

My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone

#Chapter 31 - 2.16 Profit From Landscape Contracting Business - Read My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone Chapter 31 - 2.16 Profit From Landscape Contracting Business

Chapter 31: 2.16 Profit From Landscape Contracting Business

Lucian took advantage of the Voice's powers to go by with barely any sleep.

The Voice didn't seem to need one, so Lucian would often stay awake for longer than a normal person. He would only sleep to daydream or when his body needed more rest than usual (his mind couldn't suffer from sleep deprivation).

He currently had 20 large gold coins to his name, which he intended to increase by at least 600 by the end of the year.

One greenhouse would take around three months to build, and he already had three commissions, which he planned to complete before the winter season started.

The cost of materials was around 40% of the cost, labor (including his) 40%, which would leave him with around 20% as profit.

One greenhouse around the size of three three-storey houses would cost around 500-600 large gold coins, which meant that his profit would be around 120 large gold coins, give or take.

The interior landscaping would cost around 50 large coins with a 75% profit, which equaled 37 large gold coins and 500 large silver coins in his pocket.

That was around 470 large gold coins from his landscaping contractor business alone.

Herbs, spices, and scent extracts he produced would bring around 7 gold coins.

The rest (125 LGC) he planned to make through trade, where he could sell an item for more than ten times its price. He knew that there was a high demand for exotic fruit and silk in the north, while the south had a high demand for fine art and artisan products.

Four wagons. He needed to buy four more wagons and more horses. A better horse cost him around 55 large silver coins, and he haggled the price of a wagon down from 250 to 170 large silver coins.

"WOOF!" A bark interrupted Lucian's calculations as a small kanghal puppy dragged its leash away from him, "Arf! Arf!"

It had pale fawn fur, with a black muzzle and ears that flopped to the front. Its tail was curled, and it bounced up and down excitedly at the sight of a butterfly.

The horses grazing on the field and chewing on the grass neighed and stomped the ground, spooked by the small creature.

"Hey," Lucian said, pulling the pup back to him, "If you behave like this before your future owner, I won't get paid. Now, be quiet."

"Arooo," the puppy whined in protest, its tail wagging faster and faster until it was a blur, "Arf! Arf!"

"Ah," Lucian sighed, picking up the small dog, "Come here."

The puppy tried to lick Lucian's face, but he kept it at arm's length.

The puppy, not happy with the treatment, tried to reach for Lucian's hand. After failing to do so, it started licking its own paw instead.

Lucian placed it inside a cage and closed the lid, carrying it into one of the wagons. It was the last thing on his checklist before he settled off to the south.

Fishbone connected the wagons, and Leaf helped him with the twelve horses, making sure they were all ready to go.

Lucian climbed to the front seat of the first wagon, and the rest of the group positioned themselves on the middle and last wagons.

"Let's go," he said, flicking the reins. The horses trotted forward, pulling the wagons along.

The trio glanced at the southern forest, which had a small part of it chopped off. A pile of wood was stacked on the side, waiting to be used once dried. *'Too fast!'* Their boss moved around too fast! They were barely keeping up!

It was a bumpy ride at first, but once the wheels started moving smoothly, they were able to pick up speed.

Once they left the border behind, the scenery began to change. The forests gave way to long stretches of dry, red land. The occasional tree was still visible here and there, but mostly it was just rocks.

Each village, town, or city was around six hours of traveling distance from the others. Each stop was the same: a local would come out to greet them and swap the horses, and then they would leave.

"Umm," a young girl approached the wagon while they were waiting for the swap, looking shy and embarrassed, trying to offer a basket of fresh fruits, "Our inn would like to welcome you to our humble town. We have the best food and service in the area."

She was dressed in a simple white dress with an apron tied around her waist, and her red hair was tied in a ponytail with a ribbon. Her features were soft, and her eyes were big and innocent. She looked like a doll, but her expression was serious.

Jax, Fishbone, and Leaf gawked as the girl approached their Boss, who was sitting under the shade of the tree with the sleeping puppy in his lap.

She seemed to be nervous and fidgeting, but her eyes were determined to catch Lucian's attention, who was busy petting his temporary pet. "Excuse me...are you the owner of the wagons?" she asked.

Lucian looked up, his hand stopping mid-stroke on the puppy's fur. "Yes, I am."

"I have some tangerines here, would you like some?" She offered him the basket. "They're fresh and juicy."

He took a few pennies out of his pocket, but she stopped him. "Please take them free of charge, Sir, as a token of our gratitude for your visit," she said with a smile.

Lucian looked up at her weirdly, his gaze offended, "If you have free food to offer, give it to the ones in need," he said, "I'm not a beggar and I can pay for my food."

The trio almost fainted at the rejection. The girl was obviously flirting with the Boss and was clearly interested in him. Why did he reject her?

"..." The girl's smile dimmed, her hands holding the basket tighter. "...I apologize. I didn't mean to offend you. It's just that our inn is not doing well and we need more customers to stay in business..."

"We will be departing soon. I'm afraid I won't be able to help you with that," Lucian said, his smile apologetic.

The girl looked down, feeling awkward and embarrassed. "I'm sorry, I'll be going now. Please enjoy the tangerines."

She bowed and placed the basket by Lucian's feet.

==== Author's note =====

Do you like the detailed calculations and explanations of Lucian's profits?

Should I expand on that or keep it simple?

Thanks for reading, and please consider donating cola for this poor thirsty writer. ☐

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Chapter 32: 2.17 A Man Of My Word

Lucian smiled and picked up a tangerine from the basket once the girl was out of earshot.

He peeled the skin off and popped a segment into his mouth. "Hmmm...it's good."

Jax stared at him in disbelief.

"What?" Lucian asked, "It's free. Why are you looking at me like that?"

The trio stared at him, then at each other.

Jax was the first to speak, "Boss, are you... blind?"

"Huh?" Lucian raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"She was flirting with you!" Jax said.

"I know," Lucian said, popping another piece of tangerine into his mouth, "That's her job, isn't it? To attract customers for their business."

"Well, I think..." Jax began, "She was more serious about you than about the business."

"I know," Lucian repeated, his tone flatter. "I know how she feels about me. If I accepted every girl who gave me the look, I would have a whole town of wives."

"..." They were speechless, their mouths hanging open in disbelief. Too cocky! Too arrogant!

Lucian threw the rest of the tangerines in their direction. "If you get rich enough, you'll have your own ladies fawning over you," he said, popping another piece of tangerine into his mouth.

The boys' eyes lit up at the prospect of being rich enough to have girls throw themselves at them. "Yes, boss!"

It was the type of motivation they needed to hear.

They soon arrived at the valley where Roland and his bandits were waiting for them. It was the same spot as before, nestled between two cliffs.

Roland was a man in his late thirties. A scarf covered his head and the bottom half of his face, leaving only his grey eyes visible. His clothes were worn and patched, but he still managed to look intimidating.

"I see you've come back," Roland said. "And you brought a bigger cargo, just like you said."

"I'm a man of my word," Lucian replied, getting out of the wagon, "I told you I would, and I did."

"So? Why did you choose us, bandits? Why not honest men from the towns?" Roland asked. He thought it through again and found it suspicious. There were better people to hire.

"When I first arrived in the south, the honest men were the first to spit in my face," Lucian started explaining as he leaned on the wagon, "Whereas the beggars were the ones to share the food they found in the trash with me. So I would rather hire beggars turned bandits than honest men."

"..." Roland was silent for a moment, his eyes squinting. The boy had refused to join his path back then, saying that he wanted to try another option, to see which worked out better.

The one who sat and waited for luck, or the one who chased after it.

"What will be our jobs then?" Roland asked, expecting him to say guards or fighters, as Lucian didn't have enough people to protect his business.

"Debt collectors," Lucian said, "I can't have some people forgetting to pay me. Some of them might need some reminding."

Lucian had no way to protect his money during his travels. He hid some and loaned the rest, making sure that he never had too much with him at once, and also to always have some to come back to in case he got robbed on his way.

He pulled out a notebook with names of people, the money they owed, and the due dates.

"You don't have to kill them. Just pressure them until they pay what they owe. For every successful collection, you will get five small silver coins on top of your salary, which will be 100 small silver coins a day."

The debtors didn't have to pay everything at once. They could do it in installments. There was a small fee for borrowing money from him, and there were late fees, which increased as time passed.

From the money collected, 330 large silver coins would go to Roland's group each month, and the rest would be re-lended per Lucian's instructions until they got the hang of the process.

Lucian explained it to them in detail, turning the whole thing into a business, complete with proper bookkeeping, which he taught Roland how to do as his group joined him on the journey.

Two days later...

The group huddled outside another town to set up a camp.

"Bind with Jack, Roland," Lucian ordered, taking a seat on the heated boulder, "He will keep a copy of the book in case something happens to you. I expect you to follow his orders like I'm here myself."

He didn't mention what would happen if Roland betrayed his trust. He kept a check on the numbers, so lying about someone not paying and keeping the money for himself wouldn't pass as easily as lying about a wagon getting robbed.

He planned to pass down the trade in the south to Fishbone to manage, and the plot of land near the southern forest to Leaf.

Jax was the worst at human interaction, so he would stay close to Lucian, serving as a link between Goblin's greenhouse, Leaf's plantation, Fishbone's south trade, and Roland's treasury.

People would be more likely to avoid Roland's group than try to ambush them.

"It's a big plan," Lucian said, "And you, my friends, have been chosen to be the key players. Don't chase small gains when the big ones are within your reach."

As the fire licked the logs in the middle of the circle, he could see their irises changing into imaginary gold coins under the light.

They were hooked. No, more than hooked. They were ready to kiss the ground he walked on and worship his feet if he succeeded in delivering on his vision.

Roland lifted his imaginary crown and placed it over Lucian's head, "From today on, you are the Boss, and I'll be your right-hand man, and we will conquer the south's market. What do you say?"

"I say...that you are drunk already," Lucian said, taking away his bottle and replacing it with a candy, "Cut on booze, and start chewing on mint leaves. Your breath is terrible."

The group laughed and tasted the spicy sweets Lucian handed out.

"I'm short on employees, so you will produce these on top of your other debt duties."

"..."

"..."

Their laughter died down, feeling like their bodies were going to be squeezed like lemons by this boy half their size.

Chapter 33: 2.18 Not Real Employeeess

"How did you make it this far without employees?" Jax asked, his mouth filling with the cooling taste of mint, which helped with the dryness of the desert. It was something that would sell well in the south.

"Whatever those people that worked for me before are, they certainly weren't my employees," Lucian said with a shudder.

"What happened?" Fishbone asked.

"They betrayed me," Lucian said simply, his eyes looking at the fire, "Took advantage of my absence to steal my money, my goods, and still acted as if they were the best thing that ever happened to me when I came back. So I let them go. They should be begging somewhere for scraps by now."

The group laughed awkwardly, not knowing how to react to such a story. It was meant to be a warning for them.

"Ungrateful bastards," Roland grumbled, spitting into the fire.

"Indeed," Lucian said, "That's why I'm hiring you. It's easier to trust someone who admits to being a scoundrel than someone who pretends to be a saint."

They were stunned by the compliment, feeling their chests swell with pride at the boy's faith in them.

"Damn right," one of Roland's men said, puffing out his chest. The kid had a vision, and he had a plan to make it happen. He was a dreamer with the feet firmly on the ground, a rare combination.

Lucian spent the rest of the evening explaining their duties, sipping on water as they, too, had to switch to water.

He had a way of talking that made everything seem so simple, so achievable, and they couldn't help but feel excited with each passing moment.

The fire was slowly dying down, and the stars were out in full force, illuminating the stony desert with their silver light.

Everyone was getting ready to sleep, while Lucian continued to stare at the sky.

'Aren't the stars beautiful, Voice?'

'...' the voice was silent for a while, *'I have no interest in such mundane things.'*

'You are boring, Voice. You should take some time to appreciate the beauty of the world once in a while.'

'...' The world was suddenly beautiful now? What had gotten to the boy this time?

Lucian connected a few stars in his mind, *'I can see her face. The nose is a bit crooked, but it is her.'*

'Astronomy has nothing to do with face-reading,' Voice said. Of course it had something to do with that duke's daughter.

'The constellation of the Little Wife, I shall call it.'

'She will be the death of you.'

Lucian's mile was small, but it was there. He was aware of the risks of being with her, of the dangers that it would bring to both of them.

But if she was ready to face them, then so was he. Her last words were enough to give him the strength to keep going.

'It would have been great if we could bind each other like the southerners do. Maybe if I pray to the Goddess of the Sun, She will hear my pleas and grant my wish.'

Lucian clapped his hands twice, and then prayed.

The men saw him praying to the stars, and they did the same out of respect for their new boss. Whatever god he was following, they shall follow too.

Lucian accompanied Fishbone for a two more trips to the south until he got a grip of the business. As for protection, he had Roland find the right people.

After all, he had some experience with leading people, and he knew which ones would follow his orders and which ones would cause trouble.

"Ugh," Jax grumbled, carrying a backpack filled with tools and equipment, his sandals crunching on the gravel and dry soil.

He followed a few locals Lucian had hired to guide them through the hills. There was just tall grass, a few trees here and there, and a lot of rocks.

Plants that lived in such harsh conditions usually had beneficial properties, or the opposite. The one Lucian was after was the second kind.

Smell of rotten flesh soon hit their nostrils. A dead animal was lying on the ground, near a patch of strange flowers.

The locals called it "Devil's tongue" because of its long, tongue-like spathe that was dark red with purple spots.

Lucian covered his nose with his sleeve and took out a small trowel from his bag. He carefully dug around the small patch, taking care not to damage its roots.

He then placed it in a special container filled with soil from its original habitat, sealed it, and placed it inside the larger bag.

"Alright," Lucian said, "Let's go."

"Are we done?" Jax asked, hopeful.

"No," Lucian replied, pointing to the distance. "We need to check out that rocky area over there. There might be some succulents growing there."

He had already found three new species of plants, and he had his eyes set on a few more. The more he found, the more his collection would grow.

A cactus with long white hair-like spines. A shrub with small yellow flowers and thick, waxy leaves and devil's tongue. All of them were carefully documented and labeled with their location and date of discovery.

The further they were from the ocean, the drier and more barren the landscape became. It was the perfect place to look for plants that could survive with little water.

As expected, the rocky area was home to a variety of succulents. Lucian's eyes lit up as he collected samples, placing them carefully in his bag. Any parts of these succulents could usually be regrown into an identical plant, so he never took more than he needed.

Some could be poisonous, some could be medicinal, and some could be both. Only testing would tell.

Jax helped him, and the duo managed to collect a good number of samples before the sun became too scorching to continue.

They returned to their wagon, parked in the shade of a large tree.

They had some spare time to build a small fire and roast the gazelle they captured earlier.

"For how long do you plan to stay in the north this time? Before returning back to the south," Jax asked, flipping the meat over the fire.

"Longer than usual," Lucian said, "My next three greenhouses are in the north, and I need to supervise their construction."

He also wanted to see Celine, but he didn't say that out loud.

Chapter 34: 2.19 A New Status Symbol

Marquess Blackwood stood with his hands clasped behind his back, the morning sunlight glinting off his silver waistcoat.

His brow furrowed as he surveyed the half-finished structure that dominated the gardens of his ancestral home.

The young man by his side had assembled the best architects and craftsmen in the land for a project that would, if successful, transform not just a garden, but his entire family's standing in the world.

A status symbol was what the marquess requested.

"If I understand this correctly," Marquess Blackwood began, skepticism still carved in his voice, "this glass structure will maintain a tropical environment in the dead of our northern winter?"

"Yes, My Lord," Lucian replied with a respectful bow of his head.

He had traded his simple traveling clothes for a more fitting attire of black trousers, a crisp white shirt, and a tailored waistcoat of deep green that matched the leaves of the plants he so cherished.

"Pineapples and oranges will grow here?" the Marquess asked again, like he did not believe Lucian the first time.

"They will, My Lord. You'll be the first in the kingdom to have a year-round supply of citrus fruits in your own home. Not to mention the spectacle it will provide when hosting guests. Imagine a winter ball held among flowering orchids and palm trees."

The Marquess' gaze softened slightly, the corners of his mouth tugging upward at the thought. Such a display would be unrivaled. It would be the talk of the aristocracy for seasons.

His marquessate was located in a colder region of the Diamante Kingdom, meaning that the cost of building it would be higher. The structure had to withstand heavy snowfall and harsh winds, requiring thicker glass and a more robust iron framework than in other regions.

But the Marquess was prepared to pay. He had three daughters to marry off and a son to position as a worthy heir. There was also a possibility of being a candidate for the Duke of the North.

This crystal palace would be his weapon in the social battlefield. It wouldn't be just a display of wealth and power. Its very operation could bring prosperity to his people.

"I have heard whispers from the south," the Marquess said, turning to face Lucian fully. "That you've built... two of these structures already?"

"Yes, my lord," Lucian confirmed, not a hint of arrogance in his tone. "One for Earl Laurent from the West Hills and another for a wealthy merchant guild leader in the capital. Each was fitted to their specific requirement."

"How long until the dukes and royal family start demanding your services?" the Marquess mused aloud, "A man of your talent could become very valuable, very quickly."

Lucian kept his expression carefully neutral. "I am merely a landscape contractor, My Lord. My business is plants and architecture, not politics."

"Yet your work has political consequences whether you intend it or not," the Marquess countered, his eyes sharp. "The Earl Laurent has already hosted three gatherings in his new conservatory. Each one was attended by people who wouldn't have glanced his way before. Your creation gave him the stage to elevate himself."

Lucian offered a slight nod. "I am honored that my work serves my clients' ambitions."

The Marquess gave a dry chuckle. "Don't play the humble merchant with me, young man. I know ambition when I see it. You're not just building a glass box for plants. You're constructing a ladder to climb society itself."

Lucian met the Marquess's gaze directly as he straightened his back, "Everyone climbs, My Lord. Some use family connections. Some use military prowess. I use what Mother Earth has given me."

"Honest, at least," the Marquess acknowledged. "And effective. Let's discuss the next phase of this project. The south gate needs to be redesigned. Make it larger, with ornate ironwork that displays our family crest prominently."

"Of course, my lord. The redesign will require—"

"Expense is not my primary concern," the Marquess interrupted. "Impact is. This conservatory must be the grandest in the kingdom. I intend to host Duke Rochefort himself this midwinter. His daughter will reach marriageable age soon, and my son—"

The Marquess stopped himself, realizing he was sharing too much of his political maneuverings with a tradesman, no matter how exceptional.

Lucian's heart leaped at the mention of Rochefort. Celine. For a moment, his carefully maintained composure threatened to slip.

Fifteen wasn't really a marriageable age yet, considering life expectancy was around 145 years. 25 to 30 was considered the perfect time to marry, but girls often became engaged at 15 to 20 to build connections between families.

The thought of Celine being courted by the Marquess's son sent a jolt of something ugly through Lucian's chest.

He had not seen Celine since their encounter at the border. His promise to visit her had been delayed by business, by travel, by the constant need to expand his operations.

Now, the universe seemed determined to remind him of her existence at every turn.

He conversed with the Marquess for another hour, discussing the placement of specific plants for maximum visual impact.

"I plan to let the guests enter through a grove of citrus trees," the Lucian explained, tracing a path on the blueprint with his finger. "They'll first notice the fragrance, then the sight of actual fruit growing in winter. After that, we'll lead them to the central..."

His connections were growing stronger and invitations to visit noble estates flooded his tray, but none of them were from the Rocheforts. The Duke would have certainly heard of him by now, but there was no invitation.

They were in a mourning period after the sudden death of the former Duke, Celine's grandfather.

When he heard about it, Lucian dropped everything to get to her, or at least find out how she was doing.

He had no idea how he planned to get past the castle walls and guards, but he had to do something.

'Make one of their gardeners call in sick, and then get hired as a temporary replacement?'

He heard their requirements for hiring new staff were quite strict. From background check to health check, they had to make sure no one with ill intent would get inside.

Chapter 35: 2.20 A Heart Wants What It Wants

Lucian couldn't apply for a permanent position in the Rochefort house, as he had his own business to run. He could offer consultation services, though.

So he sent a letter to the head gardener of the Rochefort estate, offering his expertise on the matter of treating plant disease, plant care, and landscape improvements for a reasonable fee.

Three days later, a response arrived. It was a rejection, stating that they had their own methods and that they did not require outside assistance at the moment.

'A polite no,' Lucian thought, disappointed. *'What now? Should I spread a plant epidemic? Something that will make them desperate enough to hire me?'*

'No...No plants shall be hurt in the process. It's against my principles.'

He slumped onto his desk. The dim light of a single oil lamp cast long shadows across the room. He was in his small office, located in one of the major cities of the Rechefort duchy.

He bought the two storey building two months ago. It used to belong to a local lord who managed the farmlands in the area. The location wasn't the best, but what wouldn't Lucian do to kick away the tanner the same way the tanner had done to him back then?

It wasn't a scene worth mentioning. The tanner's expression was the same as Lucian's when he was kicked out of his father's workshop (despite being able to afford the rent). The heart wants what it wants, and his wanted to reduce that tanner to tears.

'Embarrassing me before Celine, that's what he gets,'

Lucian mused, thinking back on the incident. *'Why does she never show up during my cool moments? Only when I'm at my lowest.'*

This got him an idea.

'I'll try to persuade them to resign their job,' Lucian decided. He couldn't just offer the gardeners more money to quit. That would be too suspicious, and news would travel fast to the ears of the nobles.

Instead, he would spread news that he was hiring and looking for experienced gardeners to expand his business, something that would entice them to come to him.

Some people preferred stability over risk, so not everyone would come, but even a few was enough to create a gap in their workforce.

'I'm still short on workers,' Lucian thought as a justification for his actions.

Poaching servants from noble households could be seen as theft or a malicious act, something he could get in trouble for. So he had to be careful about his approach.

Making the offer seem too good to refuse was one thing, but making it seem like it was the employee's own idea to leave was another.

His services should reduce the overall cost for the estate.

A noble estate usually had a fixed number of permanent staff, limited by budgets, housing, and supervision capacity. They couldn't suddenly double or triple their staff without it becoming a logistical nightmare.

But Lucian could. He could deploy a large workforce for short-term, high-intensity projects. The estate would only pay for his services when they were needed, saving money on year-round salaries, housing, and food.

The next day, he contacted a local herald to spread the word, and soon, news of his search reached the ears of several gardeners in the region.

His previous projects, the greenhouses, had already made him famous among the botanically inclined.

That was the first problem. The second one was how to bypass the supervisors who would overlook their work. Getting into the estate was one thing, but getting close to Celine without arousing suspicion was another.

'Well, I'll have to cross that bridge when I get to it. First, I need to get in.'

Lucian presented his proposal to the houses closest to him. Those that needed to cut on the expenses without compromising quality, had commissioned Lucian the same day.

Lucian immediately began to sketch out the terrain of the Baron's garden, labeling the positions of the buildings, the trees, and the plants. He needed to plan out the layout of the proposed changes, from which he would calculate the costs and materials needed.

The return in profit from tending to gardens was painfully low compared to his other businesses, but it was still early days.

"Tell Goblin to prepare one batch of Frost Peachies and a batch of Sun Saires. Dispatch twenty five workers to the Oakheart estate by tomorrow. Make sure they bring their tools," Lucian ordered Jax, who was holding an umbrella above his head to shield him from the light rain.

"Right away," Jax replied, passing on the message to Goblin through the connection between their tattoos.

Lucian continued to plan on the piece of paper, pointing arrows and lines to connect one area with another. He imagined the twenty five workers moving around the garden, planting flowers and trees, trimming hedges, and paving paths. He saw the whole scene in his head, and he had to adjust the plan to make it more efficient.

A few minutes later, Jax interrupted him, "They are on their way and should arrive by noon tomorrow. Anything else?" he asked.

"No," Lucian said, putting the piece of paper away, "I'm done here. We can go shopping before they arrive. Any new requests from Fishbone?"

"He's asking for two more wagons to transport the goods. Says the demand for Beeswax and Honey has been increasing." Jax continued to recite a list of demands, his voice monotone, "Savage wants a shipment of nuts. And Scythe wants to negotiate a deal for a few luxury goods..."

Lucian nodded, taking notes in his notebook. He could buy most things from local merchants in bulk, just like how they often bought his southern goods in bulk.

He rarely sold to final consumers nowadays as it would take too much time.

Just the thought of standing by a stall and screaming his lungs out to attract customers made him sick.

Maybe he would open a store for the public one day, but it would be run by a different person, not him.

Chapter 36: 2.21 The Rochefort's Estate

Lucian and Jax walked through the busy streets of the city, the mud from the road splashing onto their boots as they dodged carriages and pedestrians.

They noticed a group of people crowding around a notice board, pointing at it curiously.

"Let's see what's going on," Lucian said, making his way toward the crowd with Jax following closely behind him.

The notice was pinned in the middle of the board. It was an official-looking document, stamped with the Rochefort crest, and it was written in elegant calligraphy.

'By decree of Duke Rochefort,' the notice began. 'Following the untimely death of the former Duke, a period of mourning has been declared for the entire duchy. All citizens are expected to adhere to the following guidelines for three months:

1. All public celebrations, festivals, and gatherings are hereby suspended.

2. Music, loud laughter, and excessive festivity are to be avoided in public spaces.

3....

These measures are being implemented to honor the memory of the former Duke and to show respect for the grieving family.

Let it be known that the Rochefort family remains steadfast in its commitment to the welfare of its people, even in this time of sorrow.

Signed,

Adrast Rochefort, Duke of Rochefort.'

Lucian lived with the knowledge that his parents would pass soon due to the illness, so he was prepared for it in a way.

He made the most of the time he had left with them while also mentally steeling himself for their passing.

He also understood that not everyone had time to prepare for death, especially those who were expected to live for much longer, like the former Duke.

Celine never talked much about her family and was more interested in talking about their adventures. So he didn't know how she was affected by this. Was she the type to put on a brave face and hide her pain? Or would she break down and cry?

As he was thinking about her (like always), he searched for a letter they would usually exchange through the notice boards.

He already had his up, about a botanist looking for a special kind of moss. She would usually have something about gemstones or minerals, disguising herself as a merchant looking for quartz.

For example, first floor, room number four, would be encrypted into a phrase like '...one medium cut, size four...' in the notice.

He would then visit the biggest inn in the area and retrieve a small note hidden behind the top part of the wooden door frame.

The small letters didn't contain any sensitive information, but it was enough to know they were safe and thinking of each other. It was also a fun little game for them.

Lucian had been traveling from place to place, and there was nothing. Celine had gone completely silent. A few months had passed, and she still hadn't written to him.

It made him think that her Grandpa's death had happened earlier, not recent news. So the notice was more of a formality.

It made Lucian a bit impatient, so he used his connections to join one of the merchants that did business with the Rocheforts, offering his goods for cheaper if he took him along.

Lucian gulped nervously, a cold sweat running down his back as the massive gates of the Rochefort estate loomed over him.

Not even Marquess Blackwood's house made him feel this small. And that man lived in a castle.

The Rochefort estate was on a whole different level. It was more of a fortress, designed to withstand a siege.

Here and there, guards were posted with their spears held at the ready. Their eyes scanned the merchant and his entourage, looking for any signs of trouble.

The merchant, Graff, had been doing business with the Rocheforts for years, so he was allowed to enter the estate without much trouble.

The carriage ride to the main building was long, giving Lucian a glimpse of the vastness of the place. They owned so much land that they could afford to leave large areas of it empty, showing off their neatly cut grass.

'Do they love to make others feel small or something?' Lucian thought as he looked up at the main building.

The grandiose main entrance to the palace was made out of polished white marble, with stairs that led up to a set of tall doors made of dark wood and decorated with gold and silver.

The horse pulling their cart snorted and came to a halt before a secondary entrance for merchants, deliveries, and staff.

Lucian followed the merchant out of the carriage, carrying a chest to help blend in, when his eyes widened in surprise.

The swing hanging from the branch of a large tree swayed gently in the light breeze. She was sitting on it, pushing herself back and forth with her feet.

She was wearing a black dress that flowed down to the ground, her long hair tied in a tight bun. A small hat with a veil on top of her head shrouded her face, hiding her expression.

"You don't plan to come here in the winter too, do you?" Her twin brother approached her, draping his cloak over her shoulders. "What's here to see besides carts and workers?"

"A lot," Celine replied, and her voice reached Lucian like a quiet whisper, "They are dirt poor and work like animals. That's why I must come here, to remind myself how lucky I am to be born a Rochefort..."

Lucian's heart almost stopped when he saw her. *'Don't tell me she had been waiting for me.'*

A small moment of eye contact happened between Lucian and Celine, and her feet stopped pushing the swing.

'Since when?' he thought. He told her he would visit her. And here she was, waiting for him at the servants' entrance. The most likely place for him to appear. *'Did she visit this place daily just for a chance to see me?'*

"Follow me," the Rochefort staff said, directing them to the storeroom, where they would be paid for their goods.

Lucian quickly followed, his eyes still on Celine as he walked away.

Chapter 37: 2.22 Not Used To Such Finery

Lucian's plan was to get lost and wander around until he stumbled onto Celine, but the Rocheforts had people for everything. You couldn't go anywhere without someone watching over you like a hawk.

It was impossible to get lost here, and even more impossible to get in contact with Celine without being noticed.

He placed the chest down where the man told him to and walked outside to wait for the merchant to finish his business.

Celine continued to swing back and forth, not hiding the fact that she was watching him.

He decided to walk over to her brother.

"Long time no see, Young Master," Lucian said, bowing slightly. It was their first meeting in person, but he acted as if they had met before (in the borders).

The Young Master was like a spitting image of his sister, yet so different at the same time. The same eyes, the same hair color, the same sharp features. The only difference was in their expression and demeanor.

Edmund was more reserved, more careful with his words and actions. Celine, on the other hand, didn't give a damn.

How did he find out so soon?

"Sir Arclight," Edmund nodded in greeting, his gaze drifting from Lucian to his sister, who kicked mud in his direction as she swung higher.

The little mud pellets landed at Lucian's pants, "..."

'So, you bothered to come,' her actions seemed to say.

Lucian wanted to scoop up the mud and throw it back at her, but he resisted the urge. *'I missed you too, you little snot.'*

"Ah, my bad," she said, not looking sorry at all.

Edmund coughed, looking at his sister with a deadpan expression, "Apologies for my sister's behavior. She seems to have forgotten her manners in her grief."

"That is quite alright, young master," Lucian said, bowing his head again, "Grief affects us all in different ways."

Edmund agreed, inviting Lucian for a cup of tea, an invitation that Lucian couldn't refuse.

"I'll order the staff to give you a change of clothes," Edmund said while offering his elbow to Celine, who gave him an odd stare.

She switched her gaze to Lucian as if asking if he was okay with it.

"..."

"..."

The awkward silence was broken by Edmund, who decided to speak for both of them, "Come on, Celine. We can't have our guest go back looking like this, can we? Where is your hospitality?"

Celine got off the swing and stomped forward, her anger visible to the naked eye, "Ours? He seem to be your guest, not mine. You can entertain him yourself."

She took the lead while Edmund and Lucian followed her, whispering to him, "Don't take it personally, Sir Arclight. She treats all strangers this way."

"I have developed thick skin from my travels, Young Master," Lucian whispered back, "It is not a problem."

Edmund slowed down his pace as they neared the main building, "She is only sweet when she wants something, or when the person is useful to her. I am her brother, so I know her best. Just a friendly warning."

Lucian forced a smile on his face, "I will be careful."

Edmund didn't seem to like the answer because he continued, "When we were kids, she would do anything to get what she wanted. Especially the hard to reach things."

'Like me?' Lucian thought, trying to understand Edmund's intentions. It was obvious to him that the young master was trying to create a rift between him and Celine.

Edmund noticed that his words were having no effect on Lucian and dropped the subject with a friendly chuckle, "Haha, listen to me. I sound like an overprotective father. I don't mean to scare you away, Sir Arclight. I was just testing your resolve. She is my beloved sister after all."

Celine's head turned around with a silent request to include her in the conversation, but the two slowed down their pace, not letting her listen in on their conversation.

"I can't help but be curious, Sir Arclight. How did a young merchant like you manage to capture my sister's interest?"

Lucian remained calm, "I'm not sure what you mean, young master. My business is plants, not people."

They both stopped talking when Celine came up to her brother and dragged him away from Lucian. "Stop gossiping like a maiden, Edmund. It's unbecoming of a Rochefort."

"I am just getting to know our guest, Celine," Edmund said, allowing her to drag him away by his arm.

Lucian followed them inside, trying to take in as much as he could while he was here.

The interior was as grand as the exterior, with marble floors, high ceilings, and expensive paintings on the walls.

The Rochefort family was as old as the kingdom itself, and they had accumulated a lot of wealth and power over the centuries.

Lucian imitated his movements, finding them awkward and unnecessary, but he didn't want to offend his host.

Celine watched them with her chin resting on her hand. She didn't bother with etiquette yet still looked regal. The way she held her cup was the way she wanted to hold it. If the tea spilled, so be it. It was the potter's fault for making it so poorly.

She sat opposite of him and was close enough for him to see through the mesh of the veil. Her gaze held no sadness, only a quiet, simmering anger that seemed to be directed at nobody and everyone at once.

'She's not angry at me for not visiting her earlier, is she?' Lucian wondered. The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth, so he took a sip of his tea. He almost gagged. The tea was as bitter as his thoughts.

She motioned for him to put down the cup.

He carefully placed it back on the table and she added sugar with a small pair of tongs. Then she poured a few drops of milk from a small jug. She stirred it with a small spoon and pushed the cup back to him.

"Drink," she commanded, but her voice was soft.

He obeyed. It was sweet now, with a pleasant creamy taste that lingered on his tongue. The bitterness was gone, replaced by a warmth that spread through his chest.

"I'm going to marry him, Edmund," she announced suddenly, "Whether someone approves or not, it is going to happen."

Lucian spewed the tea out of his nose, staining the pristine white tablecloth a light brown. It burned. He coughed, trying to catch his breath.

Edmund looked scandalized, more dissatisfied with his sister's lack of decorum than he was with Lucian's. "Celine!"

But Celine only laughed, a sound that was as sweet as the tea she had just prepared for him. It was a rare sound, one that Lucian had not heard in a long time. It made him feel warm inside, a feeling that had nothing to do with the tea. It also made him feel like a fool as she handed him a cloth to wipe his face with.

"Unless," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper, her eyes locking with her brother's. "You have any objections?"

Edwards was at a loss for words. He looked from Celine to Lucian, and back to Celine again. He then looked at the tea stain on the tablecloth, as if it held the answer to his question. It didn't. It was just a stain.

"None," Edmund finally said, his voice strained as he smiled at her. "Not at all."

Lucian knew that he was lying. Edmund looked like he had a lot of objections. He just didn't have the courage to voice them, didn't have the courage to go against his sister's wishes.

Lucian didn't want to end up like Edmund, no matter how much he wanted to marry her. No matter how much he loved her. He wanted to speak up his mind, and so he did, "Why did you reveal our relationship to your brother without consulting me first?"

She stopped smiling. "Are you questioning my actions?"

"I'm not. I'm questioning your motives."

"My motives are simple," she said, her voice cold, "I love you. I want to marry you. I want everyone to know."

'Did she just say she loves me?!'

Lucian screamed in his mind, *'And so casually at that?!'*

Edmund covered his face to hide his grimace. He was probably not used to such... passionate displays. It was not proper. It was not how high society behaved. But he also knew his sister well. She was a force of nature, and you could not stop a force of nature. You could only hope to get out of its way.

Lucian felt a headache coming on, a dull throb that started at the back of his skull and radiated to his temples. He got into contact with nobles that thought too highly of themselves, thinking the world belonged to them because of the titles they bore.

Celine didn't seem to see that the world was not her servant. She didn't seem to care about the rules, and she thought the rules should bend to her will. She was a spoiled noble girl who always got what she wanted.

And yet, Lucian still loved her.

He was worried about what her family would do, what the society would do. Not to him, but to her. He didn't care about himself. He could take it. He had been taking it his whole life. But she... she shouldn't go through that because of her love for him. She should be protected, cherished, and loved. Not hated, despised, and scorned.

"You're not thinking about the consequences," Lucian said, trying to keep his voice even.

"I am," she replied, her chin held high. "I am thinking about the consequences of not being with you. And I don't like them."

Lucian covered his face like Edmund, his heart jumping in an embarrassing flutter. Her words were just too much. It was like a fairytale. But it was a fairytale that could end in tragedy.

He could already see his future, a future of constant worry and anxiety, a future of trying to keep her out of trouble, a future of her dragging him into trouble.

A future where his heart would be in his throat every time she left the house, every time she spoke to a stranger, every time she went to a party.

Who was she going to offend next? Who was she going to defy? Who was she going to challenge?

How was he supposed to protect her from the world, when she was the one who wanted to take on the world?

He should have taken a deep breath, maybe counted to ten, and then answer. But he didn't. The words were already out of his mouth. "You might lose everything."

"Will I lose you, too?" she asked instead.

He laughed before standing up, "You are being foolish. Try to live in the streets without your family's money, try to be shunned by everyone you know, try to be alone in the world. And then tell me if you still think it's worth it."

Chapter 39: 2.24 Stolen Moment

Edmund stood up as well, "Don't leave yet. I'll have the servants prepare a room for you. Take a rest, maybe have a proper meal. We can discuss this further when you're both calmer."

"No," Celine said, her voice dangerously low. "He will leave. And he will come back when he's ready to apologize."

"Apologize for what?" Lucian asked. Edmund seemed to know about their relationship, so he threw his manners out of the window, "For being honest?"

"For doubting me," she said, "For thinking I'm so weak that I can't handle a little hardship."

"This is not a 'little hardship'!" Lucian retorted, his hands balling into fists at his sides. "This is your entire life we're talking about!"

"You know nothing of what I've been through," Celine said, suppressing the threatening tremble in her voice, "You know nothing of what I'm willing to go through."

"Then tell me!" Lucian snapped. "Tell me what you've been through. Tell me what makes you think you're so strong."

Edmund placed a hand on Lucian's shoulder, Lucian did not push his hand away but he did not relax either.

"My sister is stubborn, but she knows what she's doing most of the time. Trust her. She has my full support and if she wants to marry you, then so be it. I will give you my blessing."

"I don't need your blessing," Lucian said, his voice cold. "I need her to be reasonable." He then turned to Celine, whose stubborn stance remained unchanged, "I'll come back. Not to apologize. But to see if you've come to your senses."

Edmund moved ahead, stopping him from leaving the room. "Do you want to see her get married to someone else? Someone she doesn't love?"

"If she is so powerful, then I am sure she can find a way out of a loveless marriage," Lucian said, his sarcasm biting, "She seems to be good at getting her way, after all. The world will bend to her naive will, won't it?"

Edmund's hand tightened on Lucian's arm, twisting it behind his back and making him face Celine. The grip was iron, the bloodline of the strong showing itself.

Lucian winced from being put in his place. Manhandled as a lesser being. And that was the difference. That was the power imbalance between them.

Edmund could do this to him, but he could never do this to Edmund. He could get away with killing Lucian and no one would bat an eye, but Lucian couldn't even raise his voice to him without being seen as insolent.

This was not how he imagined their confession to go. He imagined a private exchange of feelings, maybe a few tears of joy.

And yet, here they were. In a room that smelled of expensive tea and old money, with a brother who was caught in the middle and a girl who was ready to throw everything away for a love that was as fragile as the teacup he just drank from.

'This is getting out of hand.'

She could abuse her power and lock him inside a gilded cage if he opposed her too much. And that was what she was doing, wasn't it? Forcing him to agree to her whims. She could, but she didn't have to.

Because who was Lucian?

Did he look like he was running away?

He already made his decision.

He just didn't like how she went around teasing him, embarrassing him as if it helped her gain some control over him.

"Let him go," Celine said, her voice quiet, but it held a power that Edmund could not ignore. "He's scared. Let him be."

Edmund let go of Lucian's arm, and Lucian stumbled forward.

He nursed his sore wrist while giving Celine a venomous look, "I just needed to use the washroom. You can send a watch dog to escort me if you are so afraid of me running away."

"I will escort you myself," she said, standing up. "I want to make sure you don't get lost. You seem to have a habit of that."

Lucian was tempted to say something snarky, but he bit his tongue, "You stole my proposal from me. I had a whole speech planned out. One that didn't involve spewing tea from my nose, your brother acting as my jailer, and you threatening to marry me without my consent."

"I did not threaten," she said, rushing to his side with a bounce to her steps, "I promised...to marry you."

He outstretched his arms and let her jump into his embrace before saying, "You don't promise such things when you feel angry. You do it when you're in a good mood, not when you want to make the person choke on their drink. Destroying their mood will not make them agree with you either."

She rested her head against his chest, listening to his heartbeat, "I'm not angry anymore, not after seeing your upset face, hehe."

"..." Lucian gave her a gentle squeeze, "How do I talk you out of this? You are supposed to toss me away once I lose my use, and move on. I'm already preparing myself to become an abandoned toy."

She stepped on his boots, squeezing down.

"Ack!"

Celine glared at him from beneath her lashes, "You have no right to be mad at me."

"That's what you get for taking away my moment," he glared back.

Edmund was pale by then, "Please, don't tell me you acted angry because she proposed to you first."

"I didn't act. I was angry," Lucian said, mumbling to himself. "She stole my thunder."

"Gods above," Edmund whispered, rubbing his temples. "This is a disaster. I thought you were having a real fight. Not this... this..."

"This... is what I have to deal with," Celine said, raising her hands up and down Lucian's back, as if presenting a prize-winning bull, "He has a fragile ego."

Edmund laughed, a genuine, hearty laugh that made Lucian's cheeks burn. "And you have a habit of stroking it the wrong way."

Celine smiled proudly, "He loves it."

"Sometimes," Lucian admitted, making her eat her own words, "She doesn't stroke it at all. She just grabs it and yanks it around. She is a brute in a dress."

Edmund covered his mouth, trying to hide his laughter, but his shoulders shook.

Chapter 40: 2.25 Mama's Boy

"You both are insane," Edmund said, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye when they both continued to stand there, hugging and glaring at each other, "You look like you are going to kill each other before the wedding, I swear."

"You know what they say," Lucian said, pulling Celine closer to his side, "The line between love and madness is thin."

"Who says that?" Celine asked, looking up at him.

"I just said it," Lucian said, feeling more and more confident. He was no longer a gardener talking to a duke's daughter, but a man talking to his woman. "And it's true. Look at you, still not letting me go to the washroom."

Edmund continued to laugh at his sister's reactions, who was clearly struggling to keep up with Lucian's retorts.

"You are not allowed to laugh," Celine said, pointing a finger at her brother. "If you take his side, you can forget about me taking over your duties."

"Don't forget who is covering for your meetups," Edmund reminded her, his smile not fading. "I no longer owe you, my dear sister."

"...Ugh, you barely know him for an hour and he is already a bad influence," Celine mumbled, her hold on Lucian loosened a bit.

They accompanied him to the washroom, where he finally had a moment to himself.

'Okay,' Lucian thought to himself while looking at his reflection in the mirror, *'What's the plan now?'*

If Edmund were against them, there would probably be signs of his interference. But he didn't seem to be. He had given Lucian his blessing.

It sounded too good to be true. Lucian was not used to someone helping him without expecting anything in return. Celine must be offering Edmund something, like taking over his duties, as she just mentioned.

The Rochefort twins were a united front, Lucian thought as they walked back to the solarium.

The tablecloth was replaced, along with the spilled tea and a new set of pastries.

"How can I repay the favor, Young Master?" Lucian asked, "For helping me and Celine."

"Nothing," Edmund said, looking at his sister, who was already stuffing a pastry into Lucian's mouth. "I'm just happy to see her smiling again after her grandfather's passing. I thought she would never recover."

"I'm sorry for your loss..." Lucian didn't notice any changes in her mood. She seemed to be her usual self, always ready to push his buttons. "When did it happen?" he asked, "He didn't pass recently, did he?"

"Seven months ago," Edmund answered after receiving a nod from his sister, looking at Lucian, "The notice was just a formality. We've been in mourning ever since."

'Seven months ago,' Lucian thought, *'That's right after we met at the border...'*

She stuffed more pastries into his mouth, making his cheeks puff up. He gobbled them down with a few gulps. The mood was getting heavy again.

"I was there to comfort her, so there's no need for you to worry," Edmund said, reading his mind and stabbing it with his words.

"Don't misunderstand," Celine cut in, "I had to babysit him because he's a big baby who couldn't handle it. He's the one who needed comforting."

Edmund coughed lightly, turning his head away from Lucian's gaze. "I had to make sure you won't turn your grief into a weapon. You were not in the right state of mind, Celine."

Lucian finished the whole plate of pastries, trying to drown the nagging feeling in his chest with sugar. He never had a sibling, but he had a cousin, and they were the opposite of close.

'If you react like this toward her brother, who knows how you will act toward anyone else who becomes her husband,'

the voice said, not in a mean way, but a curious one. It even sounded happy for them to reunite, though it would never admit it.

'Poison,' Lucian munched on the croissant the maids brought in after he finished the last pastry. *'I need a lethal poison.'*

Killing her husband still looked more realistic in his head than marrying her himself.

He continued to listen to the siblings' conversation, learning more about her and her family. It was obvious that she didn't want Edmund to feel like a third wheel, so Lucian helped her, making the meeting less about them and more about Edmund.

Her brother made it possible for them to meet in the first place, so he deserved some of her attention. Celine seemed to appreciate his efforts.

"Any lucky ladies I should know about?" Lucian asked.

Edmund was a bit taken aback by the question, "Not yet. Mother doesn't think it's time."

"She's overprotective of him," Celine said, "She's scared of another woman stealing him from her. He's a mama's boy."

Edmund sent her a dirty look. "She is just worried about my future. And she is not overprotective. She is... cautious."

The way he said it made it clear that he was just repeating his mother's words, words he didn't believe in but had to obey.

After a few more hours of getting to know each other, Lucian took the opportunity to secure their next meeting before he left. He offered his services at a loss, not for free as to raise suspicion, but close enough to make it look like he was trying to climb the social ladder with a small bribe.

"I have a supply of rare orchids," Lucian said, "I could offer them to your mother as a gift. Maybe she will be in a better mood then."

Edmund's eyes lit up at the suggestion, and they all moved to his office to write down a contract.

The dark desk inside the office was polished to a shine, reflecting the three of them in its surface. Edmund sat in his high-backed chair, while Lucian and Celine sat across from him.

Lucian had to bite his tongue to stop himself from commenting on the prices he had written on the contract.

The young master had quite an influence on the house's finances, but the final decision was surprisingly not his, but Celine's.

She carried the seal of the duchy with her, and with a simple stamp, the contract was sealed. Lucian officially had a foot inside the Rochefort estate.