


Copyright © [2025] All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the author's prior written permission.

The image features a central, glowing lantern with a butterfly inside. The lantern is dark and metallic, with a bright orange and yellow flame emanating from within. A butterfly with orange and black wings is perched on the inner frame of the lantern, its body and wings illuminated by the light. The background is a dark, gradient blue-grey with some faint, glowing particles. The title 'The Unbroken Thread' is written in a white, cursive font at the top, and the author's name 'Cassira Lane' is written in the same font at the bottom.

The
Unbroken
Thread

Cassira Lane

Cryptic Bastard - Ch. 1

Year: ????

My first breath was a sob.

Frigid air rushed into my lungs, sterile and burning. Hot tears streaked down my temples, pooled in my ears. I dragged my arms to my chest, cradling a nameless grief, an orphaned despair I had no understanding of.

Why couldn't I remember anything except how much it hurt?

A shrill ringing pierced my ears, high and constant. I clutched at the sides of my head, barely suppressing a scream. The keening vibrated behind my eyes, drilled into my skull.

I don't know how long it lasted. When it finally eased, my body was trembling, tears clogging my eyes, saliva thick in my throat.

Dimly, I recognized I was on my back and pressed to a cold, hard floor. A creeping chill had bled through my clothes, soaked through my skin, and seeped into my bones. I couldn't tell if the cold came from the floor or from inside me—but behind my ribs, the echo of that forgotten grief still lingered.

The darkness was absolute. I didn't know if my eyes were open, if there were walls or if this place went on forever. Maybe I was blind. Maybe this was death. I drew a hand to my face and flinched when my finger touched my eyeball.

My hand kept moving. Nose. Lips. Chin. All intact.

I pressed my palm flat against my cheek just to feel something. My skin, a vestige of heat, any indication this was real.

I didn't think. I brought my forearm to my mouth and sank my teeth into my flesh, choking on a cry as a trickle of blood slid down my arm.

Not dead.

Not dreaming.

Relief came first. Then doubt, immediately followed by dread. I was either blind or trapped in the dark, and now I was bleeding, the metallic taste still clinging to my tongue.

I listened for anything—voices, movement, a scrape in the dark.

There was only silence.

"Hello?" I whispered, my voice cracking.

The word died without an echo.

I grit my teeth until they ached, trying to sit up. It felt like gravity had doubled. My limbs barely responded, a foreign pressure crushing my spine flat to the floor.

The darkness felt like a living thing, brushing against my ribs, crawling up my neck.

Even the air in this place was wrong. Too heavy. Too still.

Like I was buried alive.

I forced my arms under me, nails scrabbling against the floor. Agony shot through my right arm, and I dropped like a stone, a gasp tearing free as I collapsed to the ground.

I wanted to scream, but I didn't know who might hear me. What if silence was the only thing keeping me safe? What if someone was mere feet away, watching me without saying a word? My fists came up to my temples, and my body started rocking on its own, my stomach cramping like I was going to be sick.

All too soon, nausea bled into hunger. It sank its nails into my insides, squeezed my stomach in a clenched fist.

Would I waste away before anyone came? What would I do when it got worse?

I couldn't stay like this. I had to move, had to get up, even if it meant I had to crawl blindly across the ground to find a way out.

White-hot pain crackled in my sternum when I rolled onto my stomach. I pushed myself upright on shaking arms, every movement lighting my nerves on fire.

I braced one hand against the floor and shoved with everything I had. My legs shook under me, one worse than the other, but I managed to inch forward on my hands and knees.

I reached out blindly, fingers extended until they met resistance—smooth, solid, vertical.

A wall.

I dragged myself against it, using it to push to my feet. My legs held, but only because I willed them to.

One tentative step forward, then another. I staggered along the perimeter, my hands outstretched. The corner came too soon. I counted my steps to the next—one, two, three...*eight*. Corner. Eight steps. Another corner.

I made another circuit, seeking anything I might have missed—a door, a window, a seam in the walls. Nothing broke the monotony of the smooth surface except the four corners that hemmed me in.

Whatever I'd been afraid of in the dark, it didn't matter now. Someone had put me in here, which meant someone had to get me out.

"Help!" The sound tore from my throat. "Please—help me!"

The dark was suffocating, but the silence that followed was far worse.

I had no sense of how long I spent feeling my way through the room and calling out with no answer. Each of my cries could've been seconds apart or hours.

Just when I'd started to believe I would die here, the scrape of stone against stone pierced the silence. A slice of light cut through the black, searing my retinas. I threw up my arms, stumbling backward until my spine hit the wall. Footsteps echoed—deliberate, measured, each click of heel against the floor a quiet assertion of control.

"I see you're finally awake."

The voice, deep and resonant, curled through the cell like smoke.

Fresh tears fell as my vision struggled to adjust to the harsh glare. A tall figure stood framed in the doorway, the silhouette stark and featureless against the flood of light.

I pressed myself flatter against the wall. Through squinted eyes, I watched him step into the room.

"Who are you?" The words scraped past my dry throat. "Where am I?"

"Already demanding answers? No small talk first?" A soft chuckle floated through the space between us. "My darling, how you wound me."

The silhouette shifted, and I caught a glimpse of tailored fabric, the clean lines of an elegant grey coat over a white shirt. He stood at least three, maybe four heads above me. His outline held a quiet confidence, the kind that made the tight room feel even smaller.

"I imagined you'd take longer to gather your wits. As always, you are quite the surprise."

He spoke as if we were already acquainted. Even though the bright light still obscured his features, I was certain I'd never met this man before.

"You seem to know me well," I said, my fingers curling against the wall at my back. I lifted my chin, unable to hide a wince as a spike of heat surged at the nape of my neck. "Shame, I can't say the same. Given the cell and the circumstances, you have me at a bit of a disadvantage."

My eyes slowly adjusted to the light, and his face came into focus. His sharp features were crowned by waves of neatly cropped ash-blond hair, yet it was his glacier-blue eyes that rooted me where I stood.

His cool gaze swept the small, dim space before coming back to rest on me.

"Quite the place, isn't it?" he remarked. "Cramped, bleak, but at least it's yours. I would've picked somewhere nicer, but... let's just say this was the best of some very bad options."

He took another step forward. The space between us cooled by degrees. If there'd been anywhere to run, I would have.

His eyes dropped, locking onto my forearm. I followed his gaze, glancing down at the crescent of broken, tawny skin, teeth marks still raw and red where I'd bitten myself. Ribbons of dried blood traced a path towards my elbow, flaking at the edges like rust.

His body had gone unnaturally still. Something flickered across his face—so quick I almost missed it. Not revulsion. Not confusion. Something closer to anticipation.

I shifted my weight, tucking my arm further behind my back.

One blink, and he was back in control. He dragged his eyes back to mine and his face settled into a pleasant mask, the kind that felt like he'd spent time perfecting in front of a mirror.

He released a sigh.

"Listen, I get it. You have questions—where you are, why you're here, how you got here." He gave a slight shake of his head. "But those aren't what you should be asking right now. What matters is *who*."

I swallowed past a streak of pain that chose that moment to shoot up my spine.

"Who what?" I bit out.

"Who you are."

He took another step towards me. His head tilted slightly, his gaze almost clinical in its observation. His pale hair was brushed back from his forehead, contrasting with eyebrows several shades darker that lent gravity to his expression. His features were striking individually, but together they created something both alluring and unsettling—a face balanced to perfection with no softness or flaw to temper it.

Every instinct I had warned me to be wary of this man.

Despite his formidable height, there was a refined grace to his build. The type that was lean, broad enough to be imposing, and without any excessive bulk to slow him down.

There was no way I could get past him to the door.

He caught me looking and smiled, revealing a set of white, perfect teeth.

"Yes, it would be best if you didn't bother. You won't make it. Besides, even if I let you, you wouldn't last very long out there."

His tone didn't match the threat. He was polite. Conversational, like we were sharing small talk over tea.

"A crude measure of identity, but we'll start simple," he said, like nothing about this was strange. "Tell me, what's your name?"

Something so fundamental, so basic—it should have been there, ready on my tongue, even though I had no intention of sharing it with him.

"I—" My legs trembled. I pressed my palms flat against the cold wall, desperate for any tether to reality. "I don't—" My voice broke.

Pain lanced through my skull—piercing and insistent. My hands flew to my temples, and my legs buckled. I slid down the wall, its smooth surface chafing against my bare shoulders where my tunic's thin straps left them bare.

"I can't—" The words caught again. I tangled my fingers into my hair and pulled, as if this new pain might keep me present. "It feels like I'm being torn apart. And I can't remember—*why* can't I remember?"

Firm hands gripped my shoulders, and an intense heat radiated through my upper arms.

"Easy now." He maneuvered me into a sitting position, his touch surprisingly gentle. "Don't push yourself too hard."

The dizziness began to ebb, replaced by an uneasy awareness of his proximity. His crisp, open collar was only inches from my face. I caught the rich scent of dark spices mixed with something sharp, distinct, and faintly metallic. It was an unlikely combination, but not entirely unappealing.

"Let's get you off the floor. You can have a seat in the chair while we talk."

I was ready to snap back about the absurdity of finding furniture in this stone box—but there it was. A simple chair stood mere feet away, its dark wood gleaming in the light. My mind reeled. That chair hadn't been there before. I was certain of it—I'd traced every inch of this room.

He kept me upright without visible effort, his palms still flaring with a warmth that flowed through my entire body in slow, steady waves. It was impossible not to notice how large his hands were, though they were proportional to his body. They dwarfed my shoulders, his fingertips brushing from the dip of my collarbone to the ridge where my shoulder blade met my spine.

"Can you stand?" he asked, his voice softer than before.

I didn't think I could, but I did not want to admit that aloud.

There was something about him—something just beneath the surface. His voice was smooth, his touch reassuring, yet none of it put me at ease. If anything, they only made me more aware of how cold his eyes were.

The door—when had it closed? The harsh glare pouring through the entrance was gone, along with an opportunity to see what was on the other side.

A new light source now illuminated the room. I looked over my shoulder, searching for it.

High up near the ceiling, a narrow window stretched horizontally along the wall. It was positioned in the center and lined with thick, metal slats. The sky beyond was an endless black expanse dotted with countless stars that were too bright, too close. Silver light filtered through the window, casting strange, fractured shadows across the floor.

That window, like the chair, hadn't been there before. Either I was losing my mind, or reality itself was shifting around me.

I stared at the impossible chair, then at the impossible window and what was beyond it, then back at him. They simply... existed now, as if they'd always been there. I needed to stay sharp, no matter how surreal this all felt. But the pain—a thousand needles pricking my skin—made it hard to focus.

My arms trembled as I pushed myself from the floor. The man steadily guided me upright, his hold on my shoulders the only thing preventing an undignified collapse.

"Please. Have a seat," he prompted again, his gentle tone barely masking the command beneath it. His thumbs traced slow circles along my arms, the prominent veins on the backs of his hands shifting with each movement.

A took a single step and my balance faltered. He caught me, releasing a faint snort as he navigated me to the chair. I had no choice but to let him lower me into it, wincing when more bolts of pain streaked up my legs.

"What did you do to me?" I gasped, my vision blurring at the edges.

He lowered himself onto one knee and braced his other leg in front of him. For the first time, we were nearly at eye level.

"You're charmingly incorrect," he admonished, his face swimming back into view. "Contrary to what you might believe, I found you here. In fact, one might say you've even become my guest, of a sort."

His eyes traced over me. "So, it's already started then. Poor thing." His brows furrowed slightly. "This place is not kind to those that don't belong here. And you, little flame, burn far too brightly for this darkness."

One hand rested lightly on his bent knee, and the other found its way to the arm of my chair. The shift was subtle, almost casual, but he'd effectively trapped me without even touching me.

"You really don't remember anything, do you?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but the words died there. Each attempt to recall who I was before waking here felt like grasping at shadows—the more I tried, the faster they slipped through my fingers.

"What do you mean, I don't *belong* here? Where exactly is *here*?"

And if I wasn't supposed to be here, why was I here at all?

"I could explain it a hundred different ways, but without your memories, you'd still be looking at me like I was speaking in riddles."

He met my narrowing stare and released another sigh.

"Look, if it helps, think of this as a space between spaces. It's the threshold where realities overlap, but don't merge. In short, you're in a place meant to contain those who cannot be destroyed, only reconditioned."

"Then let me leave," I gritted out through clenched teeth. "If I'm not supposed to be here—"

"That's not an option." His words cut through mine like a blade. "The sooner you accept that, the sooner we can begin. Every moment you waste fighting against your circumstances is a moment that could be spent piecing your memories back together."

Instead of pressing the point, his expression shifted, the edge in his voice replaced with something almost teasing.

"I must say, you've made quite the reputation for yourself amongst those of us who call this place home." The corner of his mouth lifted, and he raised a long, precise brow. "I'm simply one of many who've heard your story, Gaia. Fortunately for you, I have a particular interest in your success. And as luck would have it, I've been waiting for the right moment to settle an outstanding debt."

The name echoed in my mind.

"Gaia," I whispered, testing the way it felt on my tongue. The sound of it sparked no memories, revealed no hidden truths about who I was or why I was here, but it felt real. I wrapped my arms around myself, clinging to this fragment of identity. A single point of certainty in this dark, disorienting place.

"Yes. That, at least, is yours to keep."

It felt right, like finding a key that precisely fit a lock. But it only opened one tiny door in a vast hallway of locked rooms, each unopened door reminding me of everything I still didn't remember.

"Names are a human concept," he continued, "so I don't believe sharing yours violated any rules." His eyes never left mine. "Though I must admit, even that small truth felt dangerous."

The man's smile turned cordial, though his gaze was cataloguing me like a newly acquired specimen. "I must say, meeting you like this is quite unexpected. So diminished from what you once were, yet still unmistakably you."

I pressed my lips into a thin line. "If you know so much, then tell me. Stop with the tedious word games." Whoever this man was, he clearly enjoyed watching me stumble in the dark while he held the lantern just out of reach.

He leaned forward slightly, the fabric of his long coat rustling against his knee. A biting chill crept into the space between us.

"Such fire from such a small spark." He gave a low, indulgent chuckle. "I'm afraid it doesn't work that way. Your memories aren't just missing—they've been sealed away in the chambers of your mind. If you want them back, you'll have to reopen those passages yourself."

"Please," I said, hating the tremor in my voice, "Did I do something wrong? Is—is that why I'm here? If this is punishment, at least tell me what I did."

His lips pressed into a thin line. "I can't. These rules exist for a reason, and I'm bound by them just as much as you are." He exhaled through his nose. "Believe me, you're not the only one who finds them inconvenient. Rules..." He snorted softly. "Annoying, pesky little things. But bending them too much would draw attention you can't afford."

"Draw attention from who?"

"From others like me," he replied. "And trust me, they'll be far less accommodating to a stray than I am."

"Others like you," I repeated numbly, trying to imagine what that meant. Something cold slithered down my spine. "And they want... what, exactly? To find me?"

"They won't just come looking for you. They'll come hunting," he said, his tone hardening with each word. "To them, your soul would be nothing more than a trophy. A symbolic victory against forces they would not dare challenge directly. Your worth to them lies not in who you are, but in who would notice your absence."

"You speak as if you're not—"

"Human." He pronounced it like a diagnosis. "Every moment you exist here tears at the fabric of what you are. The pain you're feeling? It's because this reality is rejecting your presence within it."

I glanced back at the narrow window. Several stars had started to shift position, entire constellations sliding across the black sky like pieces on an invisible game board. These weren't simple points of light—each was alive with swirling colors, their cores pulsing with shifting hues.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but when I opened them again, the stars were still moving, rearranging themselves into new patterns.

My sanity felt like it trembled at the edge of an abyss.

"Consider yourself fortunate," he commented, smoothly rising to his full height. "I've placed you in a pocket of obscurity within these walls. Few have reason to venture here, which affords us a measure of privacy."

A soft rasp of fabric drew my attention as he reached into his coat and withdrew a small glass vial from an inner pocket. Something stirred within it, a shifting darkness that twitched and pulsed, collapsing in on itself only to unfurl again. He leaned forward and reached past me to set it down.

I turned to follow the motion and froze. A wooden desk now occupied the space behind the chair. It was set in the corner and just to the right of the window, its walnut surface gleaming. The edges were subtly beveled, the drawers fitted with understated brass handles.

"How are you doing that?" I gripped the arms of the chair, my knuckles white. "First the chair, then the window, and now a desk? I'm not imagining this. I know I'm not."

He gave a lazy flick of his fingers, as if rearranging reality was no more effort than brushing dust from his sleeve. "Merely a parlor trick. If this impresses you, I suggest raising your expectations."

There was no arrogance in his voice, only certainty—and that was more unnerving than any show of power.

He gestured to the dark vial on the desk behind me with a tilt of his chin. "Drink. That will help with the pain. When the effects wear off, I'll bring more."

I turned to look at the vial, then back at him. My body felt like one open wound, and my head was pounding in time with my pulse, but somehow, I managed a dry laugh.

"You'll have to forgive me. I have this personal rule about not drinking strange liquids in small vials from strangers."

Ice-blue eyes narrowed. Something flickered across his features—frustration? Amusement? It vanished before I could name it. His expression remained impenetrable, but something shifted in the air between us—a tension that hadn't been there before.

"Ouch. A stranger? Now that's hardly fair when I've been nothing but accommodating."

Maybe I was being reckless, but fear had already lost its grip on my tongue, even though my body vibrated with it. He would have hurt me already if he'd wanted to—thin logic, maybe, but it was all I had. I wasn't sure if that made him merciful or just patient.

"Then who *are* you?" I asked, regarding him warily. "What part do you play in all this?" I couldn't keep the edge from my voice. "Savior? Jailer? Or something else entirely? I don't even know your name, let alone what you are."

The stars beyond the window seemed to pause in their distant dance, as if they too waited for his answer. I blinked, half-expecting them to move again, to prove I hadn't imagined it—but they stayed frozen.

I braced, waiting for the blow.

A genuine smile transformed his features, and my heart inexplicably stuttered. The change unsettled me more than the flashes of his cold demeanor—like watching winter thaw in seconds, revealing something raw and bright beneath the frost.

"Humans," he said the word again, this time amusement warming his voice, "always assigning names to every single thing you come across. Trying to contain the infinite within finite sounds."

Hot. Cold. Cutting. Kind. This man—or whatever he was—was an utter contradiction.

I fought to stay still when he lifted a hand and caught one of my curls between his fingers, studying it as if it held some fascinating secret. At my sharp glare, he released it.

"As if giving something a name grants you some measure of control over it." A smirk touched his lips. "But if you require something to call me, then... Sorin will suffice."

Sorin. I turned the name over in my mind, searching for a spark of recognition, a hint that I might have known it before. But like everything else since waking in this strange place, it held no meaning beyond the moment he'd given it to me.

"I hope," Sorin finally said, "that you might come to see me as a friend, with time. We never had that opportunity, you and I." A soft, almost rueful laugh escaped him. "Though I suppose that's rather optimistic, given the situation."

More silence stretched. I'd noticed he still hadn't told me what he was, and that private smile of his made it clear he wasn't about to.

He leaned in, his hand settling on the back of my chair, the wood creaking softly in his grip. Every survival instinct I had catalogued the threat.

"But know this," he said, his words almost a whisper. "I will become whatever circumstance demands, Gaia." Something darker threaded through his voice. "How you choose to perceive me... well, that is the one freedom I can offer."

My skin prickled, and I tucked the panic behind my ribs.

"Why should I trust anything you say?" I pressed my back into the chair, trapped inside the cage of his body.

"Because if you don't accept the contents of this vial, this place will devour you. Because right now, I'm the only one who can help you survive."

I searched his face, looking for any deceit or mockery, but found only that same detached interest.

Sorin rose to his feet and straightened, adjusting the fine wool of his coat. My lungs released a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"It's your choice, Gaia. I only suggest that you make it quickly. You can either take what I'm offering, or you can continue suffering until your mind breaks. And believe me, your body won't be far behind. I promise you, there will be no escape from this place if you can't even tolerate being in it."

"How convenient that my only option is trusting you. If you want my cooperation, you'll need to give me something more than vague threats and promises. Give me proof—*anything* real that shows me I'm not making a mistake if I listen to you."

Ghostly starlight cast strange shadows across his features, his silence heavy with consideration. His scrutiny felt tangible, like cold fingers brushing against my thoughts.

My chair shrieked against the stone floor as he spun it around. I fought to steady myself, heart hammering at his casual display of strength, the abrupt motion sending my stomach lurching and my hands clutching the armrests.

Every moment in Sorin's presence stripped away another layer of his human pretense. The way he moved, the cadence of his voice, the practiced expressions—all of it felt like watching an actor who had studied his role for years, but still couldn't quite master the subtle imperfections of being human.

The desk loomed before me, its polished surface reflecting whorls of iridescent light from overhead. I started to pull away, but froze at the sight of what I realized was my reflection—a stranger's face staring back from a simple wood-framed mirror mounted on the wall.

Moss-green eyes, wide with confusion, stood out against features I should have known but didn't. Warm bronze skin curved over high cheekbones peppered with freckles, while wild strands of dark hair fell past my shoulders in untamed curls. I lifted a trembling hand to my face and watched the woman in the mirror do the same.

I was probably in my late twenties or early thirties, though I wasn't entirely certain. How odd that I could estimate age, yet didn't know where that knowledge came from. I may have lost my identity, but clearly some of my instincts had remained.

The eyes that stared back had a weight to them. Not the fresh-faced uncertainty of youth, but something weathered, tempered. Whether time or trials had aged those eyes, they belonged to someone who had suffered and endured. My spine straightened unconsciously, drawing on the quiet strength I saw there.

"So this is what I look like," I whispered, meeting her gaze.

"Ah, but we're just getting to the interesting part," Sorin murmured from behind me. "Look deeper, darling."

I gave him a brief scowl, but leaned closer to the polished surface anyway, drawn by something just beneath my reflection—a shimmer of movement that didn't quite match my own.

My skin was becoming semi-translucent, spreading until it transformed me into a spectral figure, neither fully here nor entirely gone. I could see straight through myself—through to a network of vein-like structures that wove through every inch of flesh.

I braced my hands on the desk and rose unsteadily to my feet, leaning in towards the half-length mirror. Intricate patterns branched all the way from my fingertips to my toes. The silvery-blue channels looked almost like glass filaments, thousands upon thousands of them flickering with pulsing currents.

At the center and just to the side, they coiled around the space where my heart should have been. I couldn't see the organ itself, only how the glowing strands wrapped around its absence and outlined the impression of its shape.

With each beat of my heart, threads of light surged through the pathways, illuminating every delicate branch in stunning clarity.

I glanced down at my palms. They remained solid, opaque.

When my gaze returned to the mirror, I saw them—at least a dozen *some things* were crawling inside me. They were pure black and spindly, a swarm of fissures writhing just beneath my skin. They crept along the glowing network, devouring the light as they advanced, leaving behind dead, blackened pathways in their wake. The intruding darkness also twitched in time with my heart, forking further into the luminous web with each beat.

"You're wondering if what you're seeing is real," he said, reading my expression. "It is. Your body is comprised of psionic channels—similar to veins, but for energy rather than blood. To put it simply, sweet girl, this latticework is what makes you... well, you."

Sorin reached over my shoulder and touched the mirror. His sleeve hovered near my temple, the open collar of his starched shirt revealing the sculpted plane where the column of his throat met his chest. The wintry aura radiating from him licked at my skin, and I leaned away as discreetly as I could.

His finger traced across the glass, following the edge of a dark patch that was spreading along my collarbone. I shivered as an answering sensation ghosted across my flesh—not quite touch, not quite pressure, but something in between that left chills skittering across my skin.

"Beautiful," Sorin murmured, and there was something different that entered his voice—a note of genuine appreciation that made me shiver. Gone was the careful control, replaced by something almost reverent. "Even in decay, the architecture of what you are remains exquisite."

I watched, transfixed, as a black cluster pulsed along one of the channels near my heart. The glowing vein turned black as shadow filled it, leaving a dark line behind. Pain became nearly unbearable and I collapsed against the desk. It felt like I'd been stabbed with a shard of ice right next to my heart.

After several strained breaths, I pushed myself upright on shaking arms and lowered myself back into the chair.

I found his eyes in the mirror, and something had shifted in their depths—a change so small I might have missed it if I hadn't been watching closely. The blue of his irises had separated into distinct rings, each one rotating at a different speed and direction, like the mechanisms of a lock falling into place. His gaze tracked the spreading darkness, those fathomless eyes recording every detail of its advance.

"The corruption inside you is spreading," he said, his voice carrying such terrible certainty that I felt the truth of it in my bones. "Like I said before, every moment it's allowed to spread, it takes a little more of you. Your memories. Your sense of self. If you do nothing, this place will ultimately consume you and dissolve everything you are into the Void."

I watched another cluster of corruption pulse beneath my skin, my dread building until I couldn't contain it. A bitter laugh escaped me.

"And here I thought waking up without memories was the worst part of my day," I said. "So not only are your less accommodating brethren hunting me for sport, this place is literally digesting me from the inside out. Tell me, is there any other cheerful news you'd like to share?"

His shadow settled over me, and a whisper of cold ghosted across my shoulders. "It doesn't have to be that way. To reclaim what was lost, you will have to face what was taken from you. Your freedom lies in your own hands, little one." The chair creaked as he leaned over me. "Each

memory you recover, each piece of yourself you restore, weakens this place's hold on you. Only when you've taken back everything it stole will you be able to leave."

I broke eye contact with his reflection, unable to hold his gaze any longer.

With trembling fingers, I mapped the progress of the corruption as it traveled through a strand. Each fine line it invaded brought a fresh wave of knife-sharp pain beneath my skin.

"For all I know, this could be another trick—an illusion to make me compliant." I gestured at my reflection, at the creeping darkness beneath my skin. "I may not remember who I am, but I'm not naïve enough to believe everything you're telling me. How am I supposed to trust someone who only offers half-truths while keeping the important parts to himself? What if you're the one who put these... these *things* inside me?"

I searched Sorin's face for any hint of deception, but found only the same controlled calm. He leaned in again and this time, his lips came close to my ear.

"You're right," he said. "I could be deceiving you. I could be showing you whatever I wished, crafting any reality that served my purpose. It wouldn't be hard."

My fingers gripped the edge of the desk. The chair, the window, the very air I breathed... was even my mind safe from his reach? Perhaps he was bending my thoughts just as easily as he bent reality, and my missing memories were his doing.

"It's certainly easier when you make my point for me," I said, forcing dryness into my tone. "So, tell me again why I should trust anything that comes out of your mouth?"

"Because honesty serves me far better than any lie. And the truth is, you have no chance of retrieving your memories without my help."

I turned to face him directly, my jaw tightening at his obvious power play. "That's not exactly reassuring."

"It wasn't meant to be." He lifted the vial from the desk and held it between us. The contents within stirred restlessly, the shadowy mass inside shifting somewhere between a fluid and a vapor. "I offer the path to freedom, not safety."

His smile remained perfectly in place, but something changed in his eyes—something predatory that hadn't been there before.

"But I should be clear about one thing," he said, his voice dropping to a register that made the air feel thin. "Know that I don't let anything go to waste."

Sorin's eyes were distant, studying me as if already imagining it. "I could make it painless, if you begged me. Savor you slowly, indulge in the taste of your fear, sample you as your mind claws for purchase." I heard his voice twice—one layered over the other, just out of sync. "And when

it's over..." a smile, sharp as the edge of a knife, "...there will be no trace of you. Just silence where there was once a soul."

For just a moment, I could have sworn his shadow moved independently, stretching long fingers across the wall beside him.

"Since you're so curious about what I am," he mused, cocking his head as if considering, "I can show you firsthand, if you'd like. But if I showed you, I doubt there'd be enough of you left to care."

His breath didn't mist in the suddenly cold air—but mine did.

"So tell me, what would you rather be? An ally..." he paused, his smile sharpening with something terrible and hungry, "or my next meal?"

His words rang with certainty, not cruelty. Not a boast, not a bluff.

He meant it.

I realized my hands were shaking. I hid them in my lap, willing them to still.

I knew that vial might not be salvation—it could just as well be an entirely different kind of damnation. It beckoned with promised relief, and I recognized it for what it truly was: his first move in a game I didn't understand.

Sorin had orchestrated this perfectly. He'd backed me into a corner where my only option led straight to him.

I already resented him for it.

It was if my will was a minor obstacle he'd already accounted for. It wasn't just what he said—it was the inevitability beneath it, a quiet expectation that I would fall in line.

And if I drank what he was offering, I would be placing myself directly in his hands. I would be defenseless, with no memories to guide me, and no knowledge to protect me.

What conditions came with this that he hadn't bothered to explain?

Once I accepted, I knew there'd be no undoing it.

I met my own gaze in the mirror. Despite the fear etched into every line of my face, my eyes had not softened. They only stared back with calm, hardened resolve. I measured his words against the corruption spreading through my veins, and found my decision already made.

While he moved his pieces, I would learn how to move mine—one memory, one truth, one piece of myself at a time. I would build myself back into someone who could survive this—survive *him*. Someone who might even beat him at his own game. The thought kindled something beneath

the fear, a defiance that felt more familiar than anything else since I'd first opened my eyes in this place.

I took the vial, unable to hide my grimace. The moment it transferred to my hand, the darkness inside shuddered and swirled, tapping against the glass as if agitated by my touch.

Before I could change my mind, I removed the stopper and tipped back its contents. The liquid burned as it went down, leaving a cold sting in its wake. The sensation bloomed outward in every direction, leaving trails of ice that crackled under my skin. The vial fell from my fingers and shattered the instant it hit the floor. I gripped the arms of the chair, fighting to remain upright, the room tilting around me.

The mirror captured each twist and curl of the contents as they threaded through my system. What had been a single swallow of his ebony elixir now branched into tendrils that sought out the corruption like hungry roots drawn to water.

Where the wisps of shadow met fissures of corruption, they coiled around them, devouring every last trace and leaving behind restored pathways. The threads continued to branch and divide, sending ever-finer tendrils through my veins, hunting down even the smallest traces of corruption with ruthless efficiency.

In our reflection, Sorin's hand drifted closer, his fingers easily spanning my jaw as he took hold. A single drop of the dark liquid clung to my lower lip. His grip was steady, his touch cool against my fevered skin.

"Let's not waste any, shall we?" His thumb brushed across my mouth, pressed the gleaming bead inside, and grazed the flat of my tongue with the pad of his finger.

I jerked away from him, pulling my lip between my teeth. The casual intimacy of his touch unsettled me just as much as the taste, which had left my tongue oddly numb.

"It's precisely measured for you," he said. "Too little won't fully heal you. Too much..." His voice softened. "Well, let's just say we need to be careful with the dosage."

I steadied my breathing, trying to ignore how my skin still tingled where he'd touched me.

A peculiar warmth was spreading from my stomach and radiating through my limbs in slow, pulsing waves. My fingertips were tingling, as if blood were rushing back after they'd gone too long without. The sensation traveled up my arms, across my chest, and down through my legs until even my toes buzzed with it.

Ignorance might have been kinder, safer even, but I couldn't contain it—I had to know what forbidden substance I had just permitted past my lips and into my body.

"Whad... exshactly did you jush' make me drink?" I slurred, my tongue thick and uncooperative.

Sorin's clockwork eyes tracked the spreading contents of the vial. "Something that walks the line between medicine and poison."

I watched as a wispy tendril cornered a pocket of corruption in my neck, curling around it before breaking it down and drawing it in. Sorin made a subtle gesture with his hand, and the tendril responded, coiling tighter, crushing the corruption before absorbing the remnants.

"It's what I am refined into its purest form—similar to the essence that corrupts you, but controlled. Tamed."

I did not want to linger on the implications of those words.

"How does it—" I swallowed, trying to steady my tongue, "How does it know when to stop?"

I watched with growing unease as another smoky tendril split into multiple filaments and dispersed into the glowing network.

"It knows its master. And it wouldn't dare devour what isn't offered," he said, frost bleeding into his voice as his gaze tracked its progress. "Plus, I know exactly how much you can take."

His eyes sparkled dangerously when they caught my flat stare.

"Come now, don't look so glum. See how well it obeys me? You could stand to learn from its example." His gaze flicked to my lips. "Though, I must say you have quite the obedient mouth when you're properly motivated."

Whatever lurked beneath his perfect mask, it had just ensured I would need to return for something only it could provide.

"Do you practice these little speeches," I managed between clenched teeth, my voice finally returning to normal, "or does the menacing seduction just come naturally?"

A cluster of corruption in my cheek splintered and dissolved, sending ricochets of cold fire arcing across my face.

Sorin's brows vanished under the pale strands that fell across his forehead. His veneer of control had cracked, and he appeared genuinely intrigued. "Is that what you hear? Seduction in simple truth?"

His eyes dragged across me with new interest. "Even now, there are still so many layers of you to peel back and uncover." His lips curved, revealing teeth that looked—just for a second—slightly too sharp. "I must admit, your defiance will make removing each one most entertaining."

I caught the retort before it left my lips. This was his game, and I didn't know any of the rules. Something told me losing would cost far more than my pride.

When I didn't rise to his bait, his mouth formed that dangerous smile again. "Such restraint. I do so enjoy watching you swallow down what you want to say."

He was doing it on purpose. He had to be. Each carefully placed innuendo was another test, another prod at my self-control.

From one heartbeat to the next, the pain that had gripped me since I'd awakened here suddenly vanished, cut as cleanly as a severed cord. My body felt almost weightless in its absence and thrummed with an unfamiliar energy. Even my thoughts felt clearer, sharper, though the chambers where my memories should have been remained maddeningly empty.

My hand slid across my lower abdomen. I didn't feel full, but the hunger was just... gone. Like it had been erased. I didn't know whether I should feel grateful or uneasy.

Sorin waved his hand, and the mirror's surface shimmered briefly before returning to normal, hiding the network beneath my skin.

"Why help me at all?" I asked, not really expecting a clear answer.

A muscle in his cheek twitched, and he seemed to be considering his words. "Your path and mine are... entangled," he finally said, each word chosen with deliberate care. "And that requires you whole."

The cryptic bastard. Each word was precisely chosen to reveal nothing while hinting at everything. Like a deliberately crafted maze, each answer was a new wall designed to keep me turning in circles.

Yet I was forced to accept one undeniable fact: he had taken away a pain so excruciating it had nearly broken me. Whatever his motives, whatever the endgame, that relief was the first real thing I'd experienced since waking in this nightmare.

Sorin released the curl he'd twisted around his finger and looked down at his hand, as if committing the feeling to memory. *Wait*—when had he started playing with my hair again? My eye twitched, and I took a slow breath before counting to three.

How exactly did one establish personal space with a being that bent reality? The disregard for my boundaries was as disconcerting as everything else about him. His frost-edged eyes betrayed endless years of existence and untold knowledge, yet his touch held a sort of innocent wonder, each gesture filled with the unrestrained curiosity of first discovery.

I doubted "we look with our eyes, not our hands" would work on someone like Sorin. I pulled back from another exploratory touch and fought the urge to swat his hand away.

Though perhaps, a darker part of me whispered, his interest could become leverage—if I dared use it. The moment the thought formed, I locked it away where even his piercing eyes couldn't find it. Something told me losing such a game would cost more than I was willing to pay.

He circled around me and came to lean against the side of the desk. He loosely folded his arms before crossing one ankle over the other. Dark, finely woven trousers covered his legs, the fabric well-fitted and tailored. The material caught the eerie light overhead, revealing a subtle sheen that illuminated a pattern of narrow chevrons.

I weighed my next words carefully. "Earlier, you'd implied there were rules to this place. Limitations that even you have to abide by." I kept my voice steady despite the intensity of his stare. "So, how far does your leash extend, exactly?"

Sorin's eyes glittered with amusement. My boldness seemed to delight him, even if it tested his patience.

"Imagine a bird with a broken wing," he said, fingers curling as if holding something delicate. "I can provide the shelter, create the conditions for healing, even offer guidance. But I cannot teach it to fly—that must come from you, and you alone." He shrugged. "In simpler words, I can't give you what was taken, only offer the support you need to reclaim it yourself."

"Fine," I said. I forced the next words past my lips, hating how vulnerable they sounded. "So, what do I need to do next?"

Sorin's infuriating smile made a quiet return. "I'm glad you asked. It's time we got started."

He raised a hand, and the air around it warped subtly. On the desk, strands of violet light flickered into existence, unfurling in delicate, fluid lengths. They converged, twisted and layered over one another, their glow dimming as they settled into place. A neat stack of blank pages appeared, accompanied by an ornate pen and a crystal ink pot.

I blinked several times, struggling to process what I'd just witnessed. The objects were undeniably real—I could see the slight curling of the paper's edges, the gleam of light on the pen's metallic surface.

Another reminder that nothing here followed normal rules. I'd have to add it to the growing list of impossible things I needed to accept if I had any chance of making it out of here alive.

"What's this for?" I asked, gesturing towards the writing materials.

"Ah, one final thing," he said.

I was already becoming used to Sorin deciding which inquiries were worth answering. He waved his hand again, and an oil lantern materialized on the corner of the desk. The bright flame cast dancing shadows across the writing materials, but something about its movement caught my attention.

I leaned closer, squinting at the light source. The flame wasn't a flame at all—it was an actual *butterfly*. Its wings glowed with ethereal fire and beat in a slow, hypnotic rhythm. A warm illumination filled the room, revealing corners that had been previously shrouded in shadow.

The walls around us weren't the featureless black I'd assumed them to be. They were a veined stone, their onyx surfaces so smooth they reflected the butterfly's light like dark mirrors. Each beat of its fiery wings sent ripples of golden light skating across the glossy surfaces, creating a dance of light and shadow.

I watched, transfixed, as my own reflection fragmented and reformed across the obsidian surface of each wall. The effect was both mesmerizing and jarring, like everything else in this incomprehensible place.

I pulled back from the lantern, moving my hand to reach out and touch the glass. It was warm, the heat traveling through my fingertips and into my hand. My brows lifted in surprise. "Is it... alive?"

"In a sense, yes. It serves two purposes. First, your mortal eyes obviously need light to write. Second..." He paused, observing the small creature. "It will be your only measure of time in this place. As its glow fades, so too will the time you have left. And when its light gutters out completely... well, I'm sure you understand what will happen then."

Of course there was a time limit. I stared at him, the cold reality of his words sinking in. My throat felt dry as I forced myself to ask the question I wasn't sure I wanted answered.

"So in a nutshell," I said, fighting to keep my voice steady. "If I fail to meet your deadline or I don't cooperate, you're going to eat me."

Sorin leaned closer into the light, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "I've always found terror to be a wonderful motivator, wouldn't you agree?" His eyes were two chips of ice—piercing and tightly ringed with an even paler shade of blue. He offered a crooked grin, all teeth and mischief. "Mmm, I can almost taste your potential already."

"How long?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"Long enough, if you're diligent." His voice turned gentle, almost reassuring. "This construct won't fade quickly. You'll have time to record what you need to remember, provided you don't waste it."

I stared at the blank pages. "Is writing really the best way? I can't exactly write down memories I don't have."

"The mind needs a medium. Even fragments have to land somewhere." His eyes held mine, something I could not name surfacing in their depths. "This is the best way to go about it, at least for now."

The butterfly's wings continued to flutter, each pulse of light a reminder that time was already slipping away. I picked up the pen, its weight foreign yet oddly familiar in my hand.

I moved a sheet from the stack. I stared at it for a few moments. The blank expanse stared back. I tapped the pen's tip against the page. My hands were shaking. I linked them together to steady myself, the pen clutched between them.

The weight of Sorin's stare was burning a hole in the top of my head. I didn't bother meeting his gaze in the mirror—I knew he was watching me there, too.

I turned to face him suddenly, the movement scattering a few pages across the desk. "I can't write with you hovering like some ancient vulture. Back off."

His genuine laugh caught me off guard. He pushed off the desk, and shook his head slowly, the lantern light catching in his strands and turning them almost silver.

"I anticipated you might need a little push," he said, reaching into his coat pocket. My stomach clenched.

Please—no more mysterious liquids, I silently prayed to no one and nothing. It struck me in that moment that I didn't even remember if I had a faith or beliefs or a god that I followed. It left me feeling hollower than I expected.

Instead, he withdrew a neatly folded handkerchief and held it out to me. I didn't take it, certain that anything that came out of his pockets had an ulterior motive.

He didn't so much as twitch.

I unfolded the crisp white fabric with the blunted tip of the pen. Fresh herbs lay nestled inside—a few sprigs of rosemary and thyme—their leaves still vibrant and green.

Of all the things I'd expected from this enigma—more mind games, cryptic riddles, or even a dose of some other disturbing concoction—herbs weren't on the list. Their existence felt jarringly out of place in this chamber of shadows and burning butterflies.

I opened my mouth to tell him exactly how absurd this all was, but my intake of breath flooded my senses with the aroma of fresh rosemary, sharp and clean. Sweet thyme with its earthy undertones. The scents twisted together, familiar yet foreign, like a word stuck on the tip of my tongue.

Rosemary and thyme wrapped around me with ghostly arms as fragments of memory tried to surface through hairline cracks. Flashes of sunlight through leaves. Dirt under fingernails. The creak of worn wooden boards beneath bare feet. Each impression vanished when I tried to focus on it, leaving only the echo their presence behind.

The herbs trembled in my shaking hand, their scent growing stronger with each passing moment. A crushing tightness seized my chest, cutting off my breath.

More images crashed through my mind—this time too fast, too violent to glimpse. The pen clattered from my fingers. My breaths came in sharp, painful gasps, the room tilting sideways as panic clawed up my throat.

"Hey, hey—look at me." Sorin's voice cut through the chaos. His hands came over mine where they gripped the desk, covering them completely. "You *can* do this. I won't lie to you—this won't be easy. Your life..." He hesitated, something passing behind his eyes. "It wasn't a gentle one. What you're about to remember will test every limit you have."

I forced myself to meet his gaze, surprised to find something almost kind there.

"But hold on to your strength, little flame," he murmured, his voice softening. "Even in the darkest corners of your past, there is light waiting to be found. You just have to find it."

I could still see my face in the mirror. My pupils were dilated, so blown they swallowed the green of my irises. I'd thought I could be brave, that I could push through this nightmare. But nothing had prepared me to feel like someone was ripping out my heart and crushing it in their fist.

"Come on, Gaia. You can't break on me, not when we're just getting started. You need to remember, this place hungers for broken things. And right now, you're so fractured and raw you're becoming a temptation even for me."

I couldn't speak. Couldn't even think.

A muscle jumped in his jaw, and his hands tightened over mine. His fingers suddenly caught my chin and tilted my face up to meet his. "The choice is yours—write of your own accord, or I'll have to get creative. And trust me, you do not want to see my creative side."

The threat tore through my fear, snapping me back into focus. My breath caught, then steadied as anger rose on its heels.

How dare he? After everything else, he thought he could bully me into compliance?

I smacked his hand away from my face, the sharp sound echoing in the small room. "Keep your hands to yourself."

Something sparked in his eyes—another flash of interest. His answering smile was keen enough to cut.

"Alright," I growled, "but not because you threatened me. It's because I refuse to stay trapped in this nightmare without knowing who I am." The sooner I remembered, the sooner I could find a way out of this cell—and get as far away from Sorin as possible.

"Such spirit," he said, approval sharpening his gaze. "Channel it onto the page."

I snatched up the pen, clutching it like a lifeline. The herbs still lay scattered across the desk, their scent a persistent whisper of the memories that beckoned.

"Where do I even start?" I muttered to myself, scrubbing a hand down my face.

"Why, at the beginning of course." Sorin tapped the top of the parchment with one long finger. "Every story has its catalyst, that first domino that sets everything else in motion. Find that moment, and the rest will follow."

The blank page waited, no longer mocking but promising—promising answers, identity, and truth.

I dipped the pointed tip of the pen into the inkwell and removed the excess with two quick swipes against the rim—a motion that stirred something that was there and gone just as quickly as it came.

The words poured forth, unbidden.

Somewhere within, I felt the first click of a lock give way.