtaking beauty, she was the mother of his son, the sharer of his burdens, the keeper of his secrets... Yet, no twinge of jealousy pricked my heart, only a profound sadness for what she had suffered, what she had lost...

Her son was strikingly similar. Although I could see much of Lucius in the young man—in the sharpness of his cheekbones and the arrogant tilt of his head—I saw that he had his mother's large eyes, her more finely-drawn features and pointed chin. The triangularity of his face gave an almost fox-like impression, reminding me of the shimmering, ghostly animal which sometimes appeared in my dreams.

I don't know why, but an irresistible urge came over me to speak to them. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "Whatever happened to you, I'm sorry."

For a split-second I imagined that both of them looked at me and nodded, but then I realised it was simply a welling of tears in my eyes, distorting their images. And yet I felt oddly relieved, as if my words had been heard and accepted.

I could only hope that Lucius would hear and accept my apology, too. With a shiver, I recalled his cold reassurance that he would never "over-reach his privilege" with me again, and I wondered how he would greet me today. Closing the locket and slipping it back into the pocket of my dress, I made my way downstairs to find out.

The main door was firmly closed, indicating that breakfast was served in the dining room, as was customary on colder or rainy days.

But when I entered the room, the sight which met my eyes caused me to halt in my tracks and gasp with utter dismay. It was different, changed. Changed back. He had changed it back. The small, intimate table by the window had disappeared, and the long slab of mahogany was back, grand and impersonal, dominating the centre of the room.

He was seated in his old place, and did not acknowledge my arrival beyond a slight turn of his head, his eyes sweeping indifferently over me, but not connecting with mine.

I felt by turns hot and cold, ambushed by unwelcome and humiliating memories connected with that piece of furniture. ...That first day, when he had shaken and hurled me against it, and taunted me with my fears of his raping me upon it...those countless hours of his drawling sarcasm and loathing stares...that horrible night when The Woman appeared, and the two of them amicably dined while I lay prone and soaked in urine upon the floor...and finally, those mortifying days when I had been spoon-fed by Lucius's hand like a pathetic, helpless baby...

I was appalled by such a callous gesture. Did Lucius really, intentionally wish to remind me of those traumatic times? Not content to merely deconstruct the bridges of intimacy between us, but preferring to completely burn them down?

My heart sank sickeningly, but I did not comment as I approached the table and assumed my old place at right-angles to him. Stealing a glance at his face, I was intimidated by the impassivity of it as
he poured out his tea and commenced to peruse a letter laid out beside his saucer.

The silence surrounding him was not laden with negative energy or underlying rage; it was simply empty and cold.

I toyed with my food, bereft of appetite. The small mouthfuls I managed to swallow seemed to stick painfully in my gullet. I wanted to speak, to break the ice, but my confidence was undermined by the presence of the table at which was sat, and by Lucius's daunting taciturnity.

Finally, I tentatively enquired if he had slept well.

"Quite well," he replied almost under his breath, not looking up from his correspondence. Soon after, he folded up the letter and tucked it in his breast pocket.

I half-expected him to strike up a conversation, even if it was a prickly one, but he did not. Instead, he continued to finish his tea in his usual fastidious manner, but without any outward sign that I were sitting only a few feet away...as if I were not even there.

I shrank from this rebuff, and did not speak again, but pushed my food about with my fork, my eyes fixed on my plate.

Somewhere in my throat, those two small words, 'I'm sorry,' were stuck between mouthfuls of undigested food.

After what seemed like an interminable time listening to the heavy thud of my heart, there was a light scraping of chair legs on wooden floor, and Lucius arose to stand. I looked up but he was already walking away. "Good day," he said briefly, his voice polite and perfunctory, without any trace of mockery or chagrin. He could have been addressing some obscure visitor with a claim upon his hospitality but not upon his regard.

I watched him move to the door and disappear through it, my heart stricken anew with anguish. Yet how could I possibly blame him for withdrawing? After all, it was I, not him, who had created the terrible gulf which now stood between us.

... 

Days passed in this way. How many exactly I couldn't tell, for they seemed to blur into one endless, grey smudge of time.

I would rather have faced Lucius's anger or spite, or even aroused his vicious streak, than to become...simply ignored.

At least before, in those dark days as his prisoner, he had acknowledged my existence, even if the acknowledgement had been couched in contempt or cruelty. I had known what it was to crave his affection, but never his attention. I had never... I had never been completely invisible before. His casual disregard of my presence felt like a devastating corroboration of The Woman's vicious words...'Indeed, you are not a thing. You are nothing...'

I had no heart to renew my explorations of the house. Until so recently, I had really started to believe that Lucius himself would finally unlock the secrets of my past; that the trust growing between us must eventually lead to truth... I was not ready to extinguish these cherished hopes. I was not ready to admit to myself that everything between he and I was all over, almost the moment after it had begun. I was locked in a paralysing impasse between my love for Lucius, and my fear of the terrible, unknowable fate The Woman had planned for us.
Perhaps inevitably, I fell back into the routine of former days, spending long hours between meals shut in my room. I avoided the library with its laden walls of frustratingly empty books, and the pavilion with its too-painfully romantic atmosphere. Even the bright sunshine and warbling birds outside brought me no comfort; they seemed only to mock the desolation of my heart. It was almost as if, in my misery and guilt, I had shut myself back up in the prison I had once been so desperate to escape.

Each early-summer day seemed to drag like a bleak mid-winter's week. To be barely spoken to, never touched, was somehow worse than if Lucius had insulted or hurt me. I longed for some evidence that he cared that I had pushed him away; that he was hurting as much as I.

I missed him. I missed his companionship and his softly spoken words, I missed the way he looked at me with that slow smile, half-taunting, half-tender, and the surging flame of desire in his eyes. But more than anything, I missed his touch. The warmth of his hands brushing my skin, the security of his arms wrapped about my shoulders, the scorch of his lips pressed to mine... He seemed so impossibly remote, even when we dined together—perhaps then, most of all. So physically close, so emotionally distant. ...At times, my cravings were so unbearable that, half-maddened by his presence, I would abandon my meal and run to my room, hurling myself on my bed like a child.

But unlike a child, I could not cry. It was as if my tears had been petrified by the ball of stone in my heart. There was no relief to be found, only a hard, cold pain lodged in my breast.

...It felt like a thousand years ago since I had discovered the door behind the knight, and taken the steps leading me to discover the overgrown glasshouse. A different girl had made that descent, a girl who had not yet experienced the hope of happiness in the fervent embrace or the passionate kisses of the man she had fallen head over heels in love with...nor the crushing desolation of turning her back on that hope...

Lucius was now wrapped in an impenetrable cloak of impassivity, from which he never emerged. It was clear that he did not intend to humble himself again to me, for he was not a man to risk or bear rejection a second time. If we were to salvage anything of our relationship, the person to make the first move would certainly have to be me. But the more time that passed by, the more impossible that seemed.

As before, my emotions found an outlet in an escalation of disturbing and recurring dreams of mocking portraits, briar-thorns, a stone labyrinth, a ghostly fox disappearing up a spiral staircase...and always, always, a sinister black-feathered bird: sometimes small, pecking on a pain of glass, and sometimes as large as a full-grown woman, screaming threats through a beak filled with bloody fangs...

It was not long before I began to sleep-walk again, finding myself every night a little further down the staircase leading to the ground floor. I had no idea where my feet were taking me and I was terrified to think where I might end up this time, and what peril I might find myself facing.

Worst of all, I did not even know if Lucius would come to my rescue.

I kept the locket under my pillow at night, and on my person during the day, tucked into a pocket or sleeve. I derived a strange kind of comfort from having the two subjects near me, and a glimpse of their smiling faces seemed somehow to alleviate the loneliness and darkness which threatened to overwhelm me at times.
Lucius's wife...the mysterious 'N.C.M' of the cuckoo-clock...the woman who was gone, and yet who was somehow still here...

Even knowing so little about her, I felt I understood her in a way that no-one else ever could. It was as if I had absorbed something of her within me, a part of her spirit that had lingered on in the echoes and shadows of this sad house. I felt as if I knew her grief and her fear; I had seen the walls of her prison and witnessed the place of her demise...I had worn her clothes, and even, once, I had somehow become her.

...And, of course, I had fallen in love with the man that she had loved.

I wondered if loving him had hurt her, as it hurt me.
...I was running, running, running...down great, stone halls and twisting corridors, melding into a fog-twined forest strewn with great loops of briar, desperately searching for something, or someone. Naked, cold, and crying, I fought my way through the ever-morphing terrain, my skin torn and bleeding from jagged letters carved into me by the briars' vicious thorns...

Whichever I ran, a long shadow was cast over me from above in the shape of a giant, swooping bird, slowly but surely descending, turning everything to blackness behind me...the shadow became larger as the bird came lower until finally I felt the cold scaly skin and sharp claws of a bird's feet upon my shoulder, and I screamed and screamed and screamed...

A huge rift in the earth opened at my feet, and I saw the bird disappear down into its dark depths. When I looked up again, a man with silver eyes stood on the other side of the rift, holding his hand out to me to take. I reached for him, but as I did, I slipped and stumbled forward, tumbling down and down into the ravine's gaping maw, my arms stretched upwards as I cried out a name, and a voice in the darkness called back, "Hold onto me!"...

I landed softly on my feet, at the bottom of a flight of winding stairs. The shimmering, pale outline of a small fox was disappearing around the first spiral. Immediately I ran after it.

Round and round, up and up, I followed the unworldly creature, but I could never quite catch up with it, only ever glimpsing the swish of its ghostly tail. Finally I saw it melt through a door at the top of the stairs, which swung open, letting in a blaze of sunlight. Instead of disappearing when hit by light, the fox became embodied, its spectral outline forming into a substantial, real animal with deep, white fur and beautiful grey eyes.

The fox began pawing at something in the ground, whining softly. As it scrabbled, pieces of the stone floor began to fall away, and I peered down into the dark hole it was uncovering, filled with dread at what might appear...then a pair of eyes suddenly opened in the darkness and I reeled away in shock, the fox yelped and skittered away—

—I awoke, my heart thudding madly against my ribs, breathing hard.

I was standing in front of a door, my knees trembling and thighs burning from what must have been a steep, upwards climb. My hand was clasped around a cold, brass doorknob that I had evidently turned, for the door was slightly ajar.

Panic hit and I let go, whirling around to see only a twisting stairwell sunken in darkness behind me. The only light came from the crack of open doorway through which I had been about to go.

For some minutes, I stood in a petrified paralysis, torn between following this beckoning sliver of light, or retracing my steps back down into that ominous well of black shadow.

"You've come this far," I muttered at last, although I did not know how far that actually was, or indeed where in the house I could possibly be.

Turning back to face the doorway, my fingers closed again around the brass knob; I pushed and the door yielded outward with a dull groan.

I was almost blinded by a stream of daylight and I tripped on the top step and stumbled forwards, sinking down onto a plateau of stone paving, confused and dazed and still half-asleep, but nonetheless relieved to be out of the inky confines of the stairwell. For a while I just sat on the stone
paving, the effort of trying to properly wake up conflicting oddly with the sensation of recovering from physical exertion.

Gradually I became aware of my new surroundings: I was sitting in kind of large courtyard, enclosed on all sides by a stone wall. It was morning, but only just, the sky overhead dim with a cloudy dawn, and the air still biting with the chill of night only recently departed.

The delicate nightdress I was wearing provided little protection from the coldness and hardness of the paving on which I sat, and soon motivated me to clamber to my feet. Immediately a raw, blustering wind almost knocked me over again, stinging my cheeks and whipping my hair into my eyes, causing the nightdress to flap wildly around my legs.

"Oh!" I exclaimed aloud, with a mixture of exhilaration and wonder, pushing the tangles off my face as I took in the amazing vista.

I was so, so very high up! Only now did I realise what perhaps should have been obvious: that I was standing on the very rooftop of the house, and that the enclosing wall was, in fact, a chest-high stone parapet over which I could see right across the tree-tops to the countryside beyond, and the distant demarcation of dark woodland overlaid by a thick, clinging mist.

...There.

Moving over towards the ledge, I stared out at the smudged line of forest and fog. It looked almost like a roiling sea-tide, slowly and inevitably swallowing everything in its way.

...Somewhere out there, in that forest, you awoke into this strange existence.

A shiver stole over me, which had nothing to do with the biting wind.

...Something in there set you on this twisting path. Something...or someone...

Perhaps what I was looking for wasn't inside the dark, sorrow-soaked walls of this house, but out there, in the dangerous wilderness beyond. I recalled Lucius's words, the morning after he brought me back from Her lair. '...You may leave now, if you want. But I believe it would be tantamount to suicide, if that's what you wish for...'

Were the answers I sought worth dying for?

No. Of course not. But then again, was a meaningless existence, without context, without hope, without...love, worth living for? Was this pain worth living for? ...Maybe the only way forward was to go backward...perhaps...perhaps I would have to retrace my steps, right back into the thick of the fog I had fought so long and hard to escape...

I shook my head, shivering again. Fervently, I hoped it would not come to that.

Slowly, I began to make a circuit around the perimeter. The panorama was similar on each side: wide, sweeping moorlands bordered with mist-threaded forest, except on the west side, where a wall of steep, craggy mountains visibly pierced through the billows of low-lying cloud.

The parapet was too tall for me to see directly down into the grounds below, but I was overtaken by a desire to glimpse the terrace and pavilion. I told myself it was only to gauge my surroundings; that it had nothing to do with rekindling the memory of those dizzying, dangerous kisses Lucius had imprinted on my lips the last time I was there...

Tell yourself whatever you wish, Alice, mocked my inner voice. Only don't expect to convince
Ignoring my better judgement, I grasped the top of the parapet and jumped, hoisting myself up to peer over the ledge and down the side of the house.

With a lurch of sickening fear I saw that I was easily twice as high up from the ground as my bedchamber on the second floor, the ground far, far below. A sudden horrible dizziness swooped through me, then a star-bursting whiteness exploded through my mind—*and I was tumbling over and hurtling downwards, plummeting in a kind of spiralling death-fall—the ground rushing up to receive me even as blackness closed around me—grey eyes—a long-fingered hand clamping around my wrist—"Hold on to me!...Hold on...to me..."

With a strangled cry I let go of the parapet, scraping my hands as I slid back down to the flagstones, my knees giving way so I ended up awkwardly crouched against the cold stone wall, panting and gasping, my brow clammy with cold sweat.

*Well, that was awfully clever, Alice.*

My whole body was trembling with surging adrenaline, my mind reeling from shock. I already knew from my window-escape that I was no lover of heights, but that falling sensation was something entirely different than a simple case of vertigo. It felt like something far more tangible, almost like...a memory? And even now the echo of those words rang in my ears, with all the detached familiarity of *déjà vu*...

As my clammy hands brushed across the ground, my fingers connected with something brittle and flimsy, which I at first took to be one of the many leaves which had gathered over time and piled in the corners. But my eyes widened as they beheld, instead, what looked to be the corner of a thin book, which seemed to have been pushed into one of the crevices where the parapet joined the flagstones. Suddenly, the odd dream of the little fox scrabbling for something under the ground rushed back into my head.

Quickly turning onto my knees, I inspected the object more closely. My fingers shook as I began to carefully clear away the dirt and moss in the surrounding cracks until I was able to gently tug it free from its hiding place. It was a little notebook, the sort a woman might keep in her handbag to jot down reminders or record incidental names in. It was bound in what appeared to be cream leather, but was faded to whiteness in places and blotched with mildew.

Carefully, I opened the cover. The notebook was missing most of its pages—except for a few intact at the back, all that remained was a column of tattered paper near the sewn spine, as if they had been roughly torn away.

On the inside of the cover was an ornate book-template, stencilled with the words "PROPERTY OF" with a line beneath to be filled in by the owner. Upon this line a name was written in faded black ink, in a very pretty, feminine kind of handwriting: "Narcissa C. Malfoy".

*Narcissa*...I gazed at the name, as fascinated as I had been when inspecting Lucius's dynamic signature. It seemed so absolutely right, suggestive of beautiful and fragile things...easily-bruised pale petals, fair faces reflected in water...How perfectly it fitted that lovely, sad face in the locket under my pillow.

I peered more closely at the fluttering pages which remained attached. My whole body froze as I saw that they were entirely scribbled over with nonsensical words and childish scrawls, almost identical to the marks I had made on the surface of the bathroom mirror, after my horrible encounter with the crow. Had Lucius's wife also fallen victim to The Woman's evil manoeuvres?
There were five remaining pages in total, all completely filled with this indecipherable jargon; except one...the very last page, across which I could make out five torturously written words, smudged and irregular though the letters were...

"...I kN ow...yO u...aR E...Al icE..."

The hairs on my neck stood on end as I stared at the sentence.

...I know you are Alice...

For a long while I sat, stunned to total stillness, unable to break my gaze from those five contorted but clearly legible words.

What could it mean? Was she, Lucius's wife, somehow trying to reach out to me, through the invisible divide of time and—and even death? Could it really be a ghostly message from beyond the grave?...or was it simply the remnant ravings of a mind deranged by grief?...

I tucked the little book inside the sleeve of my nightdress—her nightdress—and slowly stood up. The surreality of the whole situation was disorienting and draining, adding to the sadness and loneliness which gnawed like a rat on my heart. I longed to find comfort and respite in the warmth of human connection, but I was forbidden to seek it from the only person who could give it to me.

Subdued, tired and cold, I made my way back over to the arched entranceway through which I had come. The door itself was closed, but it was only when I approached that I realised there was no doorknob on the outside.

"Damn," I whispered, annoyed at myself for not having thought to check before letting it close behind me. I clawed at the doorjamb, trying to winch it open with my fingernails, but after several minutes all I received for my pains were broken nails, and splinters in my fingertips.

At last I gave up. There was nothing to do but call for help.

"Lucius?!!" I called out, hammering on the rough oak, hating to think I might be disturbing him from his sleep. "Lucius, please help me! I'm stuck!" I felt both foolish and frightened, wondering if I might be stuck up here for hours to come. Although the days were generally quite warm now, it would be some time before the atmosphere heated up enough to feel comfortable in it.

I moved back to the east side of the ramparts where I thought Lucius's room faced out upon. Standing on tiptoe, I was just about to try calling out again when a sharp bang made me jump, and the door flew open to reveal the master of the house. Unlike me, he was as fully clothed and impeccably groomed as ever.

"Lucius!" His name tumbled from my lips, and reflexively I took two running steps towards him before stopping myself with a lurch.

Despite the tension that had driven like a wedge between us, there was amusement in his eyes as he beheld my crumpled nightdress, tangled hair and, very probably, the sheepish expression on my face.

"Sleep-walking again, Alice?" he asked me softly.

I merely nodded. But I was aware of something inside me, a kind of fierce, fervent joy that swelled within my heart and made me almost giddy, that he had indeed come to my call of distress, that he was finally speaking to me, acknowledging me, and perhaps not all was quite dead between us, after all.
His lips curved wryly. "You ought to start sleeping in warmer clothes if you intend to make a habit out of it."

"And shoes," I managed to reply, smiling faintly in return.

"Indeed," he murmured, stepping over the threshold and gracefully moving towards me. Somehow the wind, which had so tousled and disordered me, only whisked Lucius's long hair behind his broad shoulders in an elegant stream.

I blushed as his silver eyes moved lightly over my thinly-clad frame, wondering if he was as aware as I was of my nakedness beneath the gossamer-fine fabric of the nightdress.

*How typical of you, Alice, I thought. There you are: dishevelled, underdressed and lost. And there's Lucius, immaculate, soigné, and ever to your rescue...*

Perhaps sensing my embarrassment, Lucius lifted his gaze and looked about with a kind of contained interest. "I have not been up here for a very long time," he said. "Not since my youth."

"Oh!" Immediately an image of a youthful Lucius sprang into my mind, but the picture was rather unsettling, his silver eyes looking out from the portrait of the young man in the locket. "Then...this is where you grew up? In this house?"

"No," he replied. "It belonged to our family and was used as an occasional retreat." He moved next to me, though he maintained a purposeful distance. He gazed out at the arresting panorama; the clouds were lifting, the wind dying, and a rosy tint diffused over the early morning sky as the first rays of sun spread across it. I had the feeling that he was reliving some old memory...with a pang I wondered if it involved his beautiful wife. Narcissa...

I crossed my wrists, guiltily aware of the notebook hidden in my sleeve. Ought I show it to Lucius?...But I decided against doing so. For whatever reason, those words had been left for me, I believed I had been led up here to find them, although I could not understand them...yet.

At length Lucius spoke, his voice now quietly meditative. "It is easy to forget that there is a vast world out there, beyond our own limited perspective. We are, as a rule, selfish creatures; wont to think the sun rises only for us."

"...Perhaps each person has their own sun, around which their world revolves," I said, my voice vibrating with the emotions I was struggling to repress. I could not help but look at him as I spoke, the heaviness of my heart was becoming too burdensome, I needed to express something of what I felt or risk being crushed beneath its weight.

Lucius turned and gazed down at me, his eyes iridescent in the glow of the golden sunrise. I could read the question in them, but it was a question too dangerous and too tempting to risk replying to. Resolutely I turned my head and broke off our connection.

For a few moments all was silent. Then Lucius spoke again, in an altered, somewhat resigned tone. "Come, Alice. I'll take you back downstairs." He moved towards me, extending his hand for me to take. I drew quickly back and he shook his head, exasperated by my apparent caprice. "Really, my dear, do you trust me so little?"

*No, I thought. I trust myself so little. The mere thought of slipping my cold hand into his large, warm palm made me shake with a strange feverishness.*

"I can manage alone," I said, rather too emphatically. "If you'll please open the door, that is."
I began to head towards it, then gasped as a strong hand clamped around my upper arm, quickly followed by the horrible squeezing sensation I had experienced twice before, as if I were being dragged through a tight vacuum. Reflexively I screwed my eyes shut and bit my lip, determined not to cry out this time.

When the sensation passed and my eyelids flickered open, we were both standing in my bedroom, Lucius's hand still firmly encircling my arm, though no other part of him touched me. For that, I was equally thankful and...disappointed. My body yearned for the prohibited closeness and heat of him; cold, tired and dizzy as I was, that craving became almost irresistible.

A kind of thrumming silence entwined us; Lucius's eyes gleamed in such a way I thought he really meant to continue refuting my wishes to "manage alone" and pull me into the embrace I so desperately craved. ...I don't know what I would have done if he had; my defences were hopelessly low, and I doubt I could have found the means to resist him had he decided to test them.

Perhaps it was for this very reason that he did not test my defences. He let go of my arm and took a step back, his expression hardening over and his pupils contracting back to small pinpoints of blackness in their icy silver depths.

"You are very pale," he commented in a dry tone, "and have lost weight, I think." He frowned. "Are you sickening again?"

"No," I said. "I'm just..." I trailed off with a shrug.

...desperately unhappy...dying inside...

He pursed his lips. After a moment he seemed to have reached a resolution. "I apologise, Alice," he said in that same clipped tone. "I had a duty of care, and I allowed it to lapse."

I don't want to be a 'duty', I thought wretchedly, my head sinking to my chest.

I heard a quiet hiss of indrawn breath. I looked up and was confused to see that he was now staring at me oddly, his eyes fixed somewhere above my face, and for a moment I simply stared back in consternation, wondering what it was that had captured his attention. Then suddenly I realised.

With a cry of dismay, I clapped my hand to my head, over the area of shorn hair where The Woman had hacked it off.

"Don't look at me," I gasped, turning quickly away, aghast. "Please, leave—leave me—"

It was the first time Lucius had seen my hair loose; I'd always taken care to keep it tightly plaited in such a way that hid the disfiguring patch; I hated the sight of it so fiercely that I often slept with it that way. But the buffeting wind this morning had unravelled it, and I had completely forgotten...

Rushing over to the mirror, I began to comb my fingers through the tangled birds-nest, frantically trying to cover the shorn area and re-secure my plait.

I felt sick, hot, numb; paralysed by the mortifying memory of my total subjection, when—naked, bloodied, bound and broken, stripped of my pride and convinced of my worthlessness—I had been forced to grovel on my knees, to beg for my life...

My fingers didn't seem to work anymore, my hair was a stubborn mass of knots, my eyes were blinded, not by tears but by a white haze of panic. A blurry figure moved behind me in the glass; my hands dropped from my hair to cover my face. I couldn't, I couldn't bear to let him see my humiliation. Not again.
"Go away," I whispered. "Please."

But he didn't go away. Instead I heard him murmur under his breath; a warm serenity washed over me, and all the tension and anxiety flowed from me like an expelling sigh. There was a very strange but painless tingling sensation in my scalp. I did not dare drop my hands or peer through my fingers, but somehow I knew...I could feel...

"You need never hide your face from me, Alice," Lucius said quietly, all the warmth and tenderness restored to his voice. "You do not have any reason to be ashamed. You never did." I heard his steps as he retreated; the door closed shortly afterwards, leaving me alone.

Lowering my hands, I blinked the clarity back into my vision. My hair was as snarled and tangled as ever, but no longer did it bear the evidence of The Woman's vicious, debasing attack upon me. I touched the new-grown lengths wonderingly.

But it was not the impossibility of my regrown hair that filled me with wonder. It was the release of something dark and damaged that I had hardly realised I still carried with me all this time; a deep-seated belief that I was, in fact, perhaps as worthless and unwanted as I had been schooled to believe, not only by my traumatic encounters with The Woman, but by Lucius himself, in the days before my escape.

The wonder I felt was not for his healing works, but for his healing words.
I returned to bed and slept deeply and dreamlessly for several hours, waking only once to the sound of footsteps passing by in the hallway outside. Vaguely I wondered if Lucius had come in to check on me but I was so tired that this thought barely registered before I returned to the warm sanctuary of oblivion.

I awoke again, groggy but essentially refreshed, some time in the early afternoon. For a moment I just lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. Then, tentatively, I lifted my hand to my head.

My fingers encountered the regrown strands which I hardly dared hope were really there. I could not repress a smile as that same feeling of wonder and relief pleasantly coiled through me. However impossible it seemed, it had not been, as I feared, just a dream.

Slowly I sat up, the muscles of my lower back and legs protesting as I moved, I supposed from the steep upstairs climb during my night's wandering.

Staring about a little dazedly, I noticed a domed silver-platter sitting on one of the night-stands beside the bed. Leaning over to remove the cover, my stomach growled appreciatively at the waft of fresh coffee and hot croissants. Having slept through both breakfast and lunch, I was more than ready for sustenance. As I fell to doing justice to the offered food I could not help but wonder, and hope, that this was a kind of peace-offering from Lucius, perhaps a sign that he was ready to forgive me and reconcile to some kind of friendship.

With my hunger appeased, I slipped from the bed and moved through to the bathroom, wincing again at the stiffness of my leg muscles.

Thankfully the lion-pawed bath stood ready, as always it did, filled to capacity with steaming, scented water.

As I removed my nightdress, something tumbled out of the sleeve and fell to the floor at my bare feet. With an unpleasant jolt, I realised it was the notebook I'd found on the ramparts, belonging to Narcissa C. Malfoy. Somehow I had forgotten that I'd tucked it in my sleeve to hide it from Lucius.

The little book lay open on the page which, amidst its chaotic scrawls, I could see the strange words, seemingly addressed to me. "...I know you are Alice..." Goosebumps prickled over me as I beheld the tortured lettering and I recalled my own futile endeavours to write a message on the bathroom mirror.

Shivering, I took the notebook back to the bedroom and slid it under my pillow, next to the silver locket, to inspect later.

As I bathed, I let my thoughts wander to the tender words Lucius had last spoken. "You do not have any reason to be ashamed. You never did."

How I loved him. How it hurt, to love him.

...Did he hurt, too? I wondered. Was it really only injured pride, which had kept him so distant and cold? Or had I wounded him, deeply and cruelly? ...Could he be...was it possible...?

Stop it, Alice! my sensible voice remonstrated. Be a fool in love if you must, but don't fool yourself into believing he returns the sentiment. He might have come to care for you, even to desire you, but
love? Impossible! How could he love you? The girl responsible for his son's death? You ruined his life.

Not purposefully! I protested.

Besides, if he really felt the same way as you did, he would have let you go by now. That's how the saying goes, isn't it? If you love something, let it go.

But what if he can't let me go? What if there is a reason?

The reason is simple: he is a selfish man who, by his own admission, will never willingly part with what is dear to him. ...What does it even matter, Alice? You have rejected him, and he has accepted your rejection. Your hands are tied. Your tongue is tied. That is the end of the matter.

I bent my head and swallowed a sigh. How could I argue with the voice of reason?

After I finished bathing, I returned to the bedroom, wrapped in my towel. I was still exhausted, and, thinking I would soon return to sleep some more, I selected a clean night-dress to wear.

Climbing onto my bed, I withdrew the silver locket and notebook from beneath their hiding place. I clicked open the locket and gazed at the beautiful face of 'N.C.M', experiencing a stabbing sadness as I beheld those large, blue eyes. Wife of Lucius. Mother of Draco. Inhabiter of the iron-barred room. Tender of the crystalline green-house. And, I doubted not, the very same 'Narcissa C. Malfoy' to whom the notebook belonged.

Folding the front page of the notebook open, I studied the graceful signature. Then, flicking to the back, I stared at the agonised message scrawled across the last page. ...I know you are Alice...

"How do you know who Alice is?" I whispered to the portrait. "How do you know her, when I don't?"

The beautiful face only blinked and smiled, blinked and smiled.

I closed my eyes.

...Am I really Alice, then?... I wondered.

...Am I Alice?...

Alice...

"...Alice..."

"Alice?"

Lucius's voice, accompanied by a quiet tap on the door, brought me out of my daydream with a start. My eyes flew open and I quickly pushed the notebook and locket underneath my pillow, rising to stand. A guilty, childish impulse made me rush away from the bed, coming to a sudden stand near the window.

I watched the door swing open, and Lucius appeared in the threshold. "You're awake," he said. His voice sounded odd, restrained. "May I...come in?"

I nodded, not immediately trusting my own voice. I watched mutely as he entered the chamber and closed the door behind him. He stood still, as if reluctant to approach any further. "How are you feeling?" he said at last.
"Better," I replied. Then, gesturing to the silver platter by my bed, I added, "Thank you for the food."

"Of course," he murmured.

"A-and also...for..." I touched my hair.

He inclined his head with a kind of brief courtesy that I could not but feel stung by. Then he turned his eyes from me and gazed almost absently at the tapestry on the opposite wall, as if at a loss to continue.

I waited. A sudden chill of foreboding prevented me from prompting him with a question.

I saw the moment of a decision reached as it happened. Lucius's eyes narrowed, he squared his shoulders, set his jaw and turned his eyes deliberately to fix on me again. "My dear," he said, a tight self-possession ruling over every measured syllable, "I should like to speak with you."

"N-now?"

"If you feel well enough."

Slowly I nodded.

"My dear," Lucius repeated, and his voice sounded steelier now and somewhat perfunctory, as if he had rehearsed many times over the words he was about to say. "I have a proposal to put to you. ...I have been thinking about your—our—situation, which appears to me to have become...untenable."

I clenched my teeth to prevent myself from wincing at the word. 'Untenable'. I supposed that was one way to describe this torture.

"It has lately occurred to me to propose a solution, I hope to our mutual satisfaction."

I could feel myself growing colder, too cold. What did he mean by 'mutual satisfaction'? There was no satisfaction to be had in this situation. There was only longing and loneliness...

I must have paled visibly, perhaps even wobbled on my feet, for Lucius looked momentarily alarmed and moved nearer. But he stopped short as I steadied myself. His expression changed, almost as if my visage were causing him pain, but, apparently resolute to continue at all costs, he began to speak again. "However, it presents something of a risk, which only you will be able to decide is worth taking."

I turned to face the window, not wishing him to see my face. Not if it was betraying one millionth of what I was feeling right now.

His figure was reflected in the window pane. It took every particle of self-control not to reach out and touch it, as I so craved to touch him, to feel that connection between us once again.

"Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you, Alice." His voice was hoarse now, as if her were forcing the words from his lips. "I am willing...I believe I should...I wish to...give you your freedom."

My heart seemed to stop beating in my chest.

This was it, then. The moment I had visualised, hoped for, fantasised about, over and over, during the long months of my captivity—me, winning my freedom; him, conceding it to me at last. ...Then
why did I feel like I was losing everything?

"However," Lucius continued, without awaiting for me to respond, "your freedom would come at a price."

A price, Lucius? How much more blood do I have to squeeze out of this stone that was once my heart?

"What price?" I whispered.

There was a silence. Then he murmured, "Not so very much. Only a little more of what has already been taken from you. Your memory of this.—Of our time together."

Oh, no, not so very much. Just everything.

"I will return you to the safety of your loved ones, but you will remember nothing. Nothing of your stay here, nothing of...me."

So you don't want blood from a stone, after all. You want to bury it six feet under a grave of oblivion. So kind, Lucius. So wonderfully kind of you.

Lucius now spoke swiftly and concisely, as if trying to get a loathsome task over and done with. "Such a price also comes with a collateral risk—that you may never recover any memories from your past life. However, I doubt not but that you, intelligent as you are, will be able to fit back into the circles from which you came. You are...beloved there. Something of an heroine, in fact."

Really? I thought numbly, with a vague sense of disbelief. Having a heroic streak is certainly news to me.

He pressed on. "You will relearn most of what is missing, and in time the gap will be filled with other, happier, memories. ...Perhaps it will be for the best."

So it was true, then, that the key to my lost memories were inextricably tied to him...or to The Woman...

Even that fleetly-passing thought caused me to shudder. ...How could I be sure I would ever be safe from her? Just because I didn't remember a danger, didn't lessen its intrinsic dangerousness.

As if guessing my thoughts, Lucius added, "I would take certain measures to ensure your safety, Alice. You have my word of honour."

"But what about you?" I was surprised by the brittle coolness of my voice. "What will happen to you?"

I could see the up-curve of his bitter smile in the reflection of the windowpane. "I will also return to my dear homeland, make known my wife's passing and concede to whatever conditions are placed upon my repatriation and integration to society, until such time that my liberty is granted."

"You said that would be insupportable."

"Perhaps there are things more insupportable. Perhaps exile no longer holds any charm for me."

"So you mean to watch over me?"

"From a distance. You would never know. There would be no contact."
"Why even bother?" I could hear my voice begin to fray at last. "If you are s-s-so anxious to get r-r-id of me?"

I thought I could see Lucius's reflection stiffen, and there was a prolonged silence.

"Damn you for that, Alice," he said quietly, his voice simmering dangerously. "You have forced my hand, as you well know. Do you think I relish the possibility of seeing you recover all your former antipathy of me? To perhaps one day pass you in the street and see only hatred in your eyes?"

"At least you'd finally know how it feels," I retorted caustically, disguising with venom my confusion and rising panic.

Another long silence. "Yes..." he said. The anger in his voice evaporated as quickly as it had arisen and there was only resignation left. "Yes, that is true."

He turned and retreated back to the door, his reflection passing across the windowpane like a wraith. Still I did not turn to him.

"Think it over, Alice, but do not keep me waiting too long. I want your answer come morning."

The door closed with the quietest of clicks.
For a long, long while, I stared numbly at the space in the window-pane that Lucius's reflection had filled. All that was left was a dark, closed door.

I don't know for how long I stood there, my mind as frozen as my body, as around me the shadows lengthened and night drew in. I blinked when the wall-lamps flickered into life and that was when I became aware of a stabbing sensation in my breast, a dull, rhythmic puncturing of my heart in time with its quickening beat. A heaviness throbbed behind my eyes, like the onset of a migraine, causing my vision to darken and blur.

How could he?

The question barely registered through the white-noise filling my head. But gradually, with each thud of my heart and pulse of my temple, the words grew bigger, louder, slowly eradicating the hissing static until they blazed before me, through me, with searing flames of rage.

How could he?!

My hands balled into fists and I thumped the window-pane, causing the thick glass to rattle violently in its frame.

How DARE he?!

I felt breathless, winded; too choked with anguish to cry, too nauseous to be sick. The food which had sustained me earlier now churned in my stomach as I replayed his last words over and over in my head, uttered with such calm control. '...I want your answer come morning...'

As if I were simply to state my preference between tea or coffee for breakfast. As if he hadn't just given me a choice so entirely impossible to make, that I felt as if I now stood between a rack and a gallows, asked to state what my pleasure might be.

A muffled, jagged scream forced its way through my tightly-clenched teeth. My balled fingers left the window pane to curl around my pounding head. My eyes seemed to burn in their sockets; I was desperate for the relief of tears, but they would not come. There was no relief to be had.

Never, never could I have imagined he would be so callous, so heartless, so...spineless.

Coward!

COWARD!

With one hand offering me freedom, with the other hand snatching away...everything. Everything. For there was nothing, I knew nothing, I remembered nothing else. Everything that there was, was him. I had no other context but that which he had given me.

How incidentally, how casually, he had added the disclaimer that I might never even regain my missing memories. That to choose safety and freedom might equally be to choose a past of perpetual blankness—as if that were the least of my considerations. Did he not understand, did he not see the enormity of such a clause?

'...You have forced my hand, as you well know.'
Perhaps I had. Perhaps I'd been forced to force his hand—but never could I have foreseen that he would have offered so cruel an ultimatum, so wretchedly cruel...

Despair was taking over from rage, I wanted to howl, to sob, to weep, yet still my eyes remained burning and dry.

How could I accept such an offer?

And yet, how could I refuse it?

After all, what good was it to stay here? Pining for a man whose very touch was forbidden me, yet whose presence consumed my every thought? Terrorised by the peripheral threat of the spectral figure of the Woman, bent on doing me some unspeakable harm. Tripping and stumbling over secrets and mysteries like a blindfolded fool groping her way through an endless endurance-course littered with obstacles and untold dangers...

And yet—and yet I felt I was getting closer to discovering...something. I had already made discoveries: the glasshouse, the connection between the necklace and the silver cuckoo-clock...the journal, with its strange words addressed to me...

Could that be the reason for this sudden about-turn? Did Lucius believe I was getting too close to finding the answers I had sought all along? Did he wish to preclude that possibility by having me forget the question itself? Could he be so selfish?

My heart refused to believe it. It begged me to believe that it wasn't his selfishness, but something else which drove Lucius to make this proposition. Perhaps he was concerned for my safety—perhaps, having lost his wife to suicide and his son to accidental death, he simply wished to see me out of the reach of the malignant presence that cast such a long, black shadow over this house and its unhappy inhabitants...

That's the beauty of it, Alice, my rational voice told me. ...If you take up his offer none of these things will even matter to you. It will be as if it never happened.

...But I could lose ALL my memories!

True. But who is to say they couldn't be eventually unlocked through therapy and treatment? And who is to say that, should you choose to stay, you will necessarily retrieve them? You haven't managed to so far. Better to gamble from a position of safety and strength, out of harm's way.

...How can I be sure I'd be out of harm's way? How can I protect myself from something I cannot even remember?

You needn't protect yourself. Lucius has promised to return home and keep you safe from Her—...But I don't want to force him to return home! He has already admitted that he has no home. To return will cause him humiliation and pain. He will suffer.

He deserves to suffer, Alice! He has made YOU suffer!

...I have forgiven him for that.

Fool! You're still suffering, aren't you? Stay, and condemn yourself to more of the same. You cannot be so masochistic. You cannot be so stupid.

...But what about the journal? I protested frantically. With its words addressed to 'Alice'...to me?
Surely I have a responsibility to discover the meaning of that message?

The journal won't exist for you. Nor the necklace, nor the clock. The Woman won't exist.

...HE won't exist!

Yes, exactly. He won't exist.

"I can't," I gasped aloud, clawing at my cheeks in hopeless despair. "I...I can't!"

Yes, Alice, you can. As he said, it would be for the best. You would never know any different.
Just...be brave.

I shook my head fiercely. Running away was not an act of bravery. Turning my back and forgetting everything, just when I felt as if I were getting close to finding the truth—there was no courage in that. Surely, the truth was more important than anything else. To run away now would be to abandon that truth.

Ha! What a litany of sweet lies you sing to yourself, Alice! It's not the truth you're afraid of abandoning. It's not even your memories that you're afraid of losing. It's him!

It's him.

It's him.

"Yes," I whispered, my hands sliding down from my face to ball over my painfully-thudding heart. "It's him. It's only him."

At that moment I knew how futile the struggle was. How ridiculously futile. The thought of leaving Lucius, forgetting him, was so unspeakably excruciating that it outweighed every other consideration; every positive, every negative was completely annihilated.

There was no 'decision' to make. It had been made long, long ago, before the world existed, written somewhere in the infinite cosmos, where reason bowed to fate.

The blurry darkness lifted from my eyes and everything appeared to me in the brightest, sharpest definition, as if I stood in blazing daylight. A physical weight seemed to lift from my body and I stood erect and buoyed with a shimmering certainty.

With a great gasping breath, I flew over to the door, wrenching it open and rushing into the hallway.

As I raced along the flagstones my senses continued in a state of hyper-awareness: I noticed the finest hairline cracks in the stones along which I travelled, I perceived the subtest brushstrokes of oil-paint on the portraits I passed, I could hear the quiet hiss of the wall-lamps beneath my gasping breath, echoing steps and pounding heart. In the few moments it took me to arrive outside Lucius's chamber I felt I had absorbed a lifetime's worth of minutiae, and within each inconsequential detail was indelibly etched the path of my destiny...

Abruptly lurching to a stop outside the room, I immediately grasped for the doorknob, barely noticing the absence of the strange air-shield that had impeded my first venture into his room. My hand closed around the bronze handle and immediately I twisted it and pushed forward, not waiting to knock, almost falling inside in my feverish haste.

"Lucius? Lucius!"
As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, a movement alerted me to a figure rising from a seat near the hearth. Lucius had been smoking and I saw him throw his cigarette into the smouldering embers. With a gulp, I realised that he was only half-dressed, that from the waist upwards there was only smooth, pale flesh gleaming in the dim firelight, like the sculpted marble effigy of some pagan god.

Confusion overtook all else as I became acutely aware that I had never seen him before without at least several layers of expensive material covering him from starched collar to booted feet.

Stammering an apology, I began to retreat as hastily from the room as I had entered it—but Lucius swiftly closed the distance between us and reached over my shoulder to shut the door before I could escape out of it. Shakily, I turned to face him.

"You are here now, Alice," he murmured, bending over me as he brought his other arm up to effectively box me in between his body and the slab of oak behind me. "You might as well tell me what decision you have come to."

I was electrified by the closeness of us, by the heat radiating off his bare skin...his smoke-mingled scent filled me with sublime elation and I closed my eyes and let the sweetness of his proximity flow through my veins, like an addict, tormented by cravings, finally finding her fix...

When my eyelashes fluttered open again, Lucius had leaned in closer again—an inch nearer and he would have pinned me flush against the door. His arms remained outstretched above and beside me and his mouth was so close to my upturned face it was all I could do not to tilt my head and press my lips to his.

He gazed down at me, his irises shining, but his jaw set rigidly, as if hope and doubt weighed equally in balance.

"I...I came to tell you that...I have considered your offer." My numb lips seemed barely to move as I spoke; I felt oddly like a ventriloquist speaking for someone else, someone with a voice as detached and impassive as I was fevered and molten. "But I don't...I can't...I won't accept it."

The flame of hope flared in his silver eyes, but Lucius seemed determined to keep a strict reign over himself. He stared searchingly into my face as if trying, and perhaps failing, to detect or understand something beyond the words I spoke aloud.

"Why?" he asked at last, his voice low and thrumming and imperative. "Tell me why you have come to make that decision."

A surge of incredulous fury swelled within my breast. "Isn't it enough that it is made?" I gasped. "Haven't you asked too much of me already?"

Lucius nodded, but his expression was wholly unrepentant. "Yes..." he replied, his eyes glittering intently, "...yes, I ask too much of you. And no, it isn't enough. You must—I ask you, to give me your reasons why."

An odd, dry sob escaped my throat. "Why do you think, Lucius?"

I could see his jaw clenching. His body straightened and stiffened as if he were bracing himself to receive an expected wound. In a hoarser, harsher tone, he said, "Perhaps you are...afraid that you may never recover your past memories."

I felt my lips curl into a bitter smile, that he could even say such a thing. "Of course I am, you bastard!" I snarled. My hands clenched and I brought them up to violently strike at his bare chest, as I had my bedroom window-pane, hoping I would bruise his heart as he had so injured mine. "What
"kind of an 'offer' do you call that, giving me freedom at the risk of forgetting everything? How dare you—you even pretend that it's a fair one?" I struck again, harder, but Lucius did not so much as move a muscle, I might've been striking a brick wall.

"I don't pretend it is fair," he replied in the same strange, low-thrumming tone. "I know it is supremely unfair—and you have every reason to despise me for making it. ...But it is the best I can do." His gaze bore down upon me, into me, their silver depths scintillating with a myriad of wildly conflicting emotions, none of which I could clearly decipher.

"But why?" I asked, making a final, desperate attempt to clutch at invisible straws. "Why can't you let me go and remember my time here? I would never, never betray you! Maybe I could even help you—I could speak for you—perhaps even help to get your house back—"

"No, Alice," Lucius softly interrupted me, his expression softening and a smile touching his mouth. "On this matter I can afford you no concessions." There was a tenderness in his eyes which stopped my frantic pleas and a finality in his voice which prevented me from renewing them.

He drew away, taking a backward step, his arms lowering to his sides. I shivered for the loss of his radiant warmth.

"...And so," he murmured, "you choose to stay...but only because you believe the risks outweigh the reward." There was a note of despondency beneath the surface resignation. "You prefer to gamble on the chance that, in time, you will discover the truth in its entirety, whatever the cost may be to either of us..."

I laughed, a strangled, gulping, painful sound.

"No, you idiot!" The words tore violently from my throat, my voice breaking at last. "I choose to stay because I would rather die than forget YOU."

Then finally, finally the storm broke, the dam burst, tears poured down my face in scalding torrents and I sobbed for everything; everything I was losing and everything I was refusing to lose. And as I wept, the euphoria of relief flooded through me, so sweet, so dizzying that I staggered forward and impulsively flung my arms around Lucius's neck, finally, finally shattering the intolerable barricade of distance between us.

Lucius stood very still, galvanised, it seemed, by my vehement confession and impetuous action. For the briefest moment his body remained rigid—and then I felt an elemental change within him, the icy solidity turned to molten pliancy, the frozen disbelief turned to blazing certainty. His arms wrapped about my body, pulling me tightly against his chest as he bent over me, his lips melding to and parting mine, his tongue plunging deeply as he returned my kiss with a consuming ardency that scorched even as it slaked, possessed even as it fulfilled.

There was nothing gentle in the reforging of our connection; it was a raw, bruising re-staking of our claim over one another; a fervent testament to our desperate, dizzying need for each other...one of my hands slid up to entwine in his silky hair, the other slid over the wide, muscular expanse of his shoulders, my nails digging into the smooth bare skin as I sought to assure myself that this was real, that he was real...

Finally, we broke apart. I was gasping and my body shuddered uncontrollably. A fresh spring of tears burst from me. Wordlessly, Lucius folded his arms around my shoulders and brought my head to his chest, and for a long time we stood locked together, my hot, tear-streaked cheek pressed to his heart, its deep, rhythmic thud gradually calmed me, until my wracking sobs abated to quiet hiccups.
At last Lucius spoke, his lips brushing the top of my head. "You turned your back on me, Alice," he said quietly, a catch in his voice. "You cut me to the quick."

"I'm so sorry," I whispered. "I was scared." Then I amended: "I am scared."

Drawing back a little, Lucius tilted my face up to his, his thumb stroking my cheek, wicking away the beads of wetness. "Of me?" he asked me gently.

"No—not you," I replied, although perhaps this did not represent the perfect truth. "I don't know...I can't explain..." I felt a wave of frustration at the block in my mind that prevented me from being more specific. Carefully, I formed a sequence of words to bypass it as best I could. "I'm scared that...something may happen to you, if we...if we're together." I flushed deeply at the obvious implication of that. "Something bad."

A dawning realisation spread across his countenance and in its lucent light he seemed almost to glow. "Then you're afraid...not of me, but for me?"

I nodded. Any further attempt at an explanation was dazzled quite away by his smile. "Foolish girl," he murmured softly. "Did it not cross your mind that I can take care of myself?"

As his mouth again caught my lips, I wondered vaguely why it hadn't crossed my mind. My terror of the Woman had so overwhelmed me, that her taunting threats had seemed like some dreadful prophecy...but perhaps there was nothing prophetic in them at all—perhaps she simply peddled torment and terror for her own twisted amusement and the future remained as flexible as it was unforeseeable...

With Lucius's arms around me and his lips on mine, I had never felt more safe, more certain. My shaken, wrongly-slanting world had tilted back upon its axis and I stood on solid, even ground once more. With Lucius, I was lifted out of darkness, into light.

"You're shivering," he said, when at last his lips relinquished their requiring claim. "Come by the fire."

I didn't tell him it was with relief, not cold. Instead, I allowed him to clasp my hand and gently lead me over to the deep, soft couch from which he had emerged when I first entered the room, an unknown eternity ago.

As I sank down onto the cushions, I noticed Lucius's discarded shirt, jacket and robe thrown over the back of the couch and once again the heat rose to my cheeks as I was reminded of how inconsequential a barrier there was to divide us—only some thin scraps of material. His splendid, lavish clothes had always seemed like an impenetrable set of armour, affording a kind of protection to both of us, and now that he was divested of the main part of it, I felt as vulnerable as if it had been I, not him, who sat half-naked in the flickering firelight.

Lucius had soon gathered me against him and was kissing me again, but now his kisses were slower, longer, lingering...less fervent, and yet somehow more fervid. I arched to the warmth of him: the heat of his bare chest scorched through the fine material of my dress, pressing into the swell of my breasts, causing my nipples to tauten against the fabric under which I had on nothing but a pair of white lace knickers. His hands skimmed over me, brushing the curves of my waist and hips, stroking down my thighs, raising a blaze of heat wherever my blood surged to his caressing touch.

My own hands made a less intrepid journey across Lucius's bare skin, so silken and yet so solid; hard muscles, square joints and taut sinews shifting and moving beneath my wondering, wandering touch.
As my fingers slid down his left arm I felt a strange puckering of the skin, and we both tensed and broke apart. I gasped in dismay upon beholding a long scar running the entire length of his inner forearm, raised and visible in the firelight. It looked like the remnants of a serious burn: the flesh twisted and crimped, the skin mottled red and white.

Softly, I stroked the scar, noticing Lucius's sharply-indrawn breath as I did so. I wondered if it hurt him to touch it. Impulsively, I bent my head to kiss the ruined skin, but Lucius made a soft hissing sound, pulling his arm away and straightening up.

Afraid I had offended him, I began to apologise, but was stopped by Lucius swiftly recapturing my lips with his, kissing me until there was no room for question or thought, until my senses were inundated by the complex scent of him, which had so tantalised and tormented me that I wished nothing more than to drown in its intoxicating familiarity—and indeed, I felt almost drunk; recklessly dizzy, liquified, utterly resistless...

Suddenly he caught my wrists and lifted me easily to stand in front of him. I could feel the heat of the fire warming my back; I could see the flickering flames reflected in his eyes...

His hands released my wrists and slowly, slowly traced upwards, along my bare arms, sliding up over the half-sleeves of my nightdress, his fingers coming to rest along my clavicle bones while his thumbs dropped to skim the low décolletage.

There was a moment of hushed stillness; I think we were both holding our breath. And then Lucius's hands made a slight movement, catching at the wide neck seams and pushing them off my shoulders, there was a whispering woosh! of falling fabric and the too-large dress slipped down my frame to pool at my feet.

I stood before him, shaky, flushed and somewhat petrified, in only my lace underwear. My eyes dropped to fix on my toes surrounded by the wreath of pale material, and yet I could feel his gaze trailing slowly over me. After a moment I could not help but move my hands to cover my bare chest, but this I was prevented from doing by Lucius once again encircling my wrists, bringing them gently but firmly down to my sides.

"You've seen me naked b-before," I stuttered, acutely, woefully, self-conscious.

"I may have seen you," Lucius assented softly, "but I've never looked at you..."

He reached up to brush back my hair behind my shoulders. From beneath my lowered lashes I could see Lucius's eyes: gleaming black pools ringed with a circlet of iridescent silver, moving over my frame...lingering on my breasts, dropping lower to survey the scrap of scant white lace, sweeping down my thighs, my manifestly trembling legs.

His hands drifted down from my shoulders to hover over my breasts; I gasped as he brushed both nipples with his thumbs, sending a thrum of sweet sensation coursing and spooling throughout my whole body, tightening something inside me.

And then his eyes and mine flickered up at the same moment, our gazes catching, colliding.

Immediately he pulled his hands away from my body, as if suddenly burned and for a long moment he simply stared into my eyes, his own engulfing and unfathomable. "You are so...small..." he said hoarsely.

"Oh," I uttered with a gulp of mortification. Of course, I was not what he preferred. His wife—she, whose borrowed dresses were too long, too full-busted, too womanly to fit my deficient, meagre
I turned away, aghast. "I'm sorry," I muttered, blinking rapidly as I brought my hands up to cover my chest.

"Do not mistake me," Lucius said swiftly, though he still did not move to touch me again. "I only mean, you are so very young and so fragile." He swallowed shallowly. "I...I fear I might break you..."

He seemed to be struggling with something inside himself, perhaps battling between conscience and desire, perhaps conflicted by something darker and more painful. A muscle worked in his jaw and his eyes dropped to fix on the clenched fists resting on his knees.

I knelt and caught one balled hand, using my fingers to pry open his. "Lucius," I whispered, "look at me—feel me, Lucius..." His eyes lifted to connect to mine as deliberately I brought his large right hand to lie upon the small curve of my left breast, covering it with both of my own. "Can't you feel my heart beating?" I asked him, and tingled to the sensation of his thumb slowly stroking, his fingers gently impressing into the soft flesh. "I am not made of glass. I am flesh and blood..." My voice caught, and a solitary tear rolled down my cheek, catching along the ridge of my lips. "I am heart and soul and I am real...you cannot break me."

His left hand reached down to tenderly stroke my cheek. "...You little, wild rose..." he said, gazing down at my upturned face, "...where are your protecting thorns? I should not touch you. What right have I?"

"The right I give you," I whispered.

He shook his head, a slight smile curving his mouth. I knew what that expression meant. It meant, 'You cannot give me the right, amnesiac as you are and in my power. You, who never had a choice cannot now make this one.'

Unable to refute the truth, I did not attempt to. "Please, Lucius," I said simply.

The smouldering flame in his eyes seemed suddenly to leap, to blaze. "Do you know what you do to me?" he hissed, an expression of forcibly-restrained hunger etched into every sharp line of his face. "Kneeling before me, naked, pleading?"

Grasping my upper arms he brought me to stand with him and pulled me tightly against his body, so tightly I could barely breathe, bending over me to whisper in my ear. "I'm a flawed man, Alice," he said darkly. "I am selfish, avaricious, impatient...I have little control over myself. ...Go back to your room. You have already forfeited so much to me. Go, now, if you do not wish to forfeit everything."

But I did wish to, I needed to, forfeit all that was left to him. Without him, there was no warmth, no hope...nothing. And so I reached up, closed my eyes and pressed my mouth to his.

A moment later he caught me up in his arms and, with our lips still sweetly fused, he carried me over to his shadow-entwined bed.
Chapter Notes

Thanks to my friends Melpomenis, Anna Psarudaki, and Strip Dancer who have
continued to encourage and cheerlead, if not for them I might still be staring at a blank
screen. Strip Dancer is also translating this story into Russian, so if there are any Russian
readers out there, you may like to look it up on the ficbook website under the title
Принадлежащая туману. And of course, a million thanks to my beta, StoryWriter831,
without whom I would never have the courage to press the "update" button. Lastly,
thanks to all of you who have left feedback along the way.

I don't usually bother with song recs, but if you want the right mood for this chapter,
look no further than Emika's sultry version of Wicked Games.

WARNING: this chapter technically includes non-con/dub-con due to Hermione's
amnesia. I would advise you not to read it if that is potentially upsetting for you.
Otherwise, continue at your own risk.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

... 

I was falling, falling off the edge of the world.

There was no sumptuous room, no flickering firelight, no shadowy bed.

There was only the darkly spinning universe and Lucius...his lips on my lips, his skin against my
skin.

I tingled and arched to his slowly-caressing touch, my body pliant as wax in his hands. The sinuous
strength and heavy heat of him seemed to enkindle and enflame every part of me, my blood surged
around my body and my pulse pounded a wild syncopation against the strong, resounding thud of his
heartbeat.

I drank his kisses like wine, inexpertly twining my tongue to his surer, deeper plunges; but rather
than quenching, each sweet draft seemed only to make me hotter, thirstier, until I was delirious with
need and with desire.

...Is this truly happening? Can this be real?

After so many long months, fraught with discord, the gnawing loneliness and frightening
lostness...could I really be entwined in the arms of him, who, in spite of everything, I had fallen in
love with? The man who I had once called my captor, whose brutality had marked my body and
cruelty scarred my mind—he, who had once trapped me, injured and helpless, on this very same bed,
taunting and terrifying me with those insulting, hate-fuelled kisses...never could I have imagined that
I would one day return to it willingly... But all was different now; he was a changed man—I, a
changed woman; the hate and antagonism, which had spurred that frightening incident so nearly to
an irreversible conclusion, no longer existed...now there were only those invisible bonds that
wreathed and enlaced us, and the dark world fallen far, far away.
Lucius's arm slid beneath my shoulder blades, pulling me closer as his lips began to sear a path down my neck, my collar-bone, the upward swell of my breast...his breath skimming hotly over my skin, raising goosebumps in the wake of his trailing kisses...I gasped as his tongue flicked across one nipple, while his left hand enclosed the other, his palm rubbing it gently, while his thumb stroked the undercurve of my breast, creating a kind of tightening tension somewhere in my stomach, and a thrumming between my legs. The gasp turned into a moan as Lucius's lips now enclosed the peak, his tongue softly moving and massaging, while his fingers gently pinched the other to corresponding tautness.

...If this is a dream...never, never let me awaken from it...

A tremble ran over me as I felt Lucius's hand begin to slide further downwards, over my ribs, my stomach, resting momentarily on my lower abdomen...and then lower again, his fingers tracing along the edge-seams of my knickers and his thumb now lightly brushing over the lacy fabric, following the barely-concealed line of my sex. His touch was so gentle, so caressing, that I found myself arching to it, my thighs parting and my hips pressing upwards to receive each stroke—but then his fingers dextrously brushed aside and slid beneath the lacy material, and connected with me, the most personal part of me, immediately causing my body to stiffen and my breath to catch.

In the same moment, Lucius unbent his head from my chest, his wide shoulders shifting as he once again sought and claimed my mouth with his, imprinting upon them a kiss that scorched away all encroaching anxiety, his lips slowly moving, his tongue deeply probing, as all-the-while his fingers continued to caress with such skilful, insinuating subtlety that I relaxed and let delirium overtake all else.

"Beautiful..." he murmured hoarsely, his mouth barely lifting from mine, his expression as strange and enigmatic, as burning and intense as it ever was.

As our gazes connected, something within me seemed to stir and shimmer, something far more visceral than the sensations coursing through my body or the elation flooding my mind...but I had no time to try to understand or identify what it was, for Lucius was once more slowly kissing his way down the length of my body, retracing the path already traversed, but this time instead of lingering on my breasts he kept moving down and down towards the place where his fingers wrought their sweet proficiencies.

I was electrified, petrified; desperate for him to stop, fervently wishing him to continue, words of protest over-ruled by gasps of need. My head fell back, my eyes fell shut, and all peripheral thought was crowded out by the sensation of his silken hair spilling over my outer thighs, the faint scratch of his jaw rubbing against the tender inner skin, the hotness and nearness of his breath ghosting over and between those masterful fingers. Then I was crying out, my body arching as he splayed me wide and his lips melded to my sex, his tongue softly flickering into my yielding flesh, as he kissed me there, there, as sweetly and as scorchingly as he had lately kissed my mouth.

Lucius gave no quarter, allowed no resistance; he held me firmly though I weakly struggled against the all-too-saturating pleasure, each lick and lap of his tongue bespeaking his claim and avowing my capitulation, each lingering kiss an indelible and indissoluble writ that he, who had allowed me to spurn him once, would never allow me to do so again... I barely felt his fingers sliding down my thighs, taking the last, lacy item of clothing with them...the darkly-spinning universe seemed somehow to be growing and expanding, I was spiralling upon a crescendo of sensation towards something imperative and unattainable; a plateau of perfect euphoria—and then I was there, on top of the plateau, and it was diamond-bright and blinding, like a sea under full sun; I was born aloft and carried swiftly away, as waves of bliss crashed over me and I felt I might drown in its beautiful, shining depths.
..Seeking some kind of anchor, the fingers of both my hands grasped and bunched in the hair, eliciting a deep growl from him which seemed to vibrate through me as I cried out over and again... then the plateau gave way, the brightness flared and receded; I tumbled dizzily downwards, down into the humming darkness once more...

When my eyes flickered open again, Lucius lay next to me, gazing down at my face, his expression no longer enigmatic. Plainly engraved across those sharp, unearthly features was a kind of hungry, possessive desire which might have frightened me if not for the tenderness also manifest in his iridescent eyes.

"So beautiful..." he repeated in the same, hoarse tone. He reached over to softly brush a curl from my now-damp brow. Then, even more quietly, he added, "...and I, so blind...so cruel..." His fingers trailed over my breathlessly parted lips, then cupped my cheek almost reverently, as if he were compelled yet afraid to touch me. "How could you possibly want...this...want me..."

I closed my eyes again and pressed my cheek to his palm. "I do want you," I whispered. Then, raising my hand reciprocally to his cheek, I looked up into his eyes and again experienced that strange shimmering which vibrated through to the very nucleus of me. "I want you so much it...it hurts, it hurts more than anything you've ever d-done to me, or could possibly do to me. I want you, Lucius...I need you."

I tilted my head to receive his lips, and shivered deliciously as his hand moved down to gently caress my body again. My own hands wandered pleasurably over his smooth, solid chest and shoulders, then down his back—and, with something of a shock of fear and a rush of warmth, I realised that he, too, was naked, though I had not seen him removing his clothes.

Gradually, Lucius's kisses became less lingering and more insistent, his touch less wandering and more sensual, and I could feel a heavy, hot rigidity pressing into my thigh which both alarmed and aroused me. As his hand once more dropped down to nestle between my legs, I pulled back from his kiss and, stammeringly, I said, "I... I want to touch you..."

For a moment, Lucius simply gazed down at me, his eyes dilated and heavy-lidded with desire. Then, slowly, he reached over to cover my hand with his, then guided it downwards to curl around his rigid length. I could not help gasping as I registered the throbbing heat and silken hardness, the heavy substantialness of him—looking down, I saw that my hand did not even properly encircle him.

Then, with his large hand still wrapped around my much-smaller one, Lucius began to slowly pump himself against my palm. I watched, transfixed, a tingle of fearful fascination trembling over me as I tried and failed to imagine how he could possibly fit inside me. A hiss of breath in my ear brought my attention back up to his face; I drank in the evidence of his pleasure, the beautiful flush of colour on his usually-so-pale cheeks, and sheen of exertion on his marble brow, his adam's-apple moving as he shallowly swallowed. His eyes...his eyes...

Suddenly, in a fluid motion, Lucius unfurled my hand from him and pinned it up above my head, his body shifting to move over me, while his other fingers caught my left wrist and pinned it next to my right. As he bent his head to kiss me with deep, fervent plunges of his tongue, his hands unclamped from my wrists, and I felt him reach down between us as his legs parted mine, pressing wide my thighs.

The heavy heat of him aligning himself to me triggered a flood of returning panic. Bringing my hand to his chest, I pushed him back, breaking our fervent kiss. "Wait...Lucius...please..." I whispered.

He stopped immediately. "What is it, my darling?" he murmured. His pupils were dilated to fathomless oceans of silver-ringed blackness.
He waited patiently as I stuttered out the awkward words sticking in my throat. "I'm... I don't think that I've ever... ever done this before..." Lucius did not reply, but I thought I saw something like astonishment cross his face, and to my dismay I heard myself begin to nervously stammer, "I-I mean, I don't know for certain—that is, I can't be absolutely positive, because—but... but I'm fairly sure... well, I think..."

Slowly, softly, Lucius leaned down to kiss my lips, bringing my ramblings to a stop. Then he lifted his head, his fingers tilted my head up and he gazed searchingly into my eyes. "Do you wish to?" he asked me. "Answer me truly, Alice."

Again the strange synergy between us stirred something deep and restless inside me. I wondered if he felt it too. I took a steadying breath. "Yes," I said solemnly. "Truly. I mean, if you don't mind... that..."

At this, he smiled. "No," he replied, with a slightly sardonic gleam in his eyes. "I don't mind that."

"But, is it... is it... safe? Do we need..." I flushed deeply, "... protection?"

Lucius bent his head, this time to brush my flaming cheek with his lips. "It is safe," he said. "I promise."

I nodded my unspoken trust in him, and noticed a shadow flicker across his face, that same, dark self-detestation that he had worn moments before warning me to go back to the safety of my room. But seconds later it was gone, and there was only the all-consuming, smouldering desire of a man who had found what he wanted within his grasp and had only to reach out and take it. Those recent words echoed through my mind... "I am a flawed man, Alice... I am selfish, avaricious, impatient..."

But what mattered his selfishness, when it matched my desperate need? Why deny him what I so vehemently craved myself?

"I'll try not to hurt you," he said softly, his weight shifting again as he re-aligned himself to me. "But you need to help me. Relax, my darling... try to relax..."

He gritted his teeth and pushed gradually forward, his body trembling with the effort of being careful. But, despite his efforts it did hurt—my breath drew sharply and I bit my lip, trying to stop myself from crying aloud. It hurt, god, it hurt—and yet it was a beautiful thing, the pain, something exquisite and perfectly sublime—

"Please..." I gasped, my fingers clawing into the bedding, "please, Lucius..."

His body tensed and he halted; he thought I was begging him to stop. "No, don't stop!" I whispered urgently, "—please, I want you to—"

For a moment he stared down at me, his eyes glittering with silvery intensity, then he closed them and, brow furrowed with concentration, he surged forward, over me, into me.

I cried out, and for a suspended moment I was overtaken by a deep, throbbing pain inside me—too much, I couldn't—couldn't take this—but then almost in the same second it had peaked and subsided, replaced by a strange but not unpleasant feeling of... I don't know... a kind of pressure and fullness. For some seconds Lucius was quite still, leaning down to softly croon in my ear, "Breathe, Alice... my own, my darling... just breathe... breathe..."

Only then I realised that I was holding in my breath, and I let it go in a shuddering gasp which made
Lucius's curtain of hair flutter. I turned my head and pressed my forehead against his quivering bicep, inhaling his opiating scent, and somehow my body seemed to unwind, to stop its protesting resistance, and simply accept.

Slowly, with infinite care, Lucius drew back and then pushed forward again, this time eliciting a small cry from my lips, neither of pain nor pleasure, but an inescapable synthesis of both. The hurt was no longer acute, and was sweetened by other, more pleasant sensations: a bewitching friction, an incredible satiation, and the profound and indescribable connectedness of us.

Tears flowed down my cheeks, but they were not of distress, rather a resurgence of the overwhelming relief I had experienced earlier, when that unbearable barrier between us had finally crumbled and Lucius had folded me to his heart. To be this close was everything. So close that nothing could ever come between us again.

He was so gentle. It was not easy for him, and perhaps somewhat painful too: I felt and saw the exertion of his self-control in the straining of his muscles and tension in his face, I heard his low growl through clenched teeth. He carried his weight so as not to crush me, although the sheer size of his body caused my hip-joints to jar. I clung to his shoulders, my nails digging into the taut skin, my body shaking with the torrent of new sensations...the scorching heat of our fused bodies...the heavy push and dragging pull, deep within the very core of me...the excruciating, wonderful sting of being too-widely stretched, too-deeply filled...perhaps it was too much, after all...

"Am I hurting you, Alice?" Lucius's strained voice brought me back from the frightening inundation that threatened to overpower me.

"No," I gasped. "Yes!...A-a little..."

"Wrap your legs around me, my darling," he said, stilling to let me move. I did as he said, bringing up my trembling legs up and locking my ankles around his strong thighs. Immediately I felt the difference, the angle taking the pressure off my hips and somehow bringing Lucius even deeper, yet more comfortably inside me.

"Now..." He eased back carefully, "...move with me, if you can..."

Slowly, slowly he sunk himself inside me, patiently waiting for me to arch against him before drawing back again. "That's right, darling. Breathe with me...move with me... Again..."

Unhurriedly in...and out...in, and out...I caught his rhythm and was soon moving and responding to each long, leisurely stroke. That winding, tightening sensation was returning to me, tying my stomach in knots, making my channel clench around the intruding thickness. Gradually, as I relaxed, I did he, relinquishing his rigid self-control, developing a steadier rhythm that slowly increased in pace and force, as he began to make surer, deeper plunges, filling me more fully than I had ever imagined possible, the friction making me writhe and press up to him, my mouth spilling out gasps and moans, in duet to Lucius's deeper litany of tenderness and reassurance.

My ankles unhooked from Lucius's thighs and raised to clamp around his lower back, the tilting of my hips bringing him deeper again, and causing his pelvic bone to rhythmically rub against the most sensitive part of me, making me cry out as he plunged harder, deeper, quicker, pounding into me with long, full thrusts that brought me careering dangerously close to that slender precipice between agony and ecstasy... then the world was quaking and on fire, the stars were falling down around me—or perhaps I was falling, falling upwards into heaven—and I was crying out his name. Beseeching, invoking, requiring, again, again, and yet again.

As my channel frantically fluttered around his stretching, filling thrusts, Lucius captured and
entwined my fingers with his, bringing my hands up to either side of my head, then he bent down and plunged his tongue into my panting mouth, and I felt a shudder run through his whole body. With a low groan, he heaved heavily forward; I felt his length spasm inside me, and there was a spurting, viscous warmth that seemed to seal us even more tightly together, as we both came to sweet, shuddering completion.

And in that moment there was a rush of crackling energy; a shimmering light momentarily swarmed over and around us, bathing us and the entire room in a beautiful, silvery glow...

Or perhaps it was only the moon, briefly breaking from her shroud of dark clouds, for when I blinked the light was gone, and all was as dark and dizzy as before.

...  

END OF PART TWO

Chapter End Notes

A/N For the record, there are three parts to this story, so the next part will be the home straight. I really hope you enjoyed the chapter! Please leave me with some of your thoughts. Love, artful
At first, there was only darkness and silence.

Silence and darkness.

Then, somewhere far away, an indistinct echo of voices.

I became aware of an absence of pain. An absence of all feeling, except a kind of weightless warmth, and the ticking of my pulse behind my eyelids. I had a notion that I was awake and lying down, yet there was no physical proof for me to tether this idea to.

I wished I could feel my body. Just to reassure myself it was still there. In one piece.

The voices were getting louder, more defined, but still there was a strange ricochet, as if the sounds were coming to me from down a long tunnel, and whole words were lost, swallowed by darkness.

"She...she...she... ... consciousness...ness...ness..."

"Vital signs...signs...signs... ... stronger...ger...ger..."

I groaned. The sound of my voice was also far away, and echoing down that long tunnel.

There was something struggling inside me. I realised my body was fighting to regain consciousness, while my mind desperately sought to return to oblivion.

Because I didn't want to wake up. I wanted to sleep forever and ever, and forget everything.

But I couldn't help waking ...

... and I couldn't help remembering...

That night I went to sleep, enfolded in the arms of my lover. The following morning, I awoke alone.

As my eyelids flickered open, I did not wonder where I was, or if last night had all been some incredible, wonderful dream. I still tingled with his touch, his taste. My body ached, but the soreness was sweetly mitigated in remembering the pleasure that had occasioned it. His scent was everywhere, on the soft, deep pillows on which I laid my cheek, on the unfamiliar quilt that was so heavy I could barely move beneath its weight.

"Lucius?"

I slowly sat up, bunching the sheets around my torso. The room was hushed and the dark forest-
green curtains now closed, keeping at bay what promised to be a bright morning. The green-tinted daylight made me feel as if I were in some enchanted, underwater cave.

I realised I was alone. I supposed Lucius had woken early and did not wish to disturb me, but nevertheless I experienced a pang of disappointment and even slight anxiousness. But a moment later my eye was caught by something on the pillow beside me. It was a single, thornless, white rose.

Smiling, I picked up the beautiful flower and breathed in its delicate scent. There was no message attached, but it seemed message enough.

I sank back down into the deep pillows, overcome by a languid, luxurious kind of happiness. My eyelids closed and the smile on my lips remained. I could not remember having ever felt so serene, so content. For now I knew, knew beyond any shadow of doubt, that I was not only wanted and desired, but loved. Lucius loved me. I was not sure if he knew it, but I did.

I did.

I daydreamed a little longer, indulgently dwelling on the exquisite minutiae of the previous night, blushing at the sensuous memories, while constructing a pleasantly indistinct narrative for the future...Lucius and I, learning to trust in our love for each other... him, eventually helping me to regain my memories; I, slowly helping him to dispel his past demons...the light of love strengthening and securing those chains first forged in the darkness...

It would take time, I knew that. But it would surely happen.

I became restless to see him again. I sat up, this time pushing back the heavy sheets from my body. I slid to the edge and climbed out, my feet encountering the thick, plush rug on which the bed stood. A hasty inspection revealed a stripe of dried blood on each inner thigh. Suddenly self-conscious, and afraid to be seen naked in the light of day, I sought about for something to cover myself with.

I found my nightdress on the arm of the couch, neatly folded, and I hurriedly slipped it on. As the aroma of sweet-herbs gently billowed around me, I couldn't help wondering if he had noticed it last night, and been reminded...

A beam of infiltrating sunlight glanced off one of the long wall mirrors and I moved towards it. I wondered if I looked somehow different. Perhaps Alice would be gone, thawed quite away by Lucius's burning touch, and the real me would be standing there, only waiting to meet my eyes to reveal to me the secrets of my shadow-fallen past ... But no. If anything, I looked even less like someone I recognised. Flushed, glowing, tousle-haired, starry-eyed. Who was this young woman, with a secret smile curving her kiss-chafed lips? Was she me? Or was she Alice?

For a few seconds I stood still, overcome by a sudden and intense feeling of displacement.

What was she—Alice—I—doing here, in this sumptuous, forbidden room? What right had I to feel so happy, when the woman whose husband had taken me to his bed, had suffered such terrible grief that it had ended her life? ...I thought of the beautiful face in the silver locket under my pillow. What would she have to say about it, if she could?

I shivered and moved back to the bed. Picking up the rose, I sank down to sit on the quilt and stared about me. A strange dual narrative played in my mind, of those two separate occasions which had brought me here.

...There was the wardrobe, which, in a fever of rebelliousness and pain, I had rifled through and donned sundry of its contents. There was the bureau drawer where I had discovered the bird-skull
pavilion and the moving photo, moments before Lucius had slammed it shut on my fingers. There was the tall dresser against which he trapped and stripped me, before dragging me over to his bed to terrorise and humiliate me with his brutal, mocking kisses...

...And yet, there, too, just by the door, was the place that Lucius had kissed me last night, but this time with deep and passionate fervour. There was the couch, where I had stood before him, naked and trembling, in the low, flickering light of the fireplace, and where he had scooped me into his arms and carried me over to that very same bed, not with force or violence, but with utmost tenderness, laying me gently down upon its deep, quilted cover...

I twirled the delicate, slender stalk of the rose slowly in my fingers, then lifted it again to inhale its sweet scent. Another memory sifted to the surface of my thoughts, one of dagger-like rose-thorns tearing into my skin as I scaled the walls of my prison. ...Funny how something so beautiful could, in another context, be so cruel. ...But perhaps all life was made up of such strange symmetry, a mysterious tapestry woven in equal threads of darkness and light, fear and joy, pain and pleasure. Of hate and love.

I waited a while longer, but still Lucius did not appear.

Briefly, I wondered if I should take the opportunity to look inside the bureau, perhaps glimpse the moving newspaper-photo again and read the article beneath. ...But I could not bring myself to do it. It wasn't fear which held me back, for I did not truly believe that Lucius would punish me for a repeat of that transgression. It was the breaching of trust, which put a stopper upon my curiosity. Trust could not be a one-sided thing; to gain, I must earn. Then, when the time was right, I would simply ask him to show me.

Eventually, I decided to go back to my room to bathe and change.

I took longer than usual to select my clothes. Perhaps it was foolish, but I wished to find something special, something which somehow expressed how special I felt. Of course, all the garments were breathtakingly lovely, but I wanted to find one which suited me, and did not altogether make me feel like a scrawny sparrow borrowing the elegant plumes of a dove. Something that perhaps would make Lucius's eyes light up and his smile soften when he saw me.

My gaze was drawn to one of the few gowns which was not green, but rather a soft shade of antique-rose. I brought it out into the light, and was filled with a sense of reverence for something so delicate and ethereal. Unlike the medieval design of the cambric dress I usually wore, this seemed closer to something from the Regency era; having a high, Empire waist, a neckline cut wide and low, and skirts made from layers of some impossibly-gauzy material which felt almost weightless in my fingers. Tiny gold roses, exquisitely embroidered in thread as fine as spider's lace, shimmered across the bodice, and at the scalloped hem of the skirt.

As soon as I stepped into the dress, I felt it was right. My reflection in the mirror confirmed it. The gentle, rosy blush of the fabric complimented the natural warmth of my skin-tone, while the muted colour made a flattering contrast to my hair, making it appear glossier, darker, and—with its new-grown lengths—more lustrous. The golden embroidery seemed to emphasise the tawny lights in my eyes, adding an aureate glow to their new-lit radiance.

I took the white rose and nestled it behind one ear.

I felt special, and...yes...even beautiful. I believed that Lucius would think so too.
The dining-room door stood ajar, and I pressed it open, hesitating on the threshold to peer inside.

At first glance the room seemed empty. It was dark and still, the heavy curtains closed and excluding most of the morning light. The mahogany table stood unlaid and bare. I thought that Lucius must have gone to the terrace—but seconds later I realised he was standing on the far side of the room, facing the hearth.

He was wearing a floor-length black cloak that seemed to meld into the surrounding shadows. Usually he favoured morning suits early in the day, and I wondered if perhaps he had received another summons from his case-workers, and was preparing to travel. It would certainly explain why he had risen earlier than I.

Apparently he was deep in thought, and had not heard me enter.

Quietly closing the door, I moved into the middle of the room. My heartbeat was fluttering pleasantly and I could feel a blush spreading over my cheeks. I wished to go to him, to throw my arms around him, and receive once more his ardent touch and beguiling kisses, but a sudden self-consciousness—at the memory of our intimacy, at my choice of dress, at...at...everything—kept me somewhat bashfully at bay. Nervously, I smoothed down the diaphanous folds of material, feeling a little tongue-tied. But I was too happy to be flustered into total silence. "Good morning," I said softly, smiling as I waited for him to turn.

He did not turn. He did not so much as move a muscle to indicate having heard me, and I began to wonder if I had spoken too quietly. I was about to repeat my greeting when he finally spoke. "Good morning, Alice."

An odd chill, like a single drop of cold water, tingled on my nape and slipped slowly down my spine. I couldn't quite make out the tone of his voice, it sounded so strange...so hollow.

*It must be the echo of the fireplace, I thought, making him sound like that.*

I stood uncertainly where I was, wondering what next to do or say.

Then I saw his shoulders lift in an elegant shrug, and Lucius turned to face me.

I was not prepared for the ice in his eyes. It froze me in place, so I could not move or speak, but only stare mutely at him. In the dimness his face had a deathly, bone-white pallor, his cheekbones as sharp as shards in the falling shadows. His gaze swept me from head to toe, but instead of the admiration I had hoped—even expected—to enkindle, there was only glittering hardness.

"My, my..." he drawled softly, "...look at you. I do hope you didn't go to all that trouble for me."

Still I stared. I wondered if I had not woken up. Perhaps it had all been a pleasant day-dream, just now starting to curdle into one of my all-too-frequent nightmares.

"L-Lucius?" I heard myself stammer.

He made a slight bow, his hand briefly touching his chest. "As you see." Although the gesture and words were mocking, his expression was not. There was no sardonic smile, no sarcastic sneer. Just ice.

"Wh-what is the matter?" I gasped. "What is wrong?"
One eyebrow lifted fractionally. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Why are you looking at me like..."

"Like?"

"Like that." My heart began a heavy, painful hammering. "What have I done?"

"You? You haven't done anything." Leisurely, gracefully, he started moving towards me, his eyes trained to mine in an unblinking stare. "You couldn't do anything, could you? You had no choice..."

He came to a stop within touching distance, standing straight to his full, imposing height. I felt no fear, though he towered over me. His presence, his stature, his scent—these were all so familiar now, that I was physically comforted rather than cowed by his proximity.

But my mind was a chaos of confusion.

Was he playing a terrible joke on me? I clutched at this theory as at straws, and tried to summon a smile. It quivered momentarily on my lips, and died as he bent down to murmur, "You were...you are a victim in all this."

I was finding it difficult to breathe, let alone to speak. "No, I'm not," I said faintly.

"Oh, yes. Though you mayn't know it yet, my sweet." His hands lifted to cup my face, his thumbs gently stroking the planes of my blood-forsaken cheeks. His touch was so warm, so caressing, that I momentarily closed my eyes and allowed myself to be lulled. But when I opened them again, there was nowhere to hide from his arctic gaze. "Just a helpless...powerless...pathetic victim."

"A v-victim of what?"

His lip curled at the blank confusion in my face. "Of me, you little fool."

"What do you mean?"

"Need I spell it out for you, Alice?" With a vicious conciseness that made me flinch, he said, "I raped you."

For a moment, the breath was knocked out of me and I could only gulp and shake my head. "No you d-didn't..." I finally managed to stutter, "we...we... m-m-m-"

"Made love?" His smile changed, deepened; became somehow less brittle, yet more cruel. "Is that what you were going to say?"

I couldn't reply; I only looked at him with mute supplication, desperately seeking some warmth, some protection from the icy wasteland of his eyes.

Yes, we made love. ...Didn't we?

"No..." he said, as if in answer to my unspoken question. "You don't imagine a Pureblood could ever care for a mudblood, do you?" The word, softly-spoken though it was, stabbed horribly at my breast. It had been so long since he had last called me that hateful term, I had truly never thought to hear it again.

"No, indeed," he continued, his thumbs now brushing my trembling lips, "to 'make love' implies some measure of mutual feeling, or at least mutual respect, impossible between a Pureblood and a base-born inferior. ...He may choose to rape her, of course, or to use her as his whore. But love...love
is...quite out of the question, I'm afraid."

His words poured over me like dry-ice, burning, freezing, withering away the life-source within me until I felt but an exsiccated husk; one touch away from crumbling into nothingness.

"Shall I pay you for last night?" he persisted mercilessly, in that same tauntingly-tender voice. "Would you rather be my willing whore, than my victim? I shall let you decide."

Sickening with revulsion, I tried to turn and stumble away, but his fingers clamped around my arms, pulling me back, his arms encircling and trapping me against him. "Where are you going, my pretty little whore?" he crooned softly in my ear, stroking my hair in a horrible parody of tenderness.

"Stop it," I whispered. "Please."

"Perhaps I shall engage your services again...here, now." He grasped a fistful of my hair and twisted, pulling my head back to bare my neck with one hand, caressing it softly with the other. I felt the white rose dislodge from behind my ear and tumble to the floor.

"Stop it," I repeated dully, without conviction or force. It was as if all energy had drained out of me, along with all happiness. If not for his tight embrace, I should have fallen to the floor, like the rose. My body was limp, my mind blank. I had no spirit, no will, to fight him. There was no stamina for anguish or despair. I just wanted to die.

I heard the crunch of the flower being crushed beneath boots, and vaguely I registered that Lucius was pushing me backwards. I recalled that night, when he had Waltzed me around this same room, to the amused giggles of his beautiful "guest". Then, I had resisted and defied him...Why couldn't I do so now? ...But resistance and defiance required anger, and anger was a hot emotion. I didn't have any heat. My heart was a frozen glacier, off which my veins coursed cold rivers.

My back struck something solid; seconds later I was sprawled across the mahogany table, crushed beneath Lucius's body-weight, my wrists trapped by his hands and pinned above my head.

He smiled down at me, evidently amused by my silent prostration. "Is that all it takes to break you, mudblood? One night, to entirely master you?" I could feel his arousal pressing against my stomach, and bile burned in my throat.

...He really is going to rape me this time, I thought emptily. He...he really does hate me.

Lucius bent his head, his mouth so close to mine I could feel his breath brush my lips. "You're mine, now, aren't you?" he murmured. "Mine to take. ...Mine to break. ...Mine to throw away. ...I could do anything to you now, couldn't I, little worm?"

A heartbeat. A blink.

Little worm...

A shuddering gasp.

[...Little worm...] 

And then a crashing tidal-wave of realisation and relief.

Not him. It wasn't him. It wasn't Lucius.

It was Her.
Blind, white-hot fury blazed through me, restoring the heat to my blood, the life to my limbs. I began to struggle and kick for all I was worth. Gulping a huge lungful of air, I screamed at the top of my voice.

"LET ME GO, YOU BITCH!"

The man—or rather, the monster—grinned down at me. Still gripping my wrists, he threw back his head and shook his white-blond tresses, his eyes momentarily rolling back in his head. When he looked down at me again, the silver eyes were now gleaming dark lodestones, the snowy hair had become a sheet of inky blackness, and the heavy sable velvet of his cloak had changed to a cascade of glossy blue-black feathers.

It was Lucius, yet not him; a dark, diabolical, demon-eyed twin.

"Oh, but I was just starting to enjoy myself," he—she—it—said. Its voice was terrifying: a hellish hybrid between Lucius's silken tenor, and the Woman's chiming descant. "You're rather delectable when your spirit is broken. I can't begin to imagine why Luci took so long to finally bed you." So saying, the doppelgänger let go of my wrists and, gripping the neckline of my dress, rent the delicate material with its fists, exposing my chest to its gloating gaze.

I threw my hands up to try to scratch at those heinous black eyes, but the monster swatted them away like flies. "Careful with your claws, darling..." it growled, "...or I shall pluck them out."

Now the first rush of rage was receding, a new emotion threatened to overtake me: sheer terror. My left arm had gone dead, except for the tingle of welts beginning to rise on my skin. I knew the burning agony would soon follow. Desperately, I screamed again, but this time I could hear the naked fear in my voice. "Let me go!"

The doppelgänger laughed, and I shuddered at the sound of the Woman's girlish giggle manifesting through Lucius's voice and lips. "Do calm down, mudblood. You don't really suppose I would sully myself with you? Although, I own, it was rather fun to watch..." My horrified gasp inspired another laugh. "Oh, yes, Lucius showed me every disgusting, delightful little detail. Not that he had any choice. The selfish boy would keep it all to himself, but I made him share like a good brother."

Brother? Could it be possible? "Where is he?" I cried. "What did you do to him? Lucius!? LUCIUS!"

"Really, mudblood," the mocking voice rejoined, "there's no need to scream down the house. He's right here, you know."

Hauling me suddenly to my feet, the doppelgänger spun me about, pulling me backwards against its chest. The large fingers of its left hand clamped about my neck like a collar. Then it lifted its right arm and made a gesture at a place in the middle of the floor, muttering a single word in some foreign-sounding tongue: "Revelio."

It was as if an invisible curtain had been drawn aside. Where before there was nothing but polished floorboards, now there appeared a figure, on his knees, bound by what could only be described as slithering ropes...ropes of live, dark energy, which crackled and sparked as they twisted and twined about him. His face was deathly-pale and he gazed at me with something like despair in his silver eyes. With a cry of horror, I saw that his lips were stitched shut with a zigzagging line of black thread, although I could not see any blood.

"Lucius!" Desperately I struggled, but the thing holding me only tightened its grip on my throat, making me choke.
"Ah-ah-ah, little worm," it hissed in my ear, in its demonic, dual-tone voice. "Patience is a virtue, you know."

"What have you done to him?" I sobbed. "Let him go! Please! PLEASE!"

"Ah, how prettily you beg..." I shuddered with disgust as the doppelgänger's free hand enclosed upon my left breast, moulding with its palm and caressing with its fingers. The real Lucius—my Lucius—jerked wildly against his bonds, his face contorting with helpless rage, his silver eyes smouldering and a vein throbbing in his brow.

"I do wish you could feel the little mudblood's heartbeat, Luci," my captor addressed him tauntingly. "...So young, so strong...so perfectly, beautifully alive... Such a shame that it won't be for much longer..."

Suddenly its grip released and I was flung to the floor so brutally that, in trying to catch myself, I felt both wrists sprain on impact.

When I next looked up, Lucius's dark twin was gone, and in its place stood The Woman; smaller in size, yet somehow infinitely more monstrous; as lovely and loathsome as ever in her black-feathered ball gown.

"Now..." she said in her sweet, bell-like voice. "We're all going to have a little fun."

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