66. Hallucination Manicure

"Mr Linton." "Hmm?" "Mr Linton, wake up. We have to go inside." "Why?" I mumbled, unwilling to open my eyes. "Because Well, because I say so!" I chuckled. I knew that voice. Cold. Commanding. "Not good enough," I murmured. "You are still in my employ, Mr Linton. You have to do what I say." "Not a er hours, Sir." A yawn escaped me. Talking was tiring business. Maybe I should just go back to sleep. I was lying on something so comfortable The comfortable thing shi ed and grabbed me.	**************************************
 "If you don't get up, Mr Linton, I'm going to carry you. Either way, you will get out of this chaise." Oh. Mr Ambrose. It was Mr Ambrose I was lying on. How had that happened? I was sure he hadn't volunteered to be my personal sofa. "Did you hear me, Mr Linton? I will drag you out of here, whether you want to or not." For a moment I considered letting him do it. Truth be told, I felt too warm and fuzzy to think about walking. Being carried might actually be nice. However, the moment that thought of weakness popped into my head, the vigilant feminist inside me reasserted herself. I might utilize men as a couch, I might even allow them to pay me wages. But the day I allowed a man to carry me in his arms because I felt too unsteady on my poor little feminine feet would be the day I publicly confessed to being a chimpanzee. 	1.9K 253 135
Never. Ever. Blindly I groped around, grabbing Mr Ambrose and pushing myself into a sitting position. "Be careful with my coat, Mr Linton! It's only ten years old and" "still in mint condition." I nodded. "Yes, I know. You've told me before. I'm not stupid, you know." "Maybe not. But you aredrunk." "Drunk? Me? Of course I'm not drunk!" Outraged, I staggered out of the chaise. How dare he suggest such a thing? I was stone-cold sober! And I had plenty of witnesses to the fact. Grasping the carriage wheel to support me, I pointed with my free hand at the yellow piggy sitting beside the driver. "Ask him over there, if you don't believe me." "Me?" The driver looked taken aback. "Well, Sir, I could not hazard a guess as to"	°0 170 180 100 170 170 170 170 170 170 170 170 17
 "Not you! The Pig." "Pig? What pig?" The driver's nervousness seemed to increase. What was the matter with him? A yellow pig wasn't something you could miss easily, was it? "Forget it, Godwin." Mr Ambrose appeared beside me. With a jerk of his head, he indicated to the driver and the yellow piggy that they should leave. "Take the chaise away and care for the horse." He was obviously bent on ignoring my logical arguments! So typically male! "Yes, Sir, only" the driver hesitated. "What about the other men, Sir? I should go back and" "Warren will have reached the tavern by now with all the reinforcements he could muster," Mr Ambrose cut him o . "Do as you're told. I and Mr Linton will go inside now." 	20 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10
"Yes, Sir. As you wish, Sir." Climbing from the box, the driver and the yellow piggy started doing Mr Ambrose's bidding, leading the horse and carriage away. The power of this man was unbelievable! Even little yellow animals were under his power, even though I was sure they weren't on his payroll! "Come along." Mr Ambrose strode ahead, gesturing for me to follow with a flick of his fingers. Taking a cautious step forward I li ed my head – and my eyes widened in shock. Before me stood the vast, gaunt façade of Empire House. The chaise had deposited us in Leadenhall Street, right in front of Mr Ambrose's business headquarters. Like the bow of a gargantuan wreck in the dark depth of the ocean, the two-columned portico loomed up in front of me, white and ghostly. Ornate gas lanterns were spread out all along the street, throwing their yellowish light across the empty street. The whole scene looked even colder now than it had in daylight. What were we doing here? Why wasn't I at my own home? I was sure I had one of those, tucked away somewhere in London. My eyes flicked to Mr Ambrose. Honestly, surprisingly enough, he had not strode ahead, ignoring me – instead, he was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs, tapping his foot on their foot in impatience. I smiled. His foot on their foot. That sounded funny. Leisurely, I strolled towards him. With fuzzy curiosity, I gestured up at the towering monument of mammon above me. "Why here?" I asked, directing my unsteady smile at Mr Ambrose. "I don't live here. Not that I'm aware of, anyway," I added, as an a erthought. Nothing seemed to be too sure, lately. "Do I?"	
Mr Ambrose's face was hidden in shadow, his voice as terse as ever. "No, you don't. But I thought I would bring you here first and give you the chance to clean up first. Unless you want to go home in blood- spattered clothes, that is." "What?" He gestured, and I looked down at myself. Even in the pale light of the gas lamps was undeniable that the upper part of my uncle's old tailcoat had distinct signs of red on it. If they weren't blood spatters, they were the experiment of a deranged tomato-enthusiast. "Hell's whiskers!" A giggle escaped me. "That looks dashed ni y!" " Ni yi si i?" The dark figure of Mr Ambrose took a step towards me. "You consider blood spattered all over your clothes ni y? Maybe even chi? You have interesting fashion tastes, Mr Linton." "Why, thank you, Sir." I bowed, and nearly toppled over. Strong arms caught me, and put me upright again. "Still," his cool voice continued, "I doubt your aunt shares your tastes in that direction." Thoughtfully, I tugged at my lower lip. He might be right about that. Aunt Brank was o en completely unreasonable in regard to modern fashion. "Might be interesting to see her reaction, though." I giggled again. "The look on her face" "would undoubtedly be a sight to be seen. Still, in the interest of secrecy, I would advise against it."	40 #0 දී 0 දී 0
"Oh, all right! Don't be such a stick-in-the-mud." He turned. "I assure you I am not in the habit of sticking sticks into mud, Mr Linton. Follow me." Marching up the stairs, he pulled a ring of keys out of his coat pocket. I had never before met anyone who could truly march on stairs, not without breaking their toes, anyway, but he managed it just fine. He reached the door well ahead of me and had unlocked it in a ji y. The huge wooden doors squealed like the tortured souls of the undead as they were pushed open. I looked around with interest, just in case some of the tortured souls of the undead happened to be around and wanted to swap recipes, but there was only Alexander the Great atop his horse, who winked at me from the other side of the street. "Nighty night, Alexander! Conquer Persia for me!" I called, waving to him energetically – until Mr Ambrose grabbed me and pushed me	443 0
towards the door. "Hey! There's no need to be so rough," I protested, resisting his grasp. "I was only being polite." "To a hallucination. And you were waking the whole street up in the process, which is not a good idea. Or have you forgotten that the headquarters of the East India Company is right across the street?" I furrowed my brow in concentration. For some reason, I was sure that was important, but I couldn't for the life of me remember why. "Well, no," I explained, and started grinning again. It was easy to grin right now, and very di icult to frown. "Actually, I hadn't forgotten. I just don't care. I mean Alexander the Great conquered parts of India, right? He's surely not afraid of some stu y old company board members." "Mr Linton?"	<u>සීත්</u> සීත් සීත් සීත් සීත් සීත් සීත් සීත් සීත්
"We need to get you inside." "Yessir! Why, Sir?" Without answering, he renewed his grip and began to push me forward again. This time, I didn't react fast enough and he managed to manoeuvre me through the entrance into the darkness of the hall beyond. "Why do we have to go?" I demanded, trying to push my heels into the ground. But it was no use. My shoes just slipped on the polished stone floor. "I was talking to Alexander the Great!" That didn't seem to make Mr Ambrose want to let me go, the ill-bred lout! Didn't he know you couldn't behave like that to an Emperor? "We have go back. I didn't get to say good bye properly." "We can't go back. We have to go upstairs, and you have to sit down." "Why?" "Because you are drunk, Mr Lin—" "I'm not! Just ask the yellow piggies!" There was a pause. "Well then let's just say that I'm not on the best of terms with Alexander the Great. I wish to avoid him, if possible." "Oh." Now this was interesting news, and my curiosity spiked immediately. "Why's that?"	
"He kicked my favourite dog once." "Really, Sir?" We had reached the other end of the hall by now. There, the floor suddenly vanished, and instead there were these angular thingamies what were they called again? "Yes, really, Mr Linton. And a very harsh kick it was." Oh yes. Steps! Pride flooded through me! I had actually managed to remember what steps were called! And Mr Ambrose thought I was drunk. Hah! I'd show him. I took a confident step forward – and a hand shot out to grab me. "No, not those stairs, Mr Linton. Those lead to the cellars, that's why the steps go down. We want to go to my o ice and need to find some stairs that go up." I pondered this. He might actually be right, I finally decided.	5.50 °C
"How clever, Sir! I would never have thought of that." "Indeed." Somehow, another staircase appeared in front of me. Had he pushed me around again? I decided, just this once, to let it go without protesting. My mind was engaged on a much more serious and enthralling topic than stairs, anyway. "You have a pet dog?" I asked, the incredulity clear in my voice. He hesitated. I could feel it: he didn't like to give anything away, be it money or personal information. "Two," he finally snapped. From what I could see of his face in the dark it was as impassive as the stone I set my feet on. "But aren't dogs expensive, Sir?" I nudged him in the ribs, grinning. "Really expensive, from what I heard. Why waste money on pets that don't do anything useful?" "They dodo something useful. They bite people I don't like."	540 540 °C 70 °C 70 °C 70 °C 70 °C
He gripped my arm again. "Stop! Don't try to go any higher, there are no more steps." "Oh really?" I blinked into the gloom. "I hadn't noticed." "Yes. Now we have to go down the hallway. Here, down this hallway, you see. We're almost there." "Down? No problem no problem at all, Sir." "I didn't mean liedown, I mean walkdown! My o ice is over there. You can rest there." He stopped me in time before I could rest my head on the floor of the hallway. Honestly, had I lain down there, I would not have been able to get up again. Despite the fact that I was definitely not drunk, I felt e ects which, to the amateur eye, might look considerable like drunkenness. With unusual gentleness, Mr Ambrose helped me up again and manoeuvred me to his o ice door. There, he took me by both shoulders and looked sternly down into my eyes. "I have to unlock the door now, and for that I have to let go o you, Mr Linton. Do you think you can stand upright on your own long enough for me to do that?" I blinked up at him, deeply curious. I would never have thought that he cared whether I keeled over or not – except perhaps that he might regard me bashing my head in on the stone floor as a very beneficial occurrence. But here he was, looking down at me with well, it	ບ ມີບ ຈີບ 4ປ ມີບ 250 ຊີບ 4ປ
 wasn't exactly concern It wasn't as if he looked at me like I was someone he cared for – instead, he stared at me like I was a priceless object in his possession, and he was expressly forbidding me to damage myself and thus lessen my value. "I must admit," I muttered, bracing myself against the door-frame, "I feel a tidily little bit unsteady on my feet." I looked around for help, and smiled. "Hey, Napoleon! Come over and help me, your Imperial Menagery, while he gets the door open!" For some reason, my application of help to the emperor, who was leaning against the wall next to me cleaning his nails with a dagger, didn't seem to alleviate Mr Ambrose's concerns. He just doubled his e orts to get the door open as quickly as possible. Hmm. Maybe he had a beef with Napoleon too, not just with Alexander. These powerful tyrants were always at each others' throats. 	권 ^{3K} 권 ³
again. "Get in and sit down, will you?" "Why not lie down on the floor out here?" I asked, blinking back longingly at the hallway. For some reason its stone floor looked a lot more comfortable than stone floors usually did. It felt so , too, and was wobbling under my feet like a mattress. "I could keep the Emperor company." "He'll manage just fine without you. Come in, please? You need to rest." My ears needed cleaning. Did I just hear Mr Ambrose say pleas@ And that in what could almost be described as a gentle tone of voice, compared to the deep-frozen tyrant's voice he usually employed? A moment later, he squeezed my shoulder. "Please?" Holy moly! Miracles did happen!	32 40 40 40 30 30 30 40
Almost involuntarily, I started forward. Under his firm but gentle guidance, I stumbled into the room. This was becoming a very strange night Maybe I really had drunk a tiny bit too much of that burning stu . Inside, the o ice was dark. Mr Ambrose reached to his le . There was a so noise, and the shimmering light of a gas lamp illuminated the room with a warm, golden glow, throwing long shadows against the walls. Suddenly, the o ice, so stark in daylight, looked totally di erent. "Well, will you look at that?" A broad smile spread over my face, as I spread my arms in an attempt to hug the room. Mr Ambrose ducked just in time to not be cu ed around the ears. "It looks almost cosy! Now all you need is a carpet on the floor and a couple of nice pictures on the walls." Mr Ambrose rose out of his crouch again. "Which, Mr Linton, would be a needless waste of time and money." "Oh, come on! Don't you ever feel the urge to make this place a little less cold?"	a r
 "No. I have a very warm cloak, should I need it." "I was speaking metaphorelly metareferain metaphorically!" "I was aware of that." Half-turning to the door, he kicked it shut behind us. "Metaphors, Mr Linton, are also a waste of time and money" "Bah! With your attitude, I'm surprised you have gas light in the house. It's supposed to be pretty expensive." "Much less expensive than the hospital bill for running headlong into a stone wall in the dark, I assure you." He sounded as if he had made the experiment. We were still standing at the door. Neither of us seemed to know what to do, where to go next, now that we had reached our destination. Suddenly, the floor gave a lurch and threw me to the side. I knew it! I knew that the floor out in the hallway would have been much nicer to me than the evil floor in here! The floor in here seemed to have it in for me, personally. It didn't stop, but kept quaking underneath my feet, while Mr Ambrose seemed to have no problems remaining upright whatsoever. Quickly, he was at my side and had an arm around my waist. I could feel his strong muscles brushing against me, pulling me close— Then he sti ened. "Excuse me." His voice was oddly strained. "I shouldn't be touching 	
you like this. I only meant to well, I'll let go soon. Only let me help you to a chair." "Don't let go," I muttered, groggily. "Feels nice" And it did feel nice, having his arm around me. It wasn't like we were the only ones doing it, either. Two yellow piggies on the other side of the room had their arms (or were those legs?) around each other. "Mister Linton I" "You can call me Lilly, if you want," I o ered, not managing to keep a grin o my face. Funny. I didn't usually smile this much. "But if you did you'd admit I'm a girl, which you don't want. So maybe Victor? No, I have it!" A giggle escaped me. "Call me Ifrit" I heard a starnge noise. A noise I would have never expected to hear in this place. Was it really? Was that a chuckle? From hin? Had Mr Ambrose, Mr Rikkard Don't-waste-time-with-idol-frivolities Ambrose actually laughed Or had it been one of the yellow piggies? "My little Ifrit" he murmured almost inaudibly, tightening his grip	2 ^K 3-3 ^K 1-1 ^K -2 ^{7^K} -2 ^{7^K}
around me. I could feel the reverberations of the chuckle through my whole body. It felt really nice, being held by him like this. I felt safe, and warm, and for once, not at war with the rest of the world. "Yes, I'm an Ifrit" I confessed to him in a whisper. "You were quite right. I didn't really believe you in the beginning, but now, well you can see for yourself." "See what?" For some reason, he sounded confused. "Why, my huge fiery wings of course! Aren't they beautiful? So sparkly and pretty." I pointed up to where my wings almost brushed the ceiling. They were a marvel to behold. It was nearly incomprehensible that I hadn't noticed them before tonight. Maybe it was because I had never much been interested in how I looked before. But tonight, alone in this room with him, I was suddenly glad there was something undeniably beautiful about me, even if I remembered vaguely that a pair of huge	896
fiery wings wasn't exactly a traditional sign of female beauty. "Don't you think they're pretty, Sir?" I sighed. "Um, well yes, of course. Very pretty." He thought my wings were pretty! He actually thought my wings were pretty! "I should jump o the roof to see if I can fly with them," I suggested, eagerly. "Wouldn't you like to see me fly?" Abruptly, his grip around my waist became tight as a vice. "Err maybe not right now. You're surely tired from being up the entire night. How about tomorrow, if you still feel like jumping o the roof then?" I pouted. "But I want to do it now! It'll be fun!" "Personally, I'm not quite sure about that. Would you sleep on it? Please?" There was that word again that word that Mr Ambrose never used. "All right." Sighing contentedly, I wrapped my arms and also my huge fiery wings around him. The little piggies in the corner had started to dance tango. "I'll do anything for you."	10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 1
"Ehem I am gratified to hear it. Now how about sitting down?" "If you want" He led me to the middle of the room, to where the visitor chair stood in front of the desk. As I moved closer to the desk, the light of the lamp fell on me, and Mr Ambrose's eyes widened. "Wait just a minute," he exclaimed. "Don't sit down just yet. Your coat" But he had already let go of me, and my legs somehow were unable to support my own weight. I was about to fall into the chair, when his hands shot out and held me back. "Are you insane?" He hissed. "I said wait! Look at yourself! You can't sit down like this! Take your tailcoat o, first. It is spattered with blood and street dirt. Have you got any idea how much it costs to clean the upholstery on a chair like this?" I blinked up at him, confused."Not really, no."	50 40 48 30 30 10 40 10 20 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 10
"Too much for me to be willing to pay it." "That doesn't say much," I pointed out. "My point, Mr Linton, is, that if you try to sit down on that chair again, I will bring you back outside into the hallway and dump you on the floor, just like you asked me to earlier." So he felt more concern for the upholstery of his o ice chair than for me. It was nice to see he hadn't changed that much. I realized that in stopping me from sitting down, Mr Ambrose had grabbed on to me a lot more generously than before. He had both arms around me now, and was pressing me to his chest with the fervour of a man determined to avoid a large bill from the dry- cleaner's. He must have been really anxious to avoid that bill, because instead of letting go of me when my legs had steadied a bit, he pulled me even tighter against him. Though my vision was slightly blurred, I could see the hard lines of his face perfectly well. His jaw was taut, which only accentuated the noble harshness of his features. His eyes were boring down into mine, full of dark intensity. "Do notsit down." His voice was actually hoarse. Dear me, cleaning the upholstery of a chair had to be more expensive than I thought if he could get this worked up about it. He didn't let go. "But then what am I supposed to do?" My voice wasn't too steady either. And I didn't want for me to sit down any more than he did. I	110 110 110 110 110 110 110 110 110 110
didn't want him to let go. Odd. I didn't have to fear a big bill from the cleaner's, did I? He cleared his throat. "You can take o your tailcoat. Then you can sit down Mr Linton." The "Mister" came over his lips with no slight hesitation. Was that because he was still calculating the cleaner's bill? Or did it have something to do with the way we were pressed together, so closely it had to be evident that "mister" was not the correct address for the person he was holding in his arms. I, for my part, felt enough so I would never have called him "Miss Ambrose". The hard muscles of his chest, his arms, his abdomen they all pressed into my so ness in a way that made it all too clear what he was.	*0 270 250 250
A man. A really manly man with a lot of mannishness in his manliness. As if of their own volition, my arms snaked up behind and around him. My head found a comfortable spot on his chest, and came to rest there. All of a sudden, I didn't care about any cleaner's bill. I certainly didn't care to sit down. To sit down, I would have had to let go. "Hmm take it o ," I mumbled. Beneath my ear that lay on his chest, I could hear his heart. I wondered why it was beating so fast. "Take my tailcoat o Good idea. Only I'm not sure I can stand on my own. I feel so tired" Gently, hesitantly, he reached up to unwind my arms from behind his back. "I'll help you. Don't worry."	40 20 40 30 30 30 30
He stepped back from me, and somewhere inside me I felt a tug of disappointment. Disappointment? Why? What did I care whether he was close to me? But then he started unbuttoning my tailcoat, and the disappointment vanished. It was replaced by a surge of heat up from my toes to the tips of my ears. What was the matter with me? It had to be the drink. Or terror of the the cleaner's bill. Gently, his fingers travelled up my belly, popping buttons as they went. His fingers were unlike any other fingers that had ever touched me there: smooth and yet firm, light and yet insistent. I realized suddenly that they weren't just unlike any other fingers that had touched me there before – apart from my sisters' and my own, they were the onlyfingers that had ever touched me there. They made me wish for more buttons on my coat, for something to prolong the feel of this. The feel of him. Then, the tailcoat slid o my shoulders and landed on the floor with a so , velvety noise. I stood before Mr Ambrose in nothing but trousers and a thin linen shirt. Drowsily, I looked down at the shirt. "Oh," I mumbled, and pointed to the le side of the shirt, where a few specks of blood stained the white material. "The blood must have seeped through the coat. Do you want to take the shirt o , too?" From somewhere, I heard a strangled groan. When I looked up, Mr Ambrose was standing before me, his face as composed as ever, but his jaw seemed to be a bit tighter than usual.	
 "I don't think," he said, "that will be necessary, thank you." "But it's got blood on it!" I protested. "I should take it o ! The upholstery on your chair" "will be perfectly fine, Mr Linton! Now sit down!" For once, I did as he said. My legs didn't feel all too steady, and even Alexander the great, who had sneaked in behind us unnoticed, was sitting down in a corner of the room. Surely if a world-famous conqueror was sitting down, that meant that I could, too. Mr Ambrose bent to retrieve my tailcoat from the floor. Straightening, he said: "I will give your clothes to the night porter. He will have them washed and dried soon enough." I squinted at him, doubtfully. "He's a porter. Does he know how to wash clothes?" "Probably not. But I demand ingenuity and dedication of all my employees." Turning, he marched towards the door without another word. Was it just my imagination, or did he walk just a little faster than usual, almost as if he were running? At the door, he hesitated. "I'll be back soon," he said. Then he fled, slamming the door behind him. Suppressing a yawn, I nodded to Alexander in the corner. "I think he really doesn't like you," I told him. 	1354 140 153 190 40 130 150 100 100 100 100 100 100 100 100 10
fingernails. 	20 °0 °0 °0 °0 °0 °0 °0 °0 °0
A fiery heroine who does not appreciate being robbed. Not at all. An epic battle between evil and even more evil. And a romance to rock the entire castle. I would be delighted to hear what all of my Storm and Silence fans think of the series :) Yours Truly Sir Rob	ส์ ซี ส่

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