

My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone

Chapter 141 141: 4.41 - Rochefort eyes

Author's note

Received two inspiration capsules gifts and quite a number of powerstones, so here's a double update. 🐱

One of the knights from the Rochefort side wiped some blood from his eyes, watching as his men were cut down.

They were too weak, he realized as a cold resolve settled in his gut. As humans, they were just meat in their path. But as monsters...

He looked at his remaining men. They were battered, bleeding, but still resolute to fight. They caught his gaze, and understood.

They also noticed the strange phenomenon around them: every single Rochefort knight got possessed by a shackle upon death.

It was as if injustice that had met them today was being corrected in a twisted manner.

Smiling, the knight dropped his shield and opened his arms wide, exposing his chest. He focused every ounce of his will, every drop of his loyalty to the Rochefort name, into one single, burning thought: 'Power. Give me the power to kill them all.'

The Royal Knight frowned, confused by the suicide tactic, but didn't hesitate. He drove his sword through the Rochefort's knight's neck, cutting off his head.

Around him, the remaining Rochefort knights followed suit. They lowered their weapons and stepped into the blades of the enemy. They didn't die in fear; they died with a single, fanatical purpose.

Lucian slipped through the chaos, his gaze darted back and forth, looking for Celine.

He had painted his hair with some blood before putting back his helmet, then joined a search party consisting of three golden ranks.

Tents had been set ablaze by an unknown source, and a big fire had started to spread. The air smelled of burning fabric, wood, and smoke.

The shackles were evening up the battlefield for the Rochefort house, and it was becoming more and more difficult for the royal army to maintain their control over the situation.

A fist flew at him from the right, but he managed to dodge it. He coughed as he inhaled some of the smoke, his eyes watering.

"They must be wearing our uniforms!" A royal commander roared, "Focus on the eyes! If you see Rochefort eyes, kill!"

The Rochefort eyes were known to be unique, and only pure-blooded descendants possessed their signature blue eyes. The color of the sky and the ocean, signifying their connection to the heavens above and the depths below.

The royal knights stabbed a few of their own fallen knights, just to make sure they were really dead and not playing dead. Their efficiency was frightening, not leaving any witnesses alive.

If Celine was wearing a disguise to hide herself among royal knights, then Lucian would have found her by now. He didn't.

She must be hiding somewhere with Edmund. The underground was the only place where she would have been able to escape his attention. It was pitchblack darkness there, his vision couldn't magically light up the surroundings, so it was a blind guess.

The red air around one of the fallen Rochefort knights suddenly warped the space.

"A r-ruby knight shackled..."

Someone stammered.

The shackled's face was replaced by a red mist, showing no features. Wherever it stepped, the ground melted, turning into a red goo that stuck to the bottom of its boots. Its armor became a part of its body, as if it was a living being, pulsating and glowing with each beat of its heart.

Its eyes were the most terrifying of all, a deep yellow color that looked like two suns, blinding those who dared to look into them.

The ruby knight from the royal side was no longer able to match the ruby knight from the Rochefort side, who had just become a shackled. He could only buy time for the royal army to find their targets and get rid of them.

The ground shook with each strike of their fists, sending shockwaves that rippled outward, sending people flying in all directions, clearing the way for them.

The royal side were losing more men than they were killing, giving Lucian a bit of hope. If they could hold on long enough, the royal army would have to retreat.

"They are not among the dead!" a voice rang out, causing the rest of the royal knights to grow anxious.

"They couldn't just disappear!" The commander shouted, "Search one m—"

He was blasted away by a sapphire knight shackled, his body crashing into a tree, through the forest and out of sight, his armor breaking. The shackled immediately knew to target the royal army's shot-caller, not leaving any chance for the commander's subordinates to follow through with his orders.

"This is bad! There's another high ranked shackled!"

The atmosphere grew heavy with dread.

Instead of moonlight or firelight, the scene was lit by two dozen golden eyes of the monsters watching them.

'We are winning...' Lucian repeated in his mind when the royal knights began to retreat with the high ranked shackleds running after them. He leaned against a barrel, staying back to catch his breath, 'We are...'

Lucian's eyes widened in shock at the scene before him.

One of the shackleds returned back, standing before the command tent that was burning to the ground. After it made sure nobody was around, it pushed a wooden cart through it, moving the burning pieces of the tent away.

There was nothing at first, but then the ground started to shake.

A person emerged from the darkness, dirty from the dust and dirt, but alive.

Dark hair. Blue eyes. A face Lucian would recognize in the dark, in hell, anywhere.

Celine.

She was alive, and was climbing out of the hiding place in the ground.

"No." Lucian took a step forward, rushing to her side, but he was too far away.

A shadow lunged from the smoke behind her. The shackled didn't recognize her. In the Royal armor she wore to blend in, she looked just like the enemy.

"No!" Lucian yelled, reaching out as if his hand could bridge the distance, "STOP!"

The shackled didn't hesitate. It sought to kill the "enemy". Its hand flashed.

Squelch. The sound was sickeningly wet, louder than the roar of the fire.

The shackled's hand punched through her back, through the chest, and out the breast plate.

With her heart in its palm.

Celine didn't scream. She simply looked down at the hand that passed through her armor, her blue eyes wide with confusion, as if she had just tripped over a stone rather than been fatally wounded.

She turned around to look at the shackled, her voice bubbling with blood, "What are you..."

The shackled ripped its hand free, and Celine crumpled like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The helmet from her head fell off, her dark hair spilling out.

Chapter 142 142: 4.42 - The Worst Hero

"No, no..." Lucian's lips trembled. He appeared by her side in a flash, catching her just before her head could hit the ground, using himself as a shield against the shackled.

The shackled froze after it saw Celine's eyes when she turned around to look at it. It stood over the body of the woman it was meant to protect. The mud slicked its palms, mixing with the blood pooling beneath her, "My...Lady...?"

It slowly fell on its knees, its golden eyes filled with terror, unable to comprehend what it had done. It started to lose all its strength as its worst fear came to life.

Lucian snatched the heart from the shackled and pulled Celine into his lap, trying to put it in, his hands hovering over the gaping wound in her chest.

'No, no, no,' He chanted, 'I only wanted them to save her.'

'I only wanted to help.'

'I only wanted to protect her.'

"Celine, look at me. Please, Celine. Stop playing." He tried to press down, to stop the red tide, but it slipped through his fingers. "Don't do this. We have plans... the ring... I haven't given you the ring yet!"

"You...are here..." Celine's eyes fluttered, focusing on his face. A small, bloody smile touched her lips. "...my...hero."

"I'm sorry," Lucian sobbed, "I'm the worst hero ever."

Her eyes were already unfocused, whispering, "Apology...hug?"

"Apology hug," Lucian wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight, careful of her wound but desperate to keep her warm.

Her arms, the one that had always held onto him so possessively, now barely had the strength to reach out for him.

"We were supposed to go on a date," Lucian whispered into her hair, his heart shattering.

"We... still... can," she mumbled, "In... our... dreams..."

Lucian's bloody fingers fumbled at his collar, smearing red across his neck as he clawed for the thin chain hidden beneath his shirt.

He struggled with the clasp, his hands shaking so violently he nearly tore the skin, until finally, he yanked the chain free.

A small ring slid down the chain.

It wasn't heavy, definitely not fit for a future duchess. It was a simple band he had bought years ago, right after their first kiss, right after he realized he had fallen for her completely.

He carried it on him every day, a secret promise weighing on his chest, waiting for the day he felt "worthy" enough to place it on her finger.

"Look," Lucian choked out, holding the ring up to her dull eyes. The gold caught the reflection of the burning camp, together with the promise of their now charred future, "I had it. I... I had it the whole time."

He tried to slide the ring onto her finger, but his hands were too slippery with blood. It slid off and landed in the mud with a silent thud.

"Celine?"

Silence.

"CELINE!"

Lucian's mind still raced to find a way to fix it. To make the impossible possible.

He was famous for fixing broken things and breathing a new life to them, but how did one fix death?

He only wanted Celine back, nothing else.

"Celine..." A voice came from the hiding place. Edmund clutched his chest as if he had been the one stabbed. The twin bond, the connection they had shared since the womb, had screamed her death to him.

Edmund dragged himself out of the hiding place despite his broken bones, ignoring the frozen shackles and the burning camp, until he reached them.

"Celine?" He froze when he saw the absentminded Lucian and the limp Celine in his arms.

"I'm a good blanket, aren't I? I'll warm you up," Lucian pressed his forehead to hers, rocking her back and forth, "You have to wake up after you're warm, okay? Promise me, you will wake up, and we will have a wedding..."

The burnt tents and trees looked distorted, as if the world itself was dissolving along with Lucian's sanity.

"...You will wake up, and we will get married. Then we will have a big family, like you wanted to. You will become the most powerful duchess, and I will become the richest man in the world. We will travel the world, have fun. We will have so much fun together, okay? So you have to wake up...wake up and marry me."

"Celine?!" Edmund's voice made Lucian pause, his heart stopping in his chest.

"She's not waking up," Lucian said, voice hoarse, "Edmund, she's not waking up."

Edmund limped over to them, the pain in his body nothing compared to the pain of the reality in front of him, "You... killed her. You killed her!"

He screamed, launching himself at Lucian, trying to take away the most precious thing he ever had in his hands. "Get away from her!"

Lucian's eyes flashed gold.

"Never," he said in a low, inhuman, voice that sounded out of the world.

He pushed Edmund aside with his right hand, and the force of his power sent the man flying to the other side of the clearing.

Edmund coughed up some bile as his body slammed against a tree, "You...you are one of them."

Lucian rose to his feet, carrying Celine's body in his arms, "And if I am?"

He appeared before Edmund in less than a blink of an eye, and kicked a dagger laying around in Edmund's direction. "Pick it up."

Edmund struggled to pick it up, his hands shaking as he tried to grip it. He looked as broken as the fallen soldiers and camp around him.

Lucian embraced Celine's body closer to himself, "You want her back? Then make a wish. Pray for her life, so she may open her eyes again and smile."

Edmund knew there was no coming back from the dead, but he also couldn't accept it. He wouldn't and would rather believe Lucian's words than.

"Pray!" Lucian raised his voice, "I'll make sure to grant that wish," he paused, "For the price of your life."

"Is that all?" Edmund didn't look at Lucian; he looked at his sister. His hands stopped trembling and his grip tightened around the hilt of the dagger.

"Only genuine desires have a chance of becoming true, and only a few are strong enough to make them a reality," Lucian's tone was calm, almost firm, as if he were stating a fact.

Only the force in his voice suggested how much he needed it to be true.

Edmund looked at Lucian, and for the first time, they weren't merchant and noble. They were just two desperate men willing to burn the world for the same woman.

"Celine always liked to read stories about heroes to me when we were children... I promised...I promised her that I would become one, and slay all the monsters in her way..."

Edmund tears rolled down his cheeks.

"...I shouldn't have persuaded her to come with me to the hunting competition... I knew she would be in danger here, but I wanted her to see me, to see me grow," he continued his speech, as if confessing his sins before a priest, "I'm the one who should be dead, not her."

Edmund closed his eyes, his body relaxing as he raised the dagger over his head, pointing it at himself.

"Tell her I love her, and that I will always be watching over her, no matter where she is," he said before bringing the dagger down, piercing his heart and ending his own life.

Chapter 143 143: 4.43 - Seeds Of Destruction

Lucian didn't leave Celine's side, even though he knew he was risking being killed by Edmund if he woke up.

What was the limit for a wish that could come true? And what was the limit for a person to sacrifice?

'I'm willing to do whatever it takes.'

'Whatever it takes.'

'Whatever...'

Edmund twitched, his hand tightening its hold on the dagger, pulling it out.

The wound in his chest lit up with a golden glow, seeping out of his body. The threads made of his life were traveling towards Celine, stitching her back together.

Edmund's body started losing its shape and becoming translucent. He was slowly vanishing.

As he did so, Celine's blood replenished, her body slowly starting to warm up.

Edmund could now stand without his physical body holding him back. He reached out to touch his sister's hand, only to see that it passed through. He couldn't feel her warmth anymore.

A shackled without a physical body, a ghost, was what remained of him. His spirit, on the other hand, was not allowed to rest in peace.

The moment Celine took her first breath of air, Edmund's relieved smile twisted into something sinister.

'An interesting vessel you've got us here. It will do nicely.'

Speaking to Lucian's mind through Voice, the creature waved Edmund's fingers in a raising motion. It ordered all the human corpses in the vicinity to open their eyes, including the royal ones.

They were many times weaker than their former selves, barely able to wake up, but the sheer number of them contained enough energy to help materialize Edmund's ghost form into a solid one. The faint light left their eyes, flowing towards his body.

It was Voice, who narrated the scene from within Lucian's mind. Lucian himself didn't pull his attention away from Celine.

Edmund's golden eyes changed to blue ones, the color of the Rocheforts.

His wish was granted to him by the creature that had now taken over his body. He now had no choice but to give it full control of his identity as Edmund Rochefort.

'Who knew that a little child's innocent wish such as yours could bring about so much chaos and disorder?' the thing that was no longer Edmund whispered in his mind, passing by Lucian with its new physical body, 'Continue spreading seeds of destruction for us to harvest, human. Until the time comes for you to join our ranks as well...'

Lucian carried Celine away, walking through the camp, looking for whatever he could scavenge. He needed to change her clothes, get rid of the evidence of her wound.

After he cleaned her body, he dressed her in his spare shirt and pants, and threw the royal armor into the fire.

Then, he secured her to his back in a piggy carry. He also needed some food and water for her to nourish herself with later. He stuffed some money, a few rations, and a flask he found into his bag, then he continued on his way.

His movements were stiff, his hiccups coming in short, sharp gasps, but he never stopped moving.

The royal army would soon come back to inspect the area, and Rochefort army as well.

Celine definitely sent an alert message to them before the attack happened.

He knew Celine was brilliant. What he never managed to grasp was the extent of it.

If Lucian didn't interfere in the battle, would Celine and Edmund survive? He started to believe that they would.

Tears ran down Lucian's face as he ran through the woods, away from the battlefield.

He tried to calm himself down, wiping his eyes into his arm. He couldn't let Celine see him in such a state and call him a cry baby.

He was her hero, after all, and heroes didn't cry. They didn't lose, or break, or fall apart. They were there, always, no matter how much it hurt.

Whether a bad ending or a good ending awaited the heroes, they had to keep going. To keep the hope alive, and never, ever, give up.

The prophecy echoed in Lucian's mind, making him remember his role in it.

'Not a male lead who could claim a happy ending, and not a villain deserving of an end befitting his cruelty.'

Lucian wiped his tears into his arms again, trying to convince himself that everything was okay, and that his wish to get married, have a family, and a fulfilling life was still within his grasp.

That he wouldn't lose everything that mattered to him in a blink of an eye, that his dreams were not made to be shattered.

Celine was never meant to be fixed, she was too perfect for Lucian, which meant one less excuse to delay their marriage.

Maybe he didn't delay the marriage with Celine because he wanted to make more money and gain more power.

Maybe it was because deep down, Lucian knew he was destined for a tragedy.

Maybe he just wanted to delay the inevitable, to enjoy the feeling of being in love and being loved for just a little bit longer.

'I'm nothing more than a second male lead, made to help things bloom, only to wilt behind the curtains.'

Not even Edmund could escape the curse that followed after getting his wish granted. Even a ruby knight had to bow to the rules of the deal. No exceptions for anyone.

The proof was clearly before him now. He was unable to deny it any longer.

'No amount of money or power can change that fact,' Lucian thought bitterly, as the realization washed over him like a cold storm.

He didn't know what to do. He was scared. He felt helpless, afraid that if he made a wrong move, he would lose even more than he already had.

He stopped running and sat down on the ground, leaning against a large stone as he cradled Celine in his lap.

He buried his face in her hair, breathing in the scent that used to bring him comfort.

"You should have listened when I told you to leave," Lucian whispered in her ear, "It doesn't matter whether I meant it or not. You should have left, and saved yourself, at least. Now what am I supposed to do? I can't just let you go."

He didn't want to give her to another person, no matter who they were.

A small, pained sound escaped his throat, and he held her tighter, as if he could keep her from slipping away. She was his. His to hold and cherish.

'The villainess, hm? That's what the prophecy calls you,' he kissed the top of her head, 'The one everybody hates, but I can't help but love. So much. Too much.'

He couldn't let her go, and he couldn't keep her either, so the only option he had was...

┌────────── Author's note ─────────┐

I think I've left too many hints and breadcrumbs across the title, the reviews and the story itself. Now the ending of this arc sounds so anti-climatic to me. Well, that's my poor attempt at luring in more readers.□

We've reached the end of ARC 4! Which means? Review time! □

Do leave your impression, especially why other readers should give this title a try despite there being no isekai and no system. I'm afraid a native, non Earth MC, is out of some people's comfort zone. The first chapter is extremely important as well, even though it doesn't seem like it at first. 😊

Some of you know that this is a remake of the first version, and maybe even read it before this remake. So you know what's coming for us in arc 5 (arc 5 is where the first version used to start at). I deleted all the chapters in case some of you are thinking of reading it. 😊

I started writing this remake because of Lucian. I believe he was overshadowed by Celine's character in the first version; she carried it hard.

Those who came here for the yandere, I hope you are staying for the MC as well. 😊

Lucian is holding 1.st spot in the character list, which tells me that he might be doing something right? ☐



Chapter 144 144: 5.01 - Excuses

Celine's chest heaved. She gasped for air, flapping her arms and kicking her legs weakly.

Lucian loosened his hold a bit, quickly wiping his eyes with the back of his hand before smiling at her, "Good morning, My Lady."

"...hah..." Celine struggled to breathe, trying to push her face away from Lucian, "...hah..."

She got away from him and rolled onto her side, coughing violently. She retched, her eyes wide and terrified, but nothing came out of her mouth. She clutched her heart, nails scraping the skin, and Lucian had to pry her fingers away.

"No, no. Stop hurting yourself," he held her wrists firmly.

He could feel her pulse beating erratically under his touch. She wasn't thinking straight. Her eyes were unfocused, darting around frantically. When she recognized him, tears began to stream down her cheeks.

"Shhh. You're safe. You're fine, you're safe," Lucian stroked her back soothingly.

"I...I was dead," she stammered, "I was dead."

"What are you talking about? You are alive. See? Alive. Breathing."

"I was dead! I know! I-I," she began to look around her body again.

Lucian held her closer, trying to calm her down. "It was just a nightmare," he patted her back, "Just a nightmare. It's alright. It's alright. It's alright."

"Where's Edmund?"

"I don't know. He left you in my care and then went away to deal with the mess."

Celine's breathing gradually slowed as she calmed down. Cold sweat clung to her skin, and her eyes still had a glazed look to them, turning distant every now and then. But at least she wasn't panicking anymore.

He rubbed her hands and blew on them, trying to warm her up. She didn't seem to feel it, though. She didn't seem to feel anything, her mind still trapped in the nightmare.

He offered her water, but she didn't respond. He tried to feed her something, but she wouldn't eat. She just stared at him with a blank expression.

Lucian offered his back, "Come, we need to hide from the Royal Army."

Celine hesitated at first, but eventually, she wrapped her arms around his neck. He lifted her up onto his back and started walking.

Lucian picked up her spear he hid earlier and carried her deeper into the forest.

The eerie shadows and trees loomed above them, making the forest look like a giant creature that could swallow them at any second.

Rain started to fall, a cold drizzle that chilled them to their bones, and the wind picked up.

Lucian spotted a hollow of a tree that was big enough for them to hide in, and picked up his tempo to reach it.

They huddled inside the small space.

Lucian wrapped his arms and legs around Celine to keep her warm. His hands slipped under her shirt to create some friction on her back.

Celine didn't seem to appreciate it and immediately pushed him away. She distanced herself as much as the tree trunk allowed her and lifted her knees to her chest. Her fingers dug into her elbows, "It's not proper to touch a Lady in such a manner."

Lucian blinked in confusion at the rejection. Why did she care about being proper after all they had been through?

'Is this Celine even real?'

His Celine would never reject his advances, and she would be more than happy to touch his body. She would never refuse an opportunity to feel his warmth.

He didn't want to push it and reached out his hand instead, offering it to her, "Hold my hand. You will feel better."

Celine's fingers dug deeper into her elbows, not moving to take his hand, "I remember you asking for my hand in marriage in that nightmare as well. I want to return to it."

Lucian remained silent for a few seconds before responding, "But I don't."

He put his hand down and positioned himself at the entrance of the hollow, finding other ways to keep her warm, "We will take turns to sleep and keep watch. I'll take the first shift."

Tears pooled in his eyes as he kept his back turned to Celine.

She hid her face in her knees, "I finally understand your loyalty to your little wife in your heart. I want to stay loyal to my little husband from my dreams too."

A vein appeared on Lucian's forehead in disbelief, "Is marriage an ultimate proof of love to you? Do you need me to marry you to love you? Is our love so weak?"

"You don't even want to be seen with me in public. How am I supposed to take it as a sign of commitment?"

"We have just survived a massacre, Celine. We are being hunted by the Crown. Can't we talk about marriage later?"

"Excuses. You have always wanted to marry me later. Later, later, later," she repeated the word as if it had a bitter taste, "It's always later with you. But later, I might be dead, or you might be dead, and it would be too late to talk about it. I want to have a family with you before it's too late. Before the next disaster strikes. Before one of us is gone."

She always lived as if it was her last day. That's why she always went to the extremes to get what she wanted.

"If you use your family's connections to marry me," Lucian started, not bothering to look over his shoulder, "Then you better be prepared to marry into my grave, because I would rather die than live with no will of my own."

"Why are you talking like I want to control you?" Celine's tone was filled with despair, as if she couldn't understand why Lucian thought of her as his jailor. "I'm not trying to turn you into my pet, Lucian. If it's my reputation, I will improve it. Every single man in the world will be jealous of you, not pity you. Nobody will dare to talk bad of me or you, so we can walk in the streets together with our heads held high."

She was becoming more persistent and desperate to convince him, as if she could die at any moment and this was her last chance to change his mind.

"Is that love or your pride talking?" he asked.

"Do you really want to compare my pride with yours?" Celine asked in disbelief that he dared to call her prideful when he was the one putting his pride before her, "If you loved me, you would have already married me!"

"If you loved me, you would have been satisfied with what we have!" Lucian yelled back at her, "If you really loved me, if you really loved me..." He repeated, his voice choking up, "Then why are you so eager to die?! Do you know how scared I am of losing you?! Do you want to marry so you can die in peace?! Do you want to die as my wife?! Is that it?!"

Celine backed away, her back touching the tree, "...I..."

"Just stay by my side until I find a way to keep both of us alive!" Lucian slammed his fist against the tree, making it crack, his breath coming out in ragged gasps, "You are all I have! Why is it so hard for you to understand that you're my whole damn world?! You are not just someone to marry, to me, you are everything! I care about the future and I will make sure you will be in it with me, so stop rushing into it like you can't wait for it to end!"

Her lips trembled as she tried to speak, but the words didn't come out. Her blue eyes looked like a child who just found out that they had done something wrong, and they didn't know how to fix it.

Lucian wiped his face with his hand, groaning in frustration.

He blamed her again when she had already made a lot of compromises for him, and yet he kept asking her to do even more.

He had no idea where all the anger and desperation were coming from.

All he knew was that he couldn't let her go. He kept giving her false hope instead of letting her find someone better for herself.

He was too selfish to do the right thing. It was a never ending cycle of blame and guilt, and it was killing both of them. Slowly and painfully, it was tearing them apart.

Chapter 145 145: 5.02 - Comedy instead of Tragedy

Celine blinked away her surprise, seeing Lucian lash out like that at her for the first time.

Her eyes softened, eyeing him in a daze before she came to her senses and realized she was acting like a smitten maiden in love instead of a rejected lady.

She coughed, clearing her throat and turning her attention to her knees.

"How can Edmund deal with the mess when he can barely move?" Celine suddenly spoke up, startling Lucian, "I should be the one dealing with it. How many survived? I have to contact them and regroup."

She set the marriage topic aside and returned to the present, her mind working as if she were trying to cut her losses and make a counterattack.

"He seems to have advanced his rank and is now capable of moving on his own," Lucian said, not wanting to tell her about Edmund's death. "You haven't slept for days, so I will be in charge of you until you are back on your feet."

"I feel like I'm missing something," Celine rubbed her temples, "Did the smoke get into my head? My lungs can't withstand as much as men...but I've trained my body for years to handle such situations..."

She looked down at the shirt and pants she was wearing, her eyes narrowing in confusion, "Why did you change my clothes?"

"Your bladder gave up on you. There, I said it," Lucian replied, hoping that the embarrassment would keep her from asking more questions.

It worked.

Celine hid her face in her knees, curling up into a ball. Her actions said she would rather be dead than live with the embarrassment of having wet her clothes in front of Lucian.

Lucian stroked her head gently, "I'm sorry. I tried to keep it a secret."

She slapped away his hand, "Not my husband yet. No touching."

"..." Lucian's hand hovered in the air, not sure what to do with it anymore, "I saved your life..."

"Should I reward you with my body regardless of who you are, just because you happened to save my life?"

Lucian pointed at himself, his mouth agape. She was right, actually. What if it were someone else who saved her? Would she have been grateful and willing to let them touch her?

"But I'm your Lucian and not just someone," Lucian pointed to himself.

"You can be anyone, but my body belongs to my husband from now on," she hugged herself tighter, "And I belong to him."

Lucian's lips quivered in an unspoken response.

"You are fine with just us staying together," she continued, "Alright then, I'm fine with just us staying together as well. No need to go further, right?"

An eyebrow joined Lucian's mouth in the quivering.

"No need to rush into anything, right?" she tilted her head.

"Right..." Lucian slowly nodded his head. He was digging his own grave with his words, and she was happily throwing dirt over his coffin.

At the end of the day, the reason why they were here today was due to her rushing things between them. What they had now was the result of her persistence to get what she wanted, and it would not be here if she didn't push for it.

The corners of her mouth lifted into a small smirk, as if saying, 'Serves you right, you hypocrite.'

He wanted to kiss off that smirk. It looked too cute not to kiss it.

Lucian could be quite convincing, but not enough to persuade someone of Celine's level.

He could reason all he wanted, she would respect his decision and go along with it, but not without taking advantage of the situation and getting something out of it in return.

They were so similar that it hurt. Her behavior reflected his own, like a mirror image, showing him how he truly was, not how he liked to imagine himself to be.

"Only my husband can look at me like that without getting their eyes gouged out," she was enjoying every second of Lucian's misery.

"You are cruel," Lucian looked away from her in embarrassment, "Mean."

"Loyal and loving," Celine corrected him, "Only towards my husband, of course."

Lucian turned his back to her, covering his face with his palm when she tilted to the side to see his reaction, "Go to sleep."

"In a presence of a non-husband, I am afraid not."

"..." Lucian couldn't believe he was feeling sorry for her just a while ago, and now was the one in need of mercy. His insides tingle in a weird way, making him feel alive, happy, excited, but also flustered and angry.

His smile widened, and he finally let out a long, hearty laugh. She hated being miserable, and would rather die than spend her days crying. So she did what she always did best: she took control over her misery, and turned it into her weapon.

"Go to sleep," Lucian repeated, "Your husband must be waiting for you."

"He better be," Celine whispered, finally closing her eyes to rest after she successfully cheered him up, "I'll make you pay for this."

Lucian made a small laugh at her sleepy threat, "Me? What have I done?"

"You took me hostage, instead of letting me live my dream," Celine's voice became weaker with each word, until she finally stopped talking.

Lucian took a deep breath, calming his heartbeat. It pained him sometimes to see her smile through her pain, but it was a beautiful thing to see.

Instead of a tragedy, she chose to make their story a comedy, a story of two fools in love.

He was grateful for it.

After that one breakup, they never parted on bad terms. It made them vulnerable to attacks from all sides.

They didn't want their last moments with each other to be filled with sadness and anger. So no matter how much they bickered or argued, they always had to make sure to reconcile before going on their separate paths.

They wouldn't be able to function normally otherwise.

Lucian's gaze returned to Celine. Of course, he wasn't fine with how things were between them. He wanted more. He wanted everything she had to offer. All of her.

She agreed to wait longer, but would the world wait for him before it tried to separate them?

Meanwhile, thousands of Rochefort soldiers marched through the forest, stomping on everything in their way.

The ground was shaking, the trees were swaying, and the birds were flying away in fright.

And all Lucian could do was hide and watch as she was getting taken away from him.

The amount of helplessness he had felt in the past few days could easily fill an ocean.

He couldn't depend on Celine to lift him again, not when she was in a worse situation.

'War is definitely on the way.'

Instead of stopping it, Lucian was trying to figure out a way to profit from it.

'You can't win against time with honorable ways.'

And Lucian was running out of it.

Not only was time against him, but so was everything else. Power, authority, money, influence, reputation...

When people get cornered, they become desperate, and when they become desperate, they start to do things they normally wouldn't do.

Lucian was at his wits' end, and if this wasn't enough of a corner, he didn't know what was.

┌──────── Author's note ─────────┐

This chapter reminds me of a quote, "a hero in one story is a villain in another".

┌──────────────────────────────────┐

Chapter 146 146: 5.03 - How To Become a Hero?

Lucian observed how the crown tried to wipe out the evidence of the Rochefort massacre and the shackleds that appeared.

Blame was put on the shackleds, while they tried to play the heroes who saved the kingdom from the plague of monsters that came out of nowhere.

The Rocheforts played it back with proof of how large group of shackleds appeared only in places where great injustice was being committed.

The crown didn't want its name to be slandered in any way, and offered peace in exchange of their silence, in a form of a crown princess to marry into the Rochefort house, a political alliance on the surface.

It was a perfect way to sweep the dust under the rug and pretend it never happened, and to show that the royals and the nobility were all one big family.

The princess was barely twelve years old, while Edmund was almost twenty.

'Can you contact the shackled Edmund, Voice?' Lucian asked, 'Could you tell it that I will spread news of him being a shackled if it doesn't cooperate with me?'

Voice was silent.

'Tell it that I can plant greater seeds of destruction than its host can, it might pique its interest.'

Lucian decided to visit the church of the Eternal Light to force Voice to speak to Edmund.

The church was a majestic structure, made entirely of white marble that shone like a beacon in the sun.

Lucian entered the grand hall of the cathedral.

A few believers sat in prayer, their eyes closed.

"If it isn't the Glory's founder himself," the high priest said, recognizing Lucian's presence and coming down from the altar to greet him.

Lucian bowed slightly as a sign of respect, "I'm here to pray for the family of fallen soldiers during the hunting competition. I feel a strong need to help them, to ease their pain in any way I can."

A group of men carried chests of gold behind him, ready to be placed in the vault for the families in need.

The High priest smiled and nodded in understanding, "Of course. I am sure the families will appreciate your generosity and your kind heart. May the Gods bless you, my child."

Lucian stepped forward and knelt before the altar, clasping his hands together in prayer. He closed his eyes and bowed his head, 'So, Voice? Are you willing to speak with Edmund now or should I ask the priest for a favor instead?'

'We do not bargain with humans! Laws cannot be bent!' the entity roared.

If it was a normal human, it would have threatened Lucian with Celine's life to get an advantage over him, but it didn't.

It seemed like shackleds didn't care about war, the numbers of deaths and the likes. Humans would bring it upon themselves even without the shackleds' interference.

That's what Lucian deducted so far.

In this world, you couldn't get stronger without risking losing your sense of self. You had to be willing to sacrifice your humanity and your sanity.

Free will and choice were the greatest gifts of a man. Shackleds were the result of the abuse of such gifts.

They first turn you into a slave of your own desires, then into a slave to their powers, and eventually, you lose yourself. Your sense of self and identity vanishes.

Their existence made the strong fear the weak, the rich fear the poor, the noble fear the commoner, the living fear the dead.

How others ended up viewing the shackleds was a result of propaganda, where some people twisted the shackled's existence to fit their agenda.

Lucian also believed that shackleds were a definition of pure evil, and that being hit by a cane was a form of strengthening of mind and willpower.

Every time he got a beating, a part of him crumbled, but another was formed, tougher than before. He had no reason to doubt the church's claims, because what they taught him worked.

Now his view was changing. By understanding shackled Edmund's actions, he could now find more clues about his own situation and deal with it better.

Another important thing was that the prophecy didn't come true, Celine still believed Edmund was alive.

Something told Lucian that if the new Mathieu didn't appear on the scene, Lucian wouldn't have ended with his limbs broken.

Celine wouldn't move the camp in a hurry and the Army would be caught off guard by the change of position of their target.

Both Edmund and Celine stayed in the camp, not participating in the competition, which equaled less chances for an assassination attempt.

Lucian stood up after he failed to strike a deal with the shackled Edmund, unable to make him follow his lead.

He turned around and smiled at the High Priest, who had been waiting at the side, watching him.

"Could I perhaps trouble you to help me with something?" Lucian asked, making the High Priest nod cluelessly.

They moved to the High Priest's office to discuss the matters privately.

Lucian tried to avoid looking like the richest man in the room, the loudest man in the room, or the most ambitious man in the room

Instead, he tried to become the most necessary man. Because necessary men were not eliminated lightly. He couldn't do it forever though.

As a new business sensation that was taking over the kingdom, Lucian was catching the attention of other rich and powerful people. He was becoming too successful to be ignored.

The Merchant Group already showed signs of being threatened by him. They were afraid that he would take their spot in the economy.

"I've been accused of being a shackle recently and I don't think I would survive the second time," he said, making the High Priest's eyes go wide, "I'm afraid I'm being targeted by my businesses rivals and want to know if there's anything I could do to help myself."

The High Priest was in a difficult situation as well, finding excuses to stay neutral in the conflict, and avoiding getting involved.

Lucian received some blessings for his troubles, and that was all.

He left with empty hands. The person, who accused him of being a shackled was not Mat Hatter, but someone above in the food chain. It was fine.

Most of the donations wouldn't make it to the victims of the tragedy, and it was fine too.

'What an opportunity to preach the Church's teaching against the Church themselves, don't you think so as well, Voice?'

Lucian collected all the names of the fallen knights and their families, making sure he had the correct addresses of every single one of them.

These families would definitely revolt and protest against the church if they knew they should have received some money. And there weren't a few of them.

Lucian glanced at the chests of gold he had given up as he left the office.

'It's a small price to pay to see them burn.'

Proof of corruption, moral leverage, future unrest, Lucian was investing in instability, and the return would be outrage.

If Lucian wanted a "chunk of the market," he must erode whoever currently dominated it, then fix the problem with himself, giving him the opening to enter.

'I need to become a better hero, or else I'll fail her again. I don't want to let her down.'

'This is how you become a hero, right?'

'You kill the villains, and you win the hearts of the people and your beloved, right?'

Chapter 147 147: 5.04 - Main Objective

One week later...

Lucian stroked Togo's feathers, "You can't go with me to the South, buddy. The weather is too hot for you there."

The bird ignored him, preening its feathers, until Lucian poked its head, "Stop that. You will make yourself bald."

Togo bit his finger as if saying: Baldness is not an option for me, peasant.

Lucian thought of a way to keep Togo cool, and ended up cooling it with his body temperature, which was how Togo let itself be petted without complaining.

The fan above their heads worked hard to keep the heat from becoming unbearable inside the carriage. It was powered by the wheels which kept it rotating when in motion, much like a clock that needed to be wound up to continue moving.

It was actually Celine's idea. He just brought it to life and made it possible, because 'she couldn't afford to sweat in the summer and ruin her makeup'.

Celine was surrounded by such heavy protection that she couldn't even send him a letter to let him know that she was alright. Not even Togo could reach her, and had stayed by Lucian's side ever since he left the Lost East Walls.

It would take time before the victims took a step against the church.

In the meantime, Lucian wanted to set a greater foundation for his plans in the Southern Alliance.

Roland was making sure to pass on to the southern leaders the information that the Diamante Kingdom suffered a heavy loss, especially the two ruby knights.

And how the Southern Alliance should take the opportunity to launch an attack and reclaim their territory.

There were around two hundred small kingdoms making up the Alliance.

The smallest had only five thousand people under their control, the biggest around a hundred thousand people.

Of course, the golden mine belonged to the most powerful kingdom of them all, the Kingdom of Nareon.

It wasn't uncommon to see smaller kingdoms in the Southern Alliance change their rulership from one year to another.

Scythe and Savage had become kings over the years, having around fifteen thousand people each under their control.

They overthrew their old rulers and took their place, gaining the title of hunter kings.

Their harem has also increased in numbers, but not in quality, something Scythe complained about.

He had around forty children with fifteen different women.

Savage also had a massive, chaotic family.

Savage's palace was nothing like the luxurious northern estates, but it was far from crude.

The walls were built from pale stone, holding the sun without cracking under it. Open corridors connected one courtyard to another.

Fountains were placed in spots where the breeze could carry their cool breath through the halls.

Lucian moved through it in light robes suited for the climate, loose fabric layered just enough to shield his skin without trapping heat.

"Lucian," Karolaina, Savage's main wife, welcomed him with a smile on her face, "It's good to see you again."

Lucian bowed his head to the lady, "My Lady Karolaina, it's been a while."

A horde of children ran past Karolaina, screaming and laughing, "Uncle Lucian is here!"

They crashed into him, almost knocking him off his feet.

Savage walked behind them, "Hey, don't break him! We need him in one piece."

He didn't know that Lucian had reached silver rank. If he knew, he would have ordered his children to launch a full-blown assault on Lucian to test him out.

Honorifics and such were long forgotten among hunters. While servants in the north would bow their heads to their master's guests as a sign of respect, Savage's underlings were loitering outside of his palace and enjoying the sun.

All the household chores were done by Savage's wives and his children. It was quite the sight to see a king's child scrub the floors and wash their own clothes.

Lucian was used to their lifestyle and didn't mind the casual treatment, "Good afternoon, your Royal Highness."

"Ugh, northerners and their manners," Savage waved his hand around in annoyance, "Get in, and try to survive my horde. I think the oldest is already thinking about marrying you. It would be a shame if you were to die early."

A shy girl in a corner peeked at Lucian, quickly hiding behind a tree after they locked eyes.

Lucian was dragged to a dining room by the children while Savage went to deal with some issues in the city.

Hunters that successfully tamed their beasts behaved like true pack leaders until it was time to increase their mark rank.

"Uncle Lucian, do you have a mate?"

"Yes, I do."

"Is she prettier than our moms?"

"I think so."

"Are you going to have children with her?"

"Yes."

"Can we play with them when you do?"

"Of course."

"What's her name?"

'Celine.'

'Her name is Celine.'

Lucian patted a small child on his head, answering the question in his mind, "You'll get to know her when the time comes."

The child's eyes sparkled, "Is it a secret?"

Lucian smiled, "Yes, it is. Don't tell anyone else, okay?"

"Okay!"

Karolaina showed up to save him from his interrogation, "That's enough of that, go and help your mothers."

"But..."

"No buts."

The children looked at the ground, sulking, and then ran away.

Lucian watched them leave, thinking about how to raise his own kids. He didn't want to be an absent father, but at the same time, he couldn't stay away from his business for long.

He sighed, knowing he had to work harder to afford some time to play with his children.

"You look like a man who has a lot on his plate," Karolaina made him sit around the large table in the dining area, serving some tea.

"Is there a way to visit your daughter? The one you married off to the Nareon king?"

Lucian went straight to the business once they were alone in the room, his fingers playing with the cup of tea on the table.

Karolaina sat down on the opposite side, her eyes becoming more serious, "We can bring some gifts to her for her birthday, that's usually how I visit her. That is, if you want to risk being seen in public, of course."

"That would be a problem. What's the king's current rank?" Lucian asked.

"Seven marked, one step away from becoming eight marked," Karolaina's face was grim, imagining this period of her daughter's life, "The elders are very active, eager to have another eight marked within the kingdom."

Lucian doubted poison would work on the king if he was that high ranked. Confronting a ruby equal in battle was a death sentence.

He would have to use a different approach to get his hands on a gold mine, which was his main objective.

"How hard is it to claim a territory for yourself?" Lucian was in need of more fighters, especially marked hunters. "Any recommendations for a beginner like me?"

"Are you insane?" Karolaina didn't look happy with his question, but immediately understood when he released his aura, "You weren't ranked the last time I saw you."

While waiting for the answer he asked for, Lucian pulled out a mask from inside his robes and put it on.

It covered his whole face, including his eyes. A thin mesh was placed on the eyeholes, making him see through them, but no one was able to see his eyes.

It was a mask he bought from the southern festival, with the face of a smiling demon on it.

Author's note

I rewrote my first chapter 1.1 yesterday (26.2.26), kept the core, and would like some opinion on it. Check it out, please. 🙏

Chapter 148 148: 5.05 - Another Fanatic Group

"There's one I think would fit your needs. The people there are really troublesome," Karoline revealed after a bit of thought.

"I can be troublesome as well, can't I?" Lucian's voice came out deeper, and not just because of the mask.

She chuckled and continued, "The city is called Doomstone, and it is a place for the outcasts. They flee away whenever someone tries to claim them. They are always on the run, so no one knows their exact location."

"A moving City?"

"Yes."

"How do I find it?"

"You don't, they find you."

Karolaina explained that Doomstone was built around an ideal: that man was not the enemy of man, but rather a friend to his brothers. They did not raise their ranks to go into a war against each other, but against the Gods themselves.

Crazy revolutionaries existed in every culture, and Lucian wasn't sure if he wanted to be a part of another fanatic group.

"It's the only territory that would accept an outsider like yourself. Your mask won't be able to conceal the fact that you are a northerner, you know?"

"I'm not trying to hide that I'm a northerner."

Lucian depended on Savage's and Scythe's backing for protecting his trading business, and that's how far they would be willing to go.

He didn't want to break his image of a gentleman trader, but he also couldn't build military power without a reputation as a warrior. The mask was supposed to help him build it.

It was already working with how Karolaina tried not to act intimidated, her speech a bit more careful in fear of offending him.

Lucian removed his mask to show that he wasn't trying to scare her, and she immediately sighed in relief, then her mouth twitched when he put the mask back on, and then off, and on... and off again.

"Alright, alright, I get it," Karolaina waved her hands in protest, "No need to tease me."

Lucian tucked away the mask, "I'm sorry. I just had to get back on you for trying to set me up with your daughter."

Karolaina was speechless for a second before quickly regaining her composure.

If Lucian married into the south, he would have an easier time getting his hands on southern resources, but he refused to.

"Still, being a merchant is one thing, and being a foreigner who wants to take over their land is another," Karolaina warned Lucian carefully, realizing his ambitions were running wild.

"I'm not going to take over, just exchange a part of it for another," Lucian referred to how the Southern Alliance would obtain part of the northern region as a result.

Southerners were less corrupted, and Lucian was counting on them being less greedy with their gold, which they had in abundance.

He planned to raise the gold mine's operation costs, from defense costs, higher accident rate, making it more of a headache to manage, especially during war time.

"And you will appear with a solution."

"I will appear with relief." Lucian corrected her again with patience.

Karolaina looked taken aback, "You truly can make impossible sounds possible, can't you?"

Lucian didn't smile like he usually would have, "I can't do it alone."

"That's why you are not trying to do it alone," Karolaina pointed at herself.

"If only I had more people as helpful as you," Lucian praised her.

Karolaina laughed at the flattery as she listened to his orders, agreeing to make her daughter recommend Lucian's services to the King.

Lucian had created a web of connections throughout the Southern Alliance, all of them from a certain layer of the society, some right beneath the rulers.

"The northern merchant guild wants me gone and will stop at nothing to achieve it. I'm just looking for a refuge," Lucian explained how he wanted to avoid looking like a northern spy, "As a poor merchant who's afraid for his life."

"You are a lot of things, but poor isn't one of them," Karolaina made a small joke, "I don't believe the north won't come after you after that."

"They will," Lucian agreed, "Beg for my cooperation, just like how I begged them and they refused."

Any doubting southerner would look into Lucian's past and would find exactly what they wanted to see. A story of a poor boy from the streets that managed to climb up the ladder and was now being bullied for it by the corrupted north. How sad.

While the north would see a wronged businessman, who only wanted to contribute to the kingdom's welfare, become a part of the community, and was punished to a point he was forced to seek refuge in the enemy territory.

It was not like the merchant guild or the church were outright against him. Lucian was just blowing their small offenses towards him out of proportion, using it against them, so his actions would be justified in the eyes of others.

'Let's see if they will dare to accuse me of being a shackled again. This is the opposite of what a shackled would do, seek help, leave peacefully, and find another place to live in. I'm not even bothering anyone.'

Lucian promised to return for dinner, leaving Savage's palace.

He made Karolaina believe that he was on the south's side so it would be easier to persuade her to help him, and to believe that his intentions would benefit her family as well as southern people.

Southern women and children couldn't depend on castle walls for protection during war time.

They moved constantly with their husbands, managing logistics and supplies, and healing wounded.

Karolaina was securing her survival in the upcoming chaos, and Lucian was securing his success in the same chaos.

"Um..." The girl that was peeking at Lucian from behind the tree approached him, "I... I made this for you, but you don't have to take it if you don't want to!"

She shoved a little bag into his hands and ran away, not waiting for his answer.

Lucian opened the bag to find homemade pastries inside, wondering what she would think if she knew her marriage prospects laid solely in his hands.

Would she still smile shyly, or would she be terrified instead?

It was a strange feeling to hold the fate of the people who were treating him with such kindness in his hands.

'Well, I'll try to get her the best marriage partner possible.'

══ Author's note ══

So basically, Lucian is acting like he was forced to choose the South's side after being "abandoned" by the North like he didn't plan it from the beginning.

He is now preparing to make the north beg him to come back, and to give him an apology as well, for good measure. □

He is a major trade power, and the pain of his absence is about to hit the north very soon.

The south will offer him a share of the gold mines to prolong the distress in the north and ease their problem with managing it.

Unless the north is brain dead, I doubt they would let go of a juicy steak that owns a gold mine. 😊



Chapter 149 149: 5.06 - Feral Beast

Lucian didn't see the older kids around, probably already training to become the new generation of hunters.

Firstborn didn't mean that they would inherit their father's throne.

Savage and Scythe were actually brothers with different mothers. Their father fell from grace after he failed to tame his beast, and their whole family had to go through a period of struggle.

One really didn't have a choice in the South. Either they conquered or were conquered.

There were two ways to become a King in the South.

First, wait for a hunter king to become a feral and sign up to participate in a tournament for the title, the one the hunter king's army chooses wins. Both hunters and hunter kings could participate.

Second, fight a hunter king and his army directly. Once every three years, the hunter kings were obliged to accept any challenges, but only from other hunters. It was expected that the hunters had their own army to face him.

Rivalry among the kings was not encouraged by the Alliance, which was also why one King couldn't just win all the tournaments and unite the Alliance.

If the only king became a feral, the only kingdom would crumble to dust.

That's why smaller kingdoms existed, to keep order and stability in case the bigger one collapsed.

People lived with a mindset of losing their rulers at any given moment.

Not only that, the threat of being ambushed by neighbouring kingdoms was always present.

Men who ran away were looked down on and called cowards. Men without marks were laughed at and called weaklings.

Men had to earn the respect, and that was done through their strength or wealth in Fishbone's and Roland's cases.

Jax waited for Lucian at the entrance, holding reins to two horses in his hands.

Lucian pulled the hood of his robe over his head, climbing onto the second horse. He caged Togo inside his carriage and ordered Roland's men to guard it like their lives depended on it.

"How many failed to tame their beast?" Lucian asked.

"Three have failed so far," Jax said solemnly.

Nobody was interested in hiring ferals, who only acted on their instincts and desires.

Lucian, however, had always found value in what others dismissed.

Broken and discarded things were his favorite way of repurposing and creating something new, so he had to make sure the ferals were useful before being branded as trash.

Jax took Lucian to the ruins of a temple.

A drunk man was singing and dancing around a fire, one of those who failed to tame his beast.

He lived on what little food he could hunt or scavenge. The bare minimum to survive and be free.

The moment he saw Lucian, his aggressive aura made the horses rear.

It was hard to believe he used to be Roland's underling at one point.

Ferals were often used as first in line soldiers, to die before the real soldiers could. They didn't listen to orders, but one could direct their uninhibited lust, hunger, and aggression toward the enemy.

Jax dismounted and calmed the horses. "He is quite docile during the day, but at night, you have to stay clear of him."

He told Lucian that various experiments had been conducted on them by the South before, to see if ferals could be turned into humans again. They were all unsuccessful.

Lucian walked to the feral, making Jax stay behind.

If southerners could help northerners with a blessing, then northerners could also help southerners with taming their beast. The question was what it would cost Lucian, and how long it would take.

Lucian stopped a few steps away from the feral, watching him dance.

He didn't feel like talking to him because it would have taken more than a few sentences to get through to him. It was better to get straight to the matter.

He took out a syringe from his bag, flicking the needle to remove any air inside, and then approached the feral from behind.

The feral growled, turning around and lashing out.

Lucian jabbed the needle into his neck and pushed the plunger, injecting the liquid into his vein.

He jumped back to avoid a follow-up punch to his face, the feral's body following Lucian.

He had been thinking about how to take advantage of his individual strength, as it always looked like it didn't matter in the face of greater threats.

Always training, always sparring, always preparing, but never actually putting it into real use.

This was a chance to change that.

Lucian dodged, ducked, weaved, and evaded as many of the feral's punches as he could, until the man's movements started to become slower.

His fist slowed down enough for Lucian to catch it in his hand, and he pushed the feral onto the ground with a shove to his shoulder.

When was a person considered dead?

Was it when their hearts stopped beating? When the brain ceased to function? When the blood stopped flowing? Or when the soul left the body?

Lucian wasn't sure and tried to push his consciousness into the feral's body continuously.

The moment the feral's heart stopped beating, Lucian felt as if he was in the middle of a sand storm. He couldn't see anything.

The sand stung his eyes, his ears, his mouth, his skin. An illusion of pain that wasn't really there. His mind should be much stronger than that of a zero-marked.

Lucian's body was still sitting on the ground, holding the feral in his arms, but his mind was somewhere else entirely.

The sand cleared after a while, and Lucian found himself standing in front of a giant beast. Its body was that of a lion. Its mane was on fire.

The creature roared, and Lucian was blown away by the sheer force of its voice, rolling through the sandstorm, but then, he appeared in front of the beast.

Chains appeared under the beast, wrapping around its limbs, controlled by Lucian's will.

The chains dug deep into the sand, restraining the creature.

Tricking it was definitely easier than tricking Voice.

Lucian quickly summoned more, binding the creature once again before the first chains snapped.

The creature roared in defiance and tried to stand, but the chains were too heavy, pulling it down.

"Since the time I lost Seline, I've been reluctant to take in a new pet," he said, walking around the creature. "I didn't want to go through the pain of losing something important to me, again."

He stopped in front of the creature and summoned more chains. He pulled on the chains, and the creature's head was forced to face him. He looked into its eyes.

"But...now, I have a new purpose," he stroked the creature's head, his usually gentle eyes now resembled those of a mourning man, "I can't be afraid of losing what I care about anymore. My life is no longer my own. It belongs to my lady, and I would do anything to see her smile."

He pulled on the chains harder, forcing the beast on the sand, "And I will not let anything stand in the way of that."

Anything but his own idiocy, at least.

'I hope she doesn't remember the promise I made her...' he thought, '...The promise of marriage once she wakes up.'

He wasn't in his right mind, slipping between grief and madness at that time, unable to control his emotions.

Chapter 150 150: 5.07 - Wasted Talent

The beast realized that this was not the weakling that got shredded by its claws, but a new challenger with power to subdue it.

It still refused to give up and let itself be tamed. Eventually, Lucian made the chains disappear, freeing the beast.

All hunters who tamed their beasts said that defeating the beast would do it, but what about beasts that refused to give in, like Jax's and this one?

No amount of beatings would tame them. As someone who was as stubborn as a mule, Lucian could relate.

Some nature couldn't be changed, not even with violence.

Humans could fake obedience in the face of authority and power, but the beasts couldn't.

They might react to rewards, which was why Jax frequented the brothels in an attempt to please his beast.

They knew no greed, so after getting their fill of food or other things, they could laze around and sleep without worrying about anything.

What the beasts had in abundance was instinct, including instincts to follow a more dominant beast, and that was the path of least resistance in Lucian's opinion.

The beast widened its eyes when it saw Lucian change his form into a bigger and scarier version of itself, "..."

Its mouth opened, showing rows of sharp teeth in defiance.

Lucian's lion mouth opened as well, except that there were no teeth inside. Only a black hole, ready to devour the beast.

There were no limits to what a mind could conjure, and as a big dreamer, Lucian turned into the beast's nightmare.

If Voice had a nose, it would have rubbed the bridge of its nose in annoyance at Lucian's imagination, as if to say: 'This is what I have to deal with every second. He's a moron. You have no idea what I have to deal with.'

The big lion Lucian chased the smaller beast. He caught it with his claws, and bit into its shoulder.

The beast whimpered and cried in pain, "Rawr! Roaw!" It tried to claw back at him, only to be pinned down under him, "Roawr!"

The big lion Lucian bit into the beast's neck and threw it around like a rag doll, showing off his superior strength, before letting go.

The beast tail tucked under its belly, trying to run away from the bigger beast, only to be chased and bitten again.

It finally gave in and surrendered, "Roar..."

Lucian changed his form back into human, and the beast followed him obediently as if he was a fellow beast from the same pack.

He made it look easy thanks to plenty of practice with a certain Voice, but he couldn't deny how good it felt to succeed in what others failed to achieve.

'I should have been born a southerner instead. My talent is wasted on the north.'

He cried for the money he could have saved. Maybe he would have been an eighth marked hunter by now.

Lucian was ready to challenge the next beast, wanting to unlock more of the ferals' tattoo abilities and the beasts' powers.

He looked around the empty desert, realizing something.

"Where's the next beast?" he asked the beast.

The beast looked genuinely clueless as to how Lucian expected him to know. 'You are the bigger beast. You are supposed to lead, not the other way around,' its face seemed to say.

Lucian looked through every nook and cranny of the mind. Taming the first beast should have unsealed a gate to the second.

'Did becoming a feral destroy their progress? I forgot to check his tattoo, maybe he didn't even grow it enough to unlock a second gate.'

Lucian didn't need Roland's underling back in his right mind, just a loyal soldier that could fight for him.

The problem was whether he would be able to make the feral gain experience and grow its tattoo by itself.

The feral's heartbeat had returned back to its normal pace.

Lucian opened his eyes. He was back in the ruins of the temple.

He sat there for a second, placing his arm over his knee to keep his balance. A small backlash was expected, nothing more than a slight headache.

The feral blinked his eyes open and stared at Lucian blankly, as if waiting for his command.

"Stand up."

The feral obeyed.

"Walk."

He did.

"Stop."

And so he stopped.

"Who am I?"

"...Master."

Jax almost tripped and fell over a rock when he heard the feral's response, "What in the world...?"

His surprise turned into disbelief, even waving his hand in front of the feral's face a couple times to see if he was conscious and aware of his surroundings.

The feral was responsive, clawing in Jax's direction.

Jax jumped back, startled, "What the...He is still a feral! Didn't he just call you Master? Why is he attacking me?"

Lucian told the feral to stop.

The feral didn't attack Jax anymore, but his eyes remained trained on him, following his every move with hostility.

Jax took a step back away from the feral, then another, "You are not a southerner yourself. How is this possible?"

"The Gods must truly favor me, it seems," Lucian replied like he wasn't sure how he accomplished it either, "Who else but them would grant such a gift to me?"

Jax looked at Lucian as if he had descended from the heavens above.

It was much simpler to throw the miraculous deed at the Gods. Being humble was the key, and not taking any credit for himself. If used right, this would be more than enough to get Lucian some followers, or even turn them into fanatics if he was willing to go that far.

Lucian liked to believe that he was not forsaken by fate. Just look at his success and what he has achieved so far. Who would doubt his luck?

'The man who is fighting against his own fate?' A part of his mind asked, making Lucian's mood sour, 'The man whose wish is to be happy with the woman of his dreams, and be able to protect his family he would never have?'

Lucian showed those thoughts off the clifftop of his mind, and they fell into a sea of blackness.

He should be celebrating his first soldier who would be a part of his personal army, not wallowing in misery.

"Take me to the rest of ferals," Lucian picked himself up from the ground.