

My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone #Chapter 111 - 4.12 - Not Made Of Stone - Read My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone Chapter 111 - 4.12 - Not Made Of Stone

Chapter 111: 4.12 - Not Made Of Stone

"I thought you weren't interested in visiting this kind of place," Jax said, tagging along with Lucian to check out their competition.

He didn't even mind that Lucian was using the brothel's money instead of his own, viewing it as a necessary expense.

What would others do to have their boss, himself, help them out with their business?

Roland had failed to open his store in the southern capital. The political climate there was not favorable for him and he had to scrap it all and wait for another opportunity to present itself.

It wasn't favorability towards his employees that made Lucian do this. It was an opportunity for him and luck for Jax to be in the right place and right time.

"Isn't it normal for a man of my age to be interested in women?" Lucian asked back, "I'm not made of stone, you know."

Jax gave him the 'prove it' face and Lucian gave him an 'I'm serious' smile in return.

They visited the most popular brothel in the city, and Lucian didn't need a guide to tell him which one it was.

The building was made of white marble, with a domed roof and a statue of a goddess at its front. It was a palace in its own right.

One needed to pay a hefty sum of three gold coins just to enter and look around for a courtesan of their choice.

Lucian used his third eye to observe the inside of the brothel. He was quite impressed by the number of high ranking knights that gathered here.

The courtesans were dancing on the stage, surrounded by men who cheered for them.

Lucian had nobody to spar with in terms of strength. The difference between regular people and him was so great that it would be considered unfair.

Until his people could reach the same rank as him and above, he could only continue picking fights with other knights.

He asked Jax what the knight that was in debt called, and Jax quickly answered, "Lando Turan. Silver knight level, has been stuck on it for years. He works for an upper noble house of the southern region, which is part of the Duremont fraction."

"Do you think I can defeat him with my bronze level?" Lucian asked.

"Boss, are you seriously asking me that? You might as well ask me if you can hurt a bear bare-handed."

"Bear..." Lucian muttered, thinking about the hunting competition that was coming soon, "If I defeat a bear, would that make me strong enough to fight a silver knight?"

"...I think so," Jax said, not sure himself. It was hard to witness a knight fight, not speaking about comparing the results of the said fight.

Lucian nodded, smiling at the guards protecting the brothel's entrance from unwanted guests, *'Celine would definitely rather have me hunt humans than bears.'*

"Alright, we will come back later," he said and left, with Jax following after him, still wondering what Lucian was planning to do exactly.

"Wait, sir Arclight," one of the guards called out to him, "You are Lady Lily's guest, please come in!"

Jax's eyes almost popped out at the mention of Lady Lily's name, "You... How... What? When did you..."

Lucian signaled Jax to keep quiet and entered the brothel together.

They were led to their table by the waiter, "Lady Lily is currently entertaining a client, and she will be with you soon. In the meantime, enjoy our entertainment and wine."

Lucian made sure to sit with his back to the wall and observe the crowd and the stage.

There was no commotion, no fighting over a courtesan, everyone was drinking and watching the dancing performance.

Occasionally, a courtesan would approach a client and whisper something into their ears and lead them to a private room.

Lucian took a sip of his wine, trying to track down Lady Lily's room, but the walls of the private rooms were layered with lead, hurting his head and making it hard to concentrate on what was inside.

'Voice, why would someone cover the walls of a brothel with a layer of lead?' he asked, trying to ignore the headache after trying again.

'People believe that certain things are not to be seen by Gods' eyes. Unholy practices and other taboo things that would anger the Gods and bring bad luck upon their establishment are some examples,' Voice answered.

Lucian took another sip and leaned back, relaxing in his chair as he watched the stage.

'What do you think about Lady Lily?' he asked, interested in hearing Voice's opinion of her.

'A slut,' Voice answered bluntly.

'Really? You are not impressed by the amount of power she wields over the men?' Lucian glanced at Jax who was enjoying the view of the stage, *'I wonder what she sees in me when she can have any of these rich men here.'*

'You seem to have the same effect on this courtesan that you have on the duke's daughter. You must look like a new challenge for a woman who can have any man she desires with a snap of her fingers,' Voice speculated, *'A man that wouldn't be swayed by her beauty and charm.'*

'Huh,' Lucian said in his mind, *'Is it that common for women to have such fantasies? Are you speaking from personal experience?'*

'Stop prying and focus on earning money.'

'What about training? Usually around this time, I would be swinging my fists for hours on end.'

Lucian was so disinterested in watching the stage dance that the time went by slowly for him. And what other ways were there to spend time than to question Voice?

'It's more efficient to focus on obtaining more resources and getting through the silver stage, so you can train all stages at once,' Voice said.

'How do I pass the silver stage?'

'It varies from person to person. Some get repeatedly drunk until they pass out. Some take poison in small quantities to build up resistance to it. The silver stage is about purifying your body.'

Lucian took another sip as he tried to prevent the alcohol from intoxicating his body, *'That sounds lethal.'*

'Your body will be more resistant to toxins, but it won't heal you from illnesses. Don't think that you can act recklessly and be fine afterwards. You are still a human. Not an undead monster.'

'Haha,' Lucian chuckled to himself, making Jax glance at him in confusion, before he returned to watching the stage.

Lucian felt like an undead monster sometimes, the way his body refused to die no matter how much he starved it and pushed it beyond limits.

'Voice,' he called out to it.

'...what?' It asked reluctantly.

'How long will you keep me alive? Ten years? Twenty? Thirty?' Lucian was curious about his lifespan, 'How long before you take over my mind and body completely? That's what shackles do, right? They are parasites like that. They eat their host slowly from the inside.'

Voice didn't know whether it was the alcohol's fault for making him have an existential crisis again, or the fear of the uncertain future. No matter how many times it assured him, Lucian lost his trust in it a long time ago.

'You are not a host,' Voice insisted, 'You are the master of your own will. I'm here to help you.'

It repeated the same line like it did before, in a monotonous voice that sounded like Lucian's, devoid of any emotion.

'But not for free, right?' Lucian finished it off for it. He would rather accept a harsh truth than to listen to a soothing lie.

His mood was ruined by the time Lady Lily approached his table, though nobody would be able to tell with how well he covered it up.

"Sir Arclight," Lady Lily said in a soft, alluring voice, bowing slightly to show off her low neckline.

Lucian's gaze lingered on the sight. His third eye, however, didn't spare a single look. It was focused on the guest that left Lady Lily's private room, 'Edmund?'

He recognized the young man's features hidden behind a disguise of a wig and fake mustache. Edmund didn't leave through the front door, but the one in the back, reserved for special guests, or the ones that didn't want to be seen.

"Did Sir Arclight drink too much?" Lady Lily asked, leaning forward to see his face clearly, "You look pale. Shall I take you to the back room to get some rest?"

Lucian was quick to agree to the idea

"I would appreciate it very much," he said and got up. His head felt heavy and his feet felt like they were stuck to the floor.

Lady Lily was about to put his hand over her shoulder to help him, but he refused her help, "I can't have the lady of the house carry me. Jax, please."

Jax was a bit shocked, but he quickly caught up to him and supported his weight, following Lady Lily to her private room.

"Please make yourself at home," she said, closing the door behind them, "You can leave us alone, sir...?" She asked, not knowing Jax's name.

"I'm his brother, Jax," Jax introduced himself and helped Lucian sit down, before leaving the room, but not before taking a dazed look at Lady Lily, who smiled and nodded to him.

The room was spacious and richly decorated. There was a sofa and a coffee table in one corner, and a large bed in another. The walls were covered with paintings and mirrors, and the ceiling was adorned with a chandelier.

Lucian sat down on the sofa, while she took a seat next to him

"I didn't expect to see you here, Sir Arclight. What a pleasant surprise," she said, crossing her legs. Her skirt slid slightly upwards, exposing her delicate ankles, "Did you enjoy the performance tonight?"

"It was quite entertaining," Lucian admitted, staring at her leg, making her think that her charm was working on him.

"I'm glad to hear that. But you didn't come here for that, did you?" she asked, tilting her head slightly, her eyes glimmering in the candlelight.

"No, I didn't," he replied, a bit ambitiously.

"As expected of a famous businessman." Her lips parted slightly into a smile, acting like she wasn't the one making her moves on him, "What business could a man of your stature have with this humble courtesan?"

"Business? Who said anything about business?" Lucian smiled, leaning back and resting his head on the sofa. "I'm just a man who wants to appreciate the presence of a beautiful lady. Is that so hard to believe?"

He wished Celine was here, as she was the only person whose presence he could truly appreciate.

Lady Lily's eyes flicked over Lucian as she studied his features. She must have been used to such praises, yet she covered her chuckle as if it was the first time she had heard them, "Your mouth is sweeter than honey, Sir Arclight. I wonder if your heart is as soft as well."

She didn't pounce on him like a certain hungry wolf he knew, and just enticed him to take the initiative. Lucian didn't enjoy this back and forth game, as he was not here to waste time.

"So, how did you manage to lure the Rochefort heir to your lair?" Lucian asked in a casual tone, as if they were talking about the weather, "Or was it the other way around?"

Lady Lily's expression changed instantly. Her eyes widened in shock, but she quickly regained her composure and smiled.

"I'm not sure what you're implying, Sir Arclight," she said calmly. "How could a noble heir be associated with a mere courtesan like me? It's unthinkable."

"Did he tell you to approach me?" Lucian continued to insist.

Lady Lily's eyes narrowed, her smile fading. "You're accusing me of espionage, Sir Arclight? That's a serious allegation. Do you have any evidence to back up your claims?"

"Evidence? I'm not a judge or a jury," Lucian replied, his tone lightly playful, "I'm just a man who has had women come after him for quite a while now. I can recognize a pattern when I see it."

Lady Lily was silent, a calculating expression in her eyes, before she decided to play innocent.

"I apologize if I have offended you in any way, Sir Arclight," she said, bowing her head slightly. "That was not my intention. I merely sought to engage in polite conversation with a distinguished guest. If you're not interested in my services, I'll leave you alone."

"No, no. Don't leave. Stay," Lucian insisted, making himself at home like she said he could, "Allow me to lie down for a bit. I feel a headache coming."

He stretched out on the sofa as she moved silently to the bed, watching him with a guarded expression, "Are you feeling unwell? Shall I call a doctor? Or perhaps a servant to escort you home?"

"A little rest will do," Lucian replied, "Don't worry, I will pay extra for the inconvenience."

"I'm not concerned about the money, Sir Arclight. Your health is more important," she replied, her tone still polite, "Please make yourself comfortable and let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you," Lucian said, staring at the ceiling with his arms crossed over his chest, wondering if Celine would appear and catch him in the courtesan's room.

Since something similar had happened before, with Jax's courtesans teasing him and Celine seeing it all, Lucian was worried that history might repeat itself.

'If Edmund wanted me gone, why not just kill me?' he thought, 'Why go through all the trouble? Unless... he's not aiming at me at all. He is aiming at Celine.'

Lucian quickly dismissed it, thinking that Edmund wouldn't be able to handle the consequences of Celine's wrath.

'Maybe it's a test? Did Celine send Edmund here? She did mention investing in brothels, so maybe it's a part of her plan.'

If Edmund's goal was to get rid of him, he didn't know how he could possibly fight back.

'We have a good relationship and I don't think that he dislikes me enough to resort to murder. Maybe he is the one testing me, to see if I'm worthy of his sister?'

He thought about it and thought about it, and the longer he did it, the more ridiculous it sounded.

'I'm just overthinking things and getting paranoid,' Lucian finally decided, 'He probably came here to have a good time like the rest of the clients.'

Lucian's gaze shifted to Lady Lily, who began to prepare him tea. She used her back to shield herself from him, as if she didn't want him to know what she was doing.

She didn't know that he had eyes above her as well. The tea leaves were already placed in the cup. She was adding a little something extra to it.

'She wants to drug me?' Lucian was surprised at her boldness.

"Here, have a cup of herbal tea," she offered him the steaming brew, "It's good for the stomach and helps with indigestion. It will also help you relax and sleep better."

Lucian slowly sat up and took the cup from her, his fingers lightly brushing against hers as he did so. He raised the cup and used his free hand to grab her wrist, pulling her down onto the sofa.

"...!! Sir Arclight?" Lady Lily's eyes widened when he grabbed her chin from behind and pressed the cup against her lips. She tried to resist him, but he was stronger than her.

"Drink," he said firmly, feeling the adrenaline kicking in, "It's good for the stomach and helps with indigestion, right? You looked a bit pale yourself. Maybe you need it more than I do."

"..." Lady Lily was shocked, but didn't want to give up. She struggled against him and tried to spit out the tea that was already in her mouth.

She managed to spill some of it on her dress and the floor, but he held her tight and forced her to swallow the rest. He waited until she stopped coughing before releasing her from his grip, letting her collapse on the sofa.

"What did you do that for?!" she asked, wiping her mouth while running to the bathroom to throw up.

Lucian followed after her, watching her stick her finger into her mouth, trying to get rid of the tea. "Do you know how many business rivals tried to get rid of me the same way as you, Lady Lady?"

Lady Lily was panting, her face pale and her eyes red, "I... I don't... know what you are talking about...hah...hah..."

She seemed confused as to what effects the drug was supposed to have, overreacting to it.

"What was in the tea?" He asked, "Or do you often have trouble breathing after drinking your own special blend?"

"...hah...hah...hah...you..." she tried to say something, but her throat felt dry, and her lips were quivering. "...hah... hah... please...help...me..." she begged him, crawling towards him, "I... didn't... know..."

Lucian took a few steps back, avoiding her hand that was trying to reach out to him. He closed the door behind him, leaving her alone in the bathroom.

"...hah...hah...I can't...hah...I can't breathe..." she said, clawing at the doors of the bathroom, trying to get to him, "Plea..please...if I die here...you will be charged of murder...help me...hah...hah..."

"Would anyone care about the death of a mere courtesan? Even if that courtesan was the number one beauty in the capital, what of it?" Lucian chuckled, "You are just a woman that people pay to—"

"Aaaaaaaa!" Lady Lily screamed, hitting the doors with her fists, her nails digging into the wood, alerting anyone that could be in the vicinity.

The music outside was too loud, so nobody should be able to hear her, except for one man.

The door to the private room was slammed open.

Jax rushed inside, "Boss! Boss! What's wrong!? What happened!? Are you okay!?"

Jax's eyes darted around the room, and he immediately noticed Lucian blocking the door to the bathroom.

"Boss?" he asked in confusion, "Why are you standing there?" He then heard the screams for help and the banging. His expression changed, "What did you do? Why is she like that?"

He quickly closed the door behind him, and then went to Lucian's side. He tried to open the door, but Lucian blocked his path.

"What are you doing, Boss!?" Jax yelled. "She needs help!"

"Are you doubting me?" Lucian looked at him, "Are you going to stand against your brother?"

"Brother?" Jax stopped in his tracks. "Are you serious? She needs medical attention and you are worried about titles?"

"Titles are everything," Lucian said, "They are what separates a commoner from an aristocrat. A knight from a bandit. A businessman from a crook. A king from a tyrant. A killer from a judge. A murderer from a hero—"

"You are drunk! You are not thinking straight!" Jax accused him, trying to grab his arm.

"Am I?" Lucian laughed, avoiding his hand. "Do you think I'm that weak?"

"Boss! Stop this!" Jax yelled, losing his patience. "What did you do to her!? Why is she screaming like that!? If you are not going to let me through, I will break the door down!"

Lucian didn't answer him and took a step back.

"Stop..." Lucian whispered, but Jax already went ahead, ready to save a beauty in distress. He wondered if she weren't conventionally beautiful, would Jax be so enthusiastic to go out of his way to help her?

As soon as Jax opened the door, Lady Lily jumped at him. He managed to stop her by catching her arms, but she kept struggling, moaning and panting heavily. Her skin was flushed and sweaty, and she was wearing nothing but a thin, white nightgown.

"An aphrodisiac?" Jax asked, surprised. He looked at Lucian, who already walked away.

Lucian stopped a waiter downstairs, whispering something in his ear.

Jax barely struggled against Lady Lily's advances, and was about to give in to the temptation, thinking it was just an aphrodisiac and she was just a woman, who sold her body for money.

Before his thoughts could come to life, he felt a blunt force against the back of his head, and groaned in pain.

Lucian held his cane as the brothel's staff brought some sleeping medicine to calm down the agitated Lady Lily.

The owner arrived as well and tried to put the blame on Lucian, for trying to take advantage of her.

The owner was an elderly woman, who had gray hair and wrinkles around her eyes. She wore a black dress that covered her from neck to toe and had a pair of spectacles on her nose.

"I don't want to argue with an elder in a public space," Lucian said politely, "I would prefer if you took your complaints to the court and filed a lawsuit against me. The evidence is clear and the witnesses are present. The only thing that's missing is the crime that you are accusing me of committing."

The woman calmed down, realizing that she had made a fool of herself by jumping to conclusions.

"What about him?" They pointed at Jax.

"Tie him to a chair and let him cool his head," Lucian ordered, "I will deal with him later."

"W-wait," Jax protested as Lucian stuffed his mouth with a cloth in disappointment.

The brothel's staff dragged Jax away, leaving the owner to deal with Lucian, closing the doors behind them to not disturb their conversation.

"She had always been a smart girl, always careful. How could she have gotten herself into such a mess?" The old lady said, "What really happened?"

"I was invited by Lady Lily to have a chat with her and enjoy her company," Lucian said, "We exchanged some pleasantries, and then decided to enjoy a cup of tea together..."

He lied about Lady Lily not knowing about the drug, to not implicate her in the crime and turned both of them into victims. She wasn't who he was after, though he couldn't imagine what kind of fate would befall him if he drank that liquid.

"Could someone be holding a grudge against Lady Lily? Or perhaps a rival who wanted to harm her reputation and ruin her career?" Lucian twisted the matter to imply the whole brothel could be in danger.

The owner didn't think of that possibility, and quickly went to Lady Lily to make sure her number one courtesan was alright.

Once alone, Lucian lifted the tea pot and opened the lid, adding a few drops of an antidote to neutralize the drug after confirming what it was.

'Such a waste of fine tea.'

He thought as he placed the small vial inside one of his inner chest pockets. He poured himself a new cup, sitting back on the sofa. His mind wandered back to what just happened.

A trader like him had access to many kinds of merchandise, including those that could be used to harm others. It was better to be safe than sorry, especially when dealing with questionable characters on a daily basis.

He would also one day be part of the Rochefort household, where every single move could be a matter of life and death. He had to think of his safety and the safety of his wife and future children, and their children, and so on too.

He poured himself another cup, then another and another, not wasting a single drop of tea.

'Not a bad deal for a visit to a brothel.' Lucian thought about how this all would probably end up being free of charge.

He set the cup down and got up to leave.

Lucian went to find the owner and inform her that he was leaving.

"I hope you don't mind, but I helped myself to some of your tea," Lucian said, handing her a coin, "Please, give my regards to Lady Lily."

"Please, keep it. It's the least we can do," the owner said, trying to refuse the payment, "I'm sorry you had to witness that incident. I hope you will still visit us again."

"Of course, it was an enjoyable visit," Lucian assured her, standing by her side to talk to her.

They watched Lady Lily sleeping soundly, with a peaceful expression on her face. She seemed to be dreaming about something pleasant, a faint smile forming on her lips.

"It's hard to believe that someone would try to harm such a lovely woman," Lucian said, his voice filled with concern as if he wasn't the one who made her drink the cup of tea. "She deserves better than that. I hope you can find the culprit and punish them accordingly."

"We will, rest assured. We will not let them get away with it," the owner promised, her face darkening. "You have been most gracious to help us, and we are grateful for your kindness."

"It's nothing, really. I just did what any decent man would do," he said, modestly.

"Decent man, huh," the owner repeated, giving him a look, "Do you mind waiting for a while? I'm sure she will want to thank you personally when she wakes up."

"Gladly," Lucian said, nodding his head. He was curious to see how Lady Lily would react, and what she would do next.

The owner calmed down a little, chatting with him about some mundane topics. She told him a bit about Lady Lily, how she became a courtesan and how popular she was, and how many tried to buy her, yet she refused them all, staying loyal to the brothel.

Lucian nodded and listened. 'Nobody would stay in a brothel if they had the means to leave it. She probably had a good reason to do so. Maybe for independence, or a secret lover to meet in secret.'

A few coughs interrupted their conversation, and they saw Lady Lily waking up from her sleep. She looked confused and groggy, like she didn't know where she was or what happened to her. She tried to get up, but fell back on the bed, clutching her head in pain.

The owner rushed to her side, helping her sit up and supporting her back. Lady Lily looked at her with a puzzled expression, then her gaze drifted to Lucian's, who stood at the foot of the bed, smiling politely.

"Everything is alright. You are safe," Lucian said, in a comforting tone.

Lady Lily opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. She closed her eyes and pressed her hand to her forehead, as if trying to remember what happened.

'She won't admit that she tried to drug me, will she? Not in front of her boss,' Lucian thought.

"Thank Gods it was Sir Arclight who was with you. He noticed your symptoms and sent for a doctor right away," the owner said, patting her hand. "If it weren't for him, who knows what would have happened to you."

Lucian noticed the slight twitch in her lips, but she quickly regained her composure.

"It seems that I am indebted to you, Sir Arclight," she said, lowering her eyes. "I don't know how to repay you for your kindness."

She didn't know whether the man, who called her a slut (not literally) was an illusion caused by the poison, or was it a reality, which was even worse. She had to tread carefully, in case he was the latter.

The owner nodded and left the room, leaving them alone. Lady Lily glanced at Lucian again, and this time, he saw a hint of fear in her eyes. She tried to hide it, but he noticed it anyway. She must have realized that she had made a mistake.

Her voice was barely audible as she whispered, "Who are you?"

"Just a man," Lucian answered, smiling warmly as he adjusted his cufflinks.

"Are you not going to ask me about my intentions?" she asked, fidgeting with the sheets nervously.

"I'll ask the person who is responsible for this," Lucian said, 'Stay here and be a good bait for now.'

He bid his farewell and left her by herself. He suggested to the owner that Lady Lily shouldn't leave the brothel and rest, to which the owner agreed.

She also offered him the services of another courtesan to keep his company instead. He declined the offer, though he asked her to take care of Jax. They just had to keep him alive, nothing more.

There was an inn not far away from the brothel, and that was the place where Lucian decided to spend the night, not expecting to meet ToGo of all things.

The black bird was perched on the roof of the inn, looking down at him.

Lucian quickly got a room and opened the window for it to fly in. Could Celine be close by?

"Is your master around?" Lucian asked.

The bird landed on his bed and puffed its feathers, looking around curiously.

"What? Are you lost or something?" Lucian asked.

The bird tilted its head to the side, and then flew off.

"Hey, where are you going?" Lucian asked, looking out of the window to see where the bird had gone.

The bird flew back to its previous spot on the rooftop.

Lucian kept the window open, just in case. His third eye kept track of people entering the brothel and leaving it. He also checked the guests in the inn, not finding anyone familiar or suspicious.

He went to buy some wine downstairs to occupy himself with silver stage training. Multitasking would make the time pass faster.

'Voice, take over the watch duty,' Lucian said when he felt his third eye was getting more sleepy and less alert than his two actual eyeballs.

'Who do you think I am? Your servant?' it refused.

'If you don't do it, you will have to deal with my crying self all day tomorrow,' he replied, 'You don't want that, do you?'

'...you bastard,' Voice cursed.

'I'm not asking much, it's beneficial for both of us,' Lucian said, 'Do your job, and let me do mine.'

Voice didn't answer, but Lucian knew it would take over the watch duty. He wasn't the only one who couldn't stand his crying self.

Chapter 116: 4.16 - Openly Cranky

Holding five bottles of wine and a loaf of bread under his arm, Lucian returned to his room.

He took his shoes off and climbed onto the bed. With his back propped against the headboard, he covered his legs with a blanket.

The bread was sliced and left on the nightstand for ToGo.

The bird flew into the window and landed on the windowsill. It eyed the piece of bread, then hopped over to the nightstand.

Lucian watched it eat while he was sipping wine, "Did she not feed you?"

The bird glanced at him, and then continued to eat the bread.

Lucian chuckled and took another sip of wine. He felt a bit lonely, and was happy to have some company to fill the room.

"Did you get replaced by a cat?" Lucian continued to tease the bird, thinking about Celine's new pet. He finished his first bottle, and opened a new one, "She must like new things, doesn't she? Once she trains her pets to perfection, they lose their appeal. I'm not that easily replaceable, though."

ToGo didn't seem interested in his ramblings and continued to nibble on the bread.

The second bottle was almost finished when ToGo flew away, and Lucian felt like his heart was stabbed. Just when he got used to the presence of the bird, it left.

He went to use the bathroom and then returned to the bed, starting his third bottle. It didn't make him feel sleepy, but it did dull his senses.

He never got wasted to a point where he would lose control over himself. His stomach would usually protest before that could happen.

Like now. He could feel it bubbling inside him, hurting and begging him to stop. He took another sip anyway.

By the time he was halfway through his fourth bottle, she slipped into his room through the open window, looking furious.

"Why are you drinking alone?" she asked, panting heavily. She was wearing a dark outfit, which blended with the darkness outside.

Lucian looked up at her and then at the little snitch on her shoulders. Togo flew toward his nightstand to finish his bread, and Celine sat down on the bed beside him, grabbing his chin.

"Are you drunk?" she asked.

"No," Lucian denied.

"How much did you have to drink?"

"Not much," Lucian answered.

She counted the bottles on the nightstand and then looked at him suspiciously, "Did nobody teach you that drinking alone is dangerous?"

"You need to be taught to see that?" he asked, "Isn't it an obvious conclusion?"

Sensing his bad mood, she sat on the bed and started taking off her shoes.

"Are you stalking me?" he asked, finding her to be conveniently close to his location. *'She wouldn't order a female to try to drug me and make me hate females as a result, would she?'*

Her foot kicked his leg, "I was worried, okay?" she said, "ToGo told me you were trying to kill yourself again."

"I'm working on my silver stage," he explained.

"I told you to never train your stages alone," she scolded him.

He gave her a side glance, "I'm a grown man, I think I can make decisions for myself."

Celine's eyes were so cold it made him shudder. She had a certain presence that scared people away, and made him feel small. Like he was a little kid.

"...okay," he said, "I will take someone with me from now on," he relented.

"That's better," she said, falling on her back, her legs still dangling off the edge of the bed.

Lucian took a big gulp of the wine, feeling more relaxed with her here, "Do you want a sip?" he asked.

"It smells like cheap stuff," she rejected it.

"It's not. It's just watered down a little bit. Wait, I'm going to get something stronger from the inn," he said, getting up.

He didn't like the taste of strong booze, but it seemed like he wouldn't be able to reach the silver stage otherwise.

He had to use the bathroom first though and stumbled a bit on the way there.

He was fine after a few steps, but she decided to follow him and make sure he was extra fine.

Feeling a bit touchy, Lucian pretended to trip, falling in her direction.

She quickly caught him in her arms, "..."

He looked up at her with a charming smile.

Her expression turned colder, "How do you plan to reach the bar in this state?"

"..." A bit disappointed by her reaction to his advances, he pulled himself away from her and stood up straight, "I was being romantic and you just ruined it."

She blinked her eyes a few times, parting her mouth in realization of what he was trying to do. She quickly outstretched her hands, offering them to him, "Sorry. Try again," she encouraged.

"..." Lucian stormed out of the room. He was too embarrassed to give it a second try.

She didn't follow him, waiting for him to return on his own once she realized that he would manage.

He ordered the strongest drink he could find and returned to the room. She was standing in the same place, with her hands still outstretched. She was serious about him trying it again.

"..." He sighed and fell into her arms, causing her to stumble from his weight downwards.

"Ugh," she let out a groan, trying to carry him to the bed. He helped her out a little, letting her drag him to it and drop him there. She definitely doubted the romantic side of it, but at least she was trying.

His face was turning red from the heat of the drink, or maybe it was because of the company. She tried not to distract him from his training and quietly sat next to him, watching the stars from the window.

She didn't talk to him, nor did she try to touch him. She just sat there like a guardian angel.

At some point, ToGo landed on her lap, looking up at her with his little black eyes.

Celine stroked its feathers and cooed at it, praising its intelligence. She even brought some expensive snacks for it.

'*Since when did birds eat that kind of thing?*' Lucian stared at the bird. He didn't even receive a greeting or a smile from her when she appeared.

"..." Celine glanced at him, and then at ToGo, and then at him again. She raised ToGo to kiss it, but he was not amused.

He grabbed Celine's arm and pulled her into his lap, pressing her against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and made her kiss him instead.

"Not before ToGo," she covered his mouth with her arm.

Chapter 117: 4.17 - Can't Blame Her Preferences

Lucian's mood improved the moment Celine appeared at the window. He could hear his heart beating in his ears, and feel his blood rushing through his veins.

His rationality, however, was trying its hardest to act as a counterweight and to put a damper on his excitement.

Maybe it was because of the way she was acting?

Being manipulated and in control of the situation didn't make one a villain in Lucian's book, but it did make him more cautious.

Celine grabbed a pillow, ordering Togo to sit on it, then carrying the pillow to the wardrobe, closing Togo inside so it could take a nap.

"Sleep well, Togo. We will continue where we left off later," she assured the bird that it wouldn't be replaced by anything or anyone else, ever.

Lucian took a gulp of his drink after failing to show Togo who was the boss. He caressed the bottle in his arms, his new best friend, "That's the problem with birds and women. They are both birdbrained."

"..." Celine's mouth twitched at the insult but she let it slide. She tried to intentionally spike his jealousy after all, and knew he was petty enough to turn mean about it. She had praised Togo's intelligence, so Lucian wasn't calling her stupid, at least not outright.

"Did you not hear me?" Lucian asked, taking another sip, "I called you a birdbrain. Are you going to let me get away with that?"

"Is this what they call taking out your frustration on your most loved ones?" she asked herself. She then closed the wardrobe slightly to leave a gap for air, and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"No, no," Lucian moved his pointer from right to left in disagreement, "You are not my most loved one, but my only one. Birdbrained or not. You are my only one. Do you understand?"

"I don't understand. Start talking less, and drink more already," she ordered. Once her priority was set on something, nothing could change it. Especially not small talk. Years of knowing her proved that much, "Your training isn't over yet. Don't lose your progress."

Lucian placed the bottle on the nightstand and hid under the covers like a turtle, sulking that he had nobody to banter with, "So cold...My Celine is so cold. I'm not talking to her anymore. No, I'm not."

"...We will play after the training," Celine promised quietly. He felt a hand reach for his, and he opened his palm for it to find its way inside of it. "No pouncing until then."

She couldn't read his thoughts, but he still felt like she knew exactly what was on his mind. Biting and choking was a no, but pouncing? It was very much allowed. Even encouraged.

Lucian let out a long, suffering sigh, and squeezed her hand back, not wanting to let go. "I can't focus when you are near. I can't stop thinking about what I want to do to you. with you. and have you do to me..."

She fanned her face with her left hand, unaware that he could see the flush on her cheeks through his third eye. She was quite shy sometimes, and he hid beneath the covers just to witness it (not to act childish).

Voice needed to keep watch outside the brothel, leaving Lucian little time to appreciate the cute sight.

"Then you should train to be more focused, shouldn't you?"

"Some encouraging words would have been nicer, Celine. Like: 'you are doing great, you are almost there.' Or 'You are doing your best, and it shows,'" he said.

"How about: I won't wait forever if you don't hurry up?" she asked, "You are not the only one with needs."

"You don't have to wait for me if you don't want to." Lucian was immune to threats and blackmail. He could throw a few back in response to scare people off the same way they tried to scare him. "There's no point in fighting for someone who has given up on me, and you shouldn't either."

"You called me birdbrained, Lucian."

"Fair point," he took another deep breath, removing the sheets from his face and sat up, still holding onto her hand. He wanted to be over with the training so they could play together as soon as possible.

He resumed drinking from the bottle, and this time, he didn't stop until he finished it.

His throat felt like it was burning, but his head was clearer than it was before. He couldn't stop thinking about her threat of not waiting for him if he didn't hurry.

The more he drank, the more he remembered the past, starting with when he was a child, to when he saw the fear in his parents' eyes when they thought he was about to die. He saw how they looked at him differently afterwards, like he was no longer their son.

The memories hurt, but it all ended well, didn't it? His father had come to love him, and so had his mother.

He proved them wrong, didn't he?

So why couldn't he do the same thing with Celine?

"...You are breaking my hand, Lucian."

"Hmm?" Lucian looked down. He was squeezing her hand too hard and quickly loosened his grip, rubbing her knuckles with his fingers, "I'm sorry," he said, blowing on them to ease the pain.

Celine bent forward, unable to tell if he was drunk or not. He was still able to hold a conversation and wasn't slurring his words.

"I'm sorry," he repeated and pulled her into his embrace to apologize, "It's just...whatever bad you do to me keeps ringing in my head and I can't seem to move on from it..."

He didn't want to hurt her, not with his words, and not with his actions. That's why he told her to treat him like she wanted to be treated.

Celine pulled away to take a better look at his face. There was a slight redness to his cheeks and a glazed look in his eyes, "Don't worry, you haven't hurt me."

"Yet," he corrected anxiously, "Who knows what will happen if you keep choking and biting me."

She stroked his back. "I'll hold back, if it bothers you so much. Thought I'll definitely miss how deliciously you always react to it," she teased, her voice laced with affection.

Lucian bit the inside of his cheek. Her words sounded more genuine than usual. The opposite of the sarcastic tone she used when he straight out asked her to behave, like a strict teacher scolding a bad student.

It seemed like this approach worked better, and he should try it more often.

'She also prefers the nice Lucian, huh? I can't blame her...'

She would rather behave than risk him turning against her, or worse, losing him.

'As long as she won't cross the line, I won't either.' Lucian assured himself as he ran his fingers through Celine's hair, smoothing them out, *'I'm a nice guy after all.'*

"Your training, Lucian."

"It's not working. The alcohol is doing the opposite of what it should be doing."

Celine's gaze fell on the empty bottles around her, analyzing the number, the time between each one, and the effect it had on him, "I'm not surprised that it's not working on you, who feeds on rotten food, medical herbs and other concoctions... regularly."

Lucian blinked slowly, processing her words, "What do you suggest I do instead?"

Just like how society could advance with new inventions, one could use new discoveries to find better, faster, and more efficient methods of advancement.

Purification was what most people relied on to advance to the silver stage, but the medicine he was consuming might be lowering the efficiency of the process.

Rather than obsessing over poison resistance, Celine suggested he work on his exterior defenses. She could see silver's reflective properties in preventing heat loss during cold seasons and more.

As a frequent traveler, this ability would come more in handy.

The copper stage helped him regulate heat but it didn't deflect or reflect the heat. Silver could. (Imagine a thermal blanket made of reflective foil. That's the overall idea.)

It wouldn't be a straightforward path like purification, where he could depend heavily on his body's instincts to filter toxins.

"I don't think I have time for experiments of that kind," Lucian said, not sure how to become a reflective surface. He could only imagine how ridiculous it would look.

A northerner could learn to channel the qualities of metals and ores containing the earth's core energy within them, but doing research and testing out new things was a time consuming and expensive process.

There were already well-researched and proven paths that would guarantee success if followed, so why bother?

"I have a few ideas, and they are all within your capabilities," Celine began to explain her ideas.

As a jewel making hobbyist, she had come into contact with enough metals and ores to learn a bit about how to utilize their properties for different purposes.

"I promise," Lucian had to promise Celine that he wouldn't do the experiments she had just explained alone.

"Maybe you should skip the hunting competition and travel to the North Hills early. The snow there never melts and you could use it for the experiment," Celine said, sounding a bit sad at the prospect of not having him around, "It would be a better place to test the theory."

Lucian already planned to pick a few fights during the competition in order to test himself, "I'll go there after the competition is over. I can't pass up an opportunity to see you wearing riding clothes."

"Alright then," she said, blinking at him expectantly. She was really bad at setting the mood.

"...Ahem," Lucian cleared his throat and tried to set it for her, "Thank you for helping me out."

She nodded, not caring for his gratitude.

"...I hope I didn't ruin your night too much," he continued.

She nodded again, still not saying a word.

"...How can I repay you?" he asked carefully after a moment of silence, "Beside marriage," he added quickly before she could say anything.

Her shoulders sagged slightly, as if in disappointment, but then she straightened up again, "I'll stack the favor with the previous one, until marriage becomes the only option available for you."

"You mean until I will be able to defend myself against your father's attempt at killing me," Lucian corrected her.

"You were ten years old and the order was universal, not targeted at you. He probably forgot you even existed by now, and besides, you have grown to become a fine young man. I'm sure he will be impressed by how brave and smart you have become," she assured him.

"Have you told him about me already?"

"...Not yet," she admitted, "I will, once you agree to cooperate with me. Don't worry, I will make it look natural, like it's my punishment, nobody will suspect a thing. You'll be safe from harm, an innocent victim of circumstances, just how you like it."

Lucian sighed, "Is seeking death your favorite hobby? It's not only your reputation and life that will be at stake, but also that of your family, your people, the dukedom."

He brushed his hand through her back.

"Why can't you wait until I ask you to marry me properly, Celine? I'm not refusing you, am I?" he asked, exasperated. "Just a few more years, and I will have enough power to express my love to you openly, and not be afraid of the consequences."

Celine didn't say anything for a while, her face hidden in his shirt, "Would it mean having to clean my image and reputation?" she asked, "A good man like you would never find someone like me worthy."

"One of us has to do it, and since you aren't planning to become a worthy woman, I guess it falls on me to become an unworthy man," Lucian said, chuckling at the idea of matching her public image instead of the other way around.

Her lips trembled slightly at his words. "You would do that? You would lower your image for me?" She looked at him, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"I'm not lowering my image," he said, "I am becoming a better version of myself, one that I will be proud of."

"Your righteous self would be ashamed," she said, "You're not trying to make me feel guilty, are you? I don't want you to do anything that will make you hate yourself...or me."

"A compromise then," he suggested, "You try your best not to get worse and I'll try my best to become the man proud to have you by his side, worthy of being seen in public with you, maybe even help you bully a few people together."

She laughed, shaking her head at his words, "...I can't imagine you doing that. You are too nice and proper to do something like that. You wouldn't dare to."

"I don't know, a man in love does some crazy things," he defended his case, "Who knows, maybe one day I will wake up and decide to become the worst version of myself."

She shook her head again, squeezing him tighter, as if afraid to lose him.

He hugged her back, enjoying the closeness.

═══ Author's note ═══

There are definitely more reasons why he doesn't want to marry her right away.

It's not only to ground Celine's superior complex.

Celine's plan is to marry him through a scandal (Lucian refuses to let her sacrifice her reputation and dignity for it).

There will be more reasons along the way, so stay tuned. 😊

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"I will wear my best dress and look the part," Celine said, after a while, "Your future wife should look the part, after all."

"Is that so?" Lucian asked, "Then I will try my best to look the part of a future husband."

They began to play house together, talking about their future. Their imagination built a perfect home, an ideal marriage.

Their words became more daring, and more intimate.

Their hands began to explore, and their lips began to close the gap between them when thunder outside rumbled.

The lightning flashed through the window, startling them both.

They paused for a moment, staring at each other, and then burst out laughing.

It felt like they were caught doing something wrong, even though they were both consenting adults.

"I think we should call it a night," Celine said, standing up and smoothing her clothes out.

Lucian nodded, adjusting himself and trying not to feel too embarrassed. He got up and kissed her on the cheek, wishing her a good night, "You stay, I will go."

"It's your room," Celine said, but Lucian was already out the door, "Hey! Come back here, you donkey."

Lucian grabbed his cane and suitcase, closing the door behind him, before she could argue with him.

He didn't have the willpower to resist her anymore and would rather sleep in a barn than stay with her in one room.

He didn't have to wait long to calm down, the rain outside didn't give him a choice.

Lucian was soaked to the bone within seconds, his clothes clinging to his skin, his hair plastered to his face. His attention, though, still remained on the woman inside the inn.

Celine curled up in the blankets and hugged his pillow. "I should wait here," she mumbled to Togo, who flew to her after being startled by the thunder, "So he has a warm bed to return to."

Lucian felt his chest getting tight at the sight, pulling him towards her like it was a piece of metal and she was a magnet.

'Where is he, Voice?'

Voice caught a sight of Edmund on the road, hiding inside a carriage and looking through the gap in the window, at the inn Lucian was staying at.

'Is he waiting for his sister?' Lucian wondered if he should go out and greet him. 'He or Celine must have ordered Lady Lily to drug me with an aphrodisiac.'

Edmund fiddled with his ring, twisting it on his finger. He must have sensed something, because he looked in Lucian's direction and their eyes met. He quickly opened the door, ushering Lucian inside.

Lucian got on, sitting down across him on the leather seat.

Edmund coughed, breaking the ice, "She suddenly wanted to become my carriage driver. I should have known it had something to do with you. Is everything okay? I hope you didn't get into another fight."

"Something like that, yes," Lucian answered, "Being caught in a red light district by my dearest is not the best way to end a night."

"You still call her your dearest, so I guess it didn't end badly," Edmund joked, trying to lighten the mood, "Celine is not the type to be jealous. She doesn't really have anything to envy in the red light district, does she?"

Lucian didn't comment, so Edmund continued, "I heard about your success, but I didn't expect you to reach the bronze rank so fast. My sister's words ring true. You are indeed more than you seem."

"You flatter me," Lucian said, not taking the compliment seriously.

Edmund probably sensed the slight hostility in Lucian's tone and laughed nervously. "Please, not you too, don't misunderstand my intentions. The last thing I want is another enemy to add to the list. Celine is not a jealous type, but she's very territorial about her belongings. From your reaction, I can see her badmouthing me to you, right?"

"She is honest with me," Lucian confirmed, not giving him any more details to work with.

Edmund's smile froze in place. He stopped fiddling with his ring, letting it rest on his finger, "I see."

His voice held a bit of a bitterness, but he didn't push for an explanation.

He grabbed an umbrella instead and opened the door, "Even the nicest people get spiteful and suspicious of others once they get isolated and have to face the world alone. I hope that's not the case with you."

He walked toward the brothel without looking back, his last words lingering in the air, "Where's your friend, who always seems to follow you around? He didn't get into trouble again, did he?"

'Friend?' Lucian tried to think of who Edmund was talking about, 'Jax?'

He closed the carriage door and leaned back, closing his eyes to follow Edmund's movements.

'Why would he mention Jax now?'

Edmund entered the brothel and went towards Lady Lily's private room, which was off Lucian's reach. He was left in the dark once again.

'Was Jax the target the whole time?'

Lucian looked for Jax's location, finding him tied up in the brothel's storage room. There was a blindfold and a gag around his mouth.

'Looking back at it, it does seem like Jax had some secret relationship with Lady Lily to begin with,' Lucian thought, 'He went against my orders to help her, and was very protective of her.'

Lucian covered his face with his hands.

'Does Edmund know Celine better than me? Or is this a trap? I'm feeling like a fool here.'

He tried to clear his thoughts and not jump to any conclusions. He didn't want to accuse Celine of trying to isolate him from the people close to him.

'Do I look like someone who gets attached to people easily, Voice?' he asked, his tone laced with sarcasm as he thought about why would someone go through such unnecessary lengths to make him keep his distance from others.

'You look like you would jump to save someone in need in a heartbeat,' Voice answered, making Lucian laugh out loud.

'Mm, I'm such a softie.' Lucian thought, his laughter changing from sarcastic to humored.

It was silenced by the rainy weather, but it still echoed in the empty carriage.

'It seems like I'm not the only one who is trying to stand up against Celine's way of doing things, which is only going to end in tragedy.'

Lucian rested against the carriage window, watching the raindrops hit the glass. The pull toward Celine was replaced by a dull ache in his chest, which felt like a bad omen.

'...that's why you break their wings before they get a chance to fly away...'

Little Celine's words crossed his mind, an old memory from a time when she was just a kid.

Lucian found her tip on how to keep people close stupid. A broken bird was a useless bird, a potential wasted. It was better to tame the bird, to teach it to trust its owner and to never betray it.

She called him stupid back for not getting her genius, and he called her stupid right back, challenging her to break his wings and see how he would run away from her, and never come back.

'Every bird is different from another. I wasn't referring to your wings, dummy,' Celine's childish voice explained to him, 'I meant your gang members' wings.'

Lucian drew a small Celine with his finger on the glass.

'She didn't even meet them, yet she already judged them based on my reaction to them.'

He drew little Lucian beside her. Their cute stick figures were drawn with a few strokes, looking innocent.

'I thought saving Jax from slavery would mean I was saving him from a miserable life. He would have died a dog's death if I didn't intervene. But it turns out, it's not enough to simply give a man his freedom and expect him to go through hell and back with you.'

Lucian drew a dog's tail on little Celine, and gave her little ears too.

'He was supposed to behave like Goblin does, but his loyalty is not as blind as I expected. He thinks for himself, unlike the rest, and acts upon his own desires.'

Lucian drew little horns on little Lucian's head, and made him breathe fire from his mouth, burning little Celine's tail. He erased and redrew their stick figures a few times while tidying his thoughts.

'Should I ask the guards to keep an eye on the carriage? Who knows when Edmund will return.'

Lucian decided to act like a lonely man who had no one else to trust but Celine when he was with Celine and Edmund when he was with Edmund. Observing their every move and comparing their reactions, he could slowly piece together the full picture and make a decision accordingly.

Lucian joined Voice in watching people's lives go by, 'I hope it's Celine, who is trying to isolate me from the rest of the world.'

'Why...?' it asked, not understanding.

'It would have been nice if I could do the same to her and have her all to myself,' Lucian explained, 'You know, to feel like the only person in her world. That kind of thing... I guess I'm being greedy.'

'...' Voice's silence was louder than any words it could have spoken.

'It's not like I'm asking her to abandon her family for me, or her future, or her dreams, or her aspirations, or... her... everything. I'm not asking her for anything, actually, so why does it feel like I'm asking too much?'

'...' Voice probably begged for Celine to fetch Lucian so it didn't have to be at a receiving end of his rambling, 'What if it's Edmund, who is trying to isolate Celine from the rest of the world?'

'I will tell Celine on him, of course. I'm sure she won't be very pleased to find out that her brother is trying to separate us.'

Lucian found it odd that Edmund would enter the brothel before his eyes and not try to hide his relationship with it from him. It was as if he didn't care what Lucian thought of it at all.

'Well, as long as my life is not in danger, I'm willing to let the situation play out for a bit longer,' he decided, moving his attention from Jax's and Edmund's situation to Celine's.

Northerners with darker hair were known to have higher stamina, higher energy levels, and the ability to stay up longer without getting tired. Without having to go through Knight ranks to unlock those perks, they had it from the moment they were born.

Celine fell asleep and woke up several times during the night, checking her surroundings to see if he was back. Each time she found him missing, she would sigh and curl up. Only to wake up later to do it all over again.

She seemed more restless than tired, as if she was suffering from the same thing as him.

She was covered by the blanket, but he managed to see her rubbing her tights against the pillow. It was a thin blanket after all, easy to imagine her body shape under it.

Lucian returned to Celine's side after cooling off his head. She pretended to sleep and he pretended not to notice that she was awake.

He dried his hair with a towel, quietly sitting on the hard, wooden floor. Resting his head on the bed, he closed his eyes in an attempt to fall asleep, still in the wet clothes he was wearing.

'What a way to spice up things before our marriage night,' Lucian thought.

The desires that were gnawing at him from within were getting more and more unbearable. This was no longer about kissing the ugliest parts of their bodies and accepting them.

This was lust, plain and simple.

The one who fell for it first was a loser. The one who had the stronger will was the winner. The prize was nothing else but their ego, and their dignity.

"Ouch," he hissed exaggeratedly, feeling her feet poking his head.

"Why is little general saluting at my face, still? How is he not tired yet?" Celine asked with a sleepy voice, her head appearing next to his, staring down at his crotch, "You didn't relieve yourself? Where have you been this whole time then?"

"Can you not say something like that out of nowhere? You are a Lady," Lucian said, covering his crotch with the towel he had been drying his hair with, "Go back to sleep. I'm fine."