

## My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone

### #Chapter 41 - 2.26 A Cute Wolf - Read My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone Chapter 41 - 2.26 A Cute Wolf

#### *Chapter 41: 2.26 A Cute Wolf*

"Don't look at me like that," Celine said when Lucian blinked at her in disbelief, "I told you I have my ways, didn't I? If you depended on me more, you would have known."

"..." Lucian was not used to being taken care of, so it never crossed his mind to ask for help and rely on her. Wouldn't it make him look weak and incompetent? He didn't want that, "And let you take advantage of me? No, thank you."

He knew she had been collecting loyal followers in the towns and villages she visited by helping them out of a pinch. He had rejected her offer to become her servant after all.

"..." Celine was baffled at his reaction, and the conversation turned into another one of their fights, with Edmund in the middle, again.

"I'm going to use the washroom," Edmund said, "Do whatever you want, but don't break anything."

He left them alone.

Lucian looked at her, and she looked at him, and they both looked away. The earlier confidence was gone, their cheeks burning. They were alone, and the atmosphere changed.

"So..." Lucian said, "You are not going to kill me if I try to kiss you, are you?"

Her cheeks turned even redder, "I will kill you if you don't," she said, her voice trembling slightly.

Lucian leaned in and lifted her veil, his lips gently brushing against hers, "I'm sorry," he said.

He took out a small package from his pocket and slipped it into her dress pocket, "You don't have to prove you are strong to me. I'm already married to you in my head."

Her lips trembled as she tried to form a proper sentence, but nothing came out.

He continued to apologize for his behavior, but she wasn't listening anymore.

She climbed on top of him, her legs on either side of his hips, and kissed him.

Her tongue invaded his mouth, and he responded with equal passion.

His hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer, "Hngh...!"

Her fingers tangled in his hair, her hips grinding against his, "Hah...!"

Only when the click of the door was heard did they push each other away.

Lucian's chair flipped over from his sudden movement and he fell on his back together with the chair, while Celine crashed onto the desk, her arms flailing to maintain her balance.

The chair he was sitting in had a broken leg now, and Lucian groaned in pain. "You said you wouldn't kill me..."

She grabbed the broken leg from the floor and threatened to hit him with it, "Who told you to stop?"

"I didn't mean to," Lucian crawled on the floor away from her, "I'm sorry!" he cried out in laughter, "Help!"

Edmund quickly closed the door and rushed to stop them.

"What in the heavens is wrong with you two?" he said, taking the broken leg away from Celine, "Are you trying to destroy my office?"

Lucian hid under the desk, pumping his chest to calm down his breathing.

"I think I have a cracked rib," he called out, the double meaning not lost on her. His heart was beating too fast for his body to handle.

She kicked the desk panel, "Serves you right. Just wait when I get my hands on you. I will break all your ribs one by one."

"Alright, you two, stop it," Edmund said, looking at the two of them, "The servants are already gossiping. Let's try to keep the chaos to a minimum, shall we?"

Lucian peeked from under the desk, "You were taking too long, Young Master," he said, his voice sounding like a child complaining about his parents. "We got bored."

"I can see that," Edmund said, his voice dry, "Next time, I'll knock. And I'll bring a guard with me. Just in case."

They all laughed. It felt like they were kids again, messing around without a care in the world. And for a moment, they forgot about the barriers between them.

Lucian's visit lasted for another hour before he had to leave.

"I have to go now," he said, "Thank you for the tea."

He bowed to Edmund, who returned it with a nod.

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The Merchant Graff had left earlier, so the siblings decided to escort Lucian to the gate in the family carriage.

The curious stares of the guards and staff followed Lucian as he walked towards the main entrance, speculating his identity and relationship with the house.

Nobody was waiting for Lucian at the gates so he had to walk back to the city alone. He could have borrowed a horse, but he didn't want to impose.

*'MY CLOTHES! I FORGOT MY CLOTHES!'*

Lucian screamed internally, remembering he had left them in the room he changed in. *'They are the best ones I own!'*

It was his good luck that Celine seemed to have read his mind, because a servant on a horse came rushing towards him with a neatly folded bundle in his arms.

"Thank you," Lucian said, taking the clothes from him and handing him a few tip coins.

The servant refused to take them, saying it was his duty. Lucian insisted, and the servant finally accepted them, thanking him profusely.

It was not just his clothes. The servant left behind a horse. There was also a bag of food too. Baked goods, mostly.

*'That girl...'* Lucian thought, *'Isn't she taking the saying "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach" too seriously?'*

The air was cold as the sun began to set, but the warmth she left him with made him barely notice it.

*'Do you think she will like my gift?'* Lucian asked the voice as he walked back to the city, *'I hope she will.'*

The pouch he slipped into her pocket contained a scent sachet with a special blend of his favorite spices and flowers, designed to help her relax. She liked shiny things, so he hid a one and a half carat yellow diamond inside the sachet as well.

The voice didn't respond to him. It was probably busy trying to erase the memory of the scene it had just witnessed.

*'She's such a wolf, Voice. A cute wolf,'* he sighed, rubbing his full stomach. *'And I'm her little lamb...ah no, a little rabbit. Wait... no, a little chick.'*

He couldn't decide what animal he wanted to be in her hands, but he knew he wanted to be in them.

#### *Chapter 42: 2.27 Stonetomb City*

*'Why not a wolf yourself?'* Voice suggested. Though it probably found Lucian to be more like a little fox, sly and a bit of a prankster.

Lucian snorted, a small cloud of mist forming in front of his face. *'The more hungry she gets, the more she'll want to eat me, and the better I'll taste, right? I can't do that by being a wolf.'*

*'...'*

*'What...?'*

*'Nothing.'*

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It didn't take Lucian long to reach Stonetomb City, where he had left Jax.

Its name was accurate. The buildings, walls and streets were all the same grey stone, giving it the dreary and oppressive look of a tomb, especially during the night.

The tannery's name had been changed to 'Glory in Bloom' with a flower motif painted on the wooden sign.

A faint sweet perfume replaced the previous smell while the glass display windows showed various baskets of dried herbs and flowers. Some hung in strings from the ceiling and others were arranged in colourful displays.

Lucian unlocked the door with a key he took from his pocket and went inside.

Most of the building was remodeled to accommodate his staff, as well as a small lab and front store.

He found Jax in the meeting room, playing a game of dice with around thirty people, who had been working in the local gardens.

Most had light hair like Lucian, a sign of being physically weaker. They could easily catch a flu from staying outside in the rain. Gardening outdoors and constant traveling wasn't an ideal life, but they didn't have many other options.

Winter was approaching, so they had been preparing the plants for the cold season. Once the snow fell, some would stay in the three greenhouses, some would return to Goblin's greenhouse, and some would stay here as general help.

Trading was out of the option for them during winter, but Lucian didn't mind. They had plenty of work to deal with. Out of season fruit would still be available in smaller quantities from Goblin's greenhouse.

Its position was close to the center of the kingdom so he had been investing in its expansion and defence.

Lucian would spend the winter in the Southern Alliance most of the time, but he wanted to spend it with Celine this year.

"What took you so long, Boss?" Jax asked, not taking his eyes off the dice. "I was about to send a search party for you."

"I had a meeting with a potential client," Lucian said, sitting down beside him. "And I have good news. We've secured a new contract with the Rochefort family."

They all stopped playing and looked at him, their mouths hanging open.

A loud cheer erupted from the table.

The name Rochefort carried a lot of weight, and being associated with them was a huge achievement.

If they knew how little Lucian was charging for his services, they would probably faint.

"Looks like we're going to be busy for a while, boys," Lucian said, slapping Jax on the back. "Let's celebrate."

The celebration was short-lived, as they had an early start the next day. There was no alcohol, just a hearty meal and a good night's sleep.

*'What went through their heads when they decided to give you the most common name in the world,'* Voice spoke up when someone in the group called out to Lucian.

There were three of them just inside this room alone. It often heard it on the streets too. Arlight was also the most common surname. His parents didn't even bother to think of something more creative.

*'They probably wanted to add as much light to my life as possible, you know, to chase the darkness away,'* Lucian returned to his office on the second floor, sorting through the pile of documents left on his desk.

*'What if the real reason is something more sinister?'*

*'Like what?'* Lucian asked, not really paying attention. He was too busy going over the numbers.

*'An offering to the gods maybe. Certain humans wanted to give them the most average childred as a sacrifice to appease their wrath.'*

*'Where did you get that idea from?'* Lucian asked, genuinely curious.

*'Nowhere, just came to me,'* Voice replied. *'The church encourages the children of your kind to be named after saints for good luck, and even protects them from being suppressed too much by the society.'*

*'Well, whatever it is, I'm leveraging it for all its worth,'* Lucian shrugged, and decided to check the next letter. It was a request for a new greenhouse to be built, and a list of plants required to be grown there.

*'...You! How can you accept your weak and pathetic state so easily?! Are you even trying?!'* Voice was outraged in Lucian's stead and it made him pause for a second.

*'You care about me, I'm touched,'* Lucian said, and turned the page to the next document. *'But I'm not going to purge the world of injustice and usher in an era of equality, so calm down.'*

*'At least get some muscles then! You look like a scarecrow!'*

*'I'm exercising,'* Lucian said, and pointed at the weight in the corner of the room. *'And I'm eating well. You can't force a flower to bloom before its time. You can only provide the right conditions.'*

Lucian wiggled his eyebrow at the air, suggesting that Voice could provide the right conditions for him.

*'A flower doesn't have a will of its own. It just grows. You have a will, and you're choosing to be a weakling.'*

*'Why do you even want me to be a strong fighter? So I can punch you?'* Lucian asked. *'Go find yourself a Diamond Knight or something. They are all about strength and muscles.'*

He wiggled his eyebrow in a suggestive manner again.

*'That would be a downgrade,'* Voice huffed, but seemed to calm down.

It hated humans, but when it came to Knights, the hatred was a special kind of disgust.

People were either born more or less gifted. What was wrong with Lucian wanting to become a bit more gifted for free? The idea of having to work ten times as hard to reach an iron knight's powers was frankly, a waste of time and energy.

Even if he trained from morning till night, he would never be able to defeat anyone without Voice's help.

*Chapter 43: 2.28 Still A Puppet*

*'Alright, I will find some bandits to spar with tomorrow,'* Lucian said, deciding to humor it for a bit. He needed some debt collectors in the Diamante Kingdom as well, *'Will that make you happy?'*

*'No. I want you to be so strong that you can kill them with a stare... I want you to be so strong that you can make the world bow down to you.'*

*'And why would I want that?'* Lucian asked, *'What's the point of having all that power if you're just going to use it to bully people? That sounds boring.'*

*'The point is to be free. To be able to do whatever you want without anyone being able to stop you.'*

*'Hm, that's not a bad goal,'* Lucian admitted, and leaned back in his chair. *'But I don't see people in top positions doing the fighting themselves. They use people like you to do it for them.'*

Lucian probably hit a sensitive topic, because he coughed up blood just then. A sharp pain stabbed through his chest, and he had to hold onto the desk to steady himself.

*'Say that louder,'*

Voice said, its voice turning dangerously cold.

Lucian's vision swam as the pain intensified, his body convulsing. He reached toward his neck and fumbled with the small leather pouch tied there, his fingers trembling as he tried to open it.

A vial containing a dark red liquid fell out and rolled across the floor. He struggled to grab it, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he bent down to pick it up.

He got on his knees and stretched his arm, his fingers brushing against the cool glass, but his strength failed him.

He collapsed, his head hitting the floor with a dull thud.

*'What... what was that for?'* Lucian asked.

*'A reminder,'* Voice replied, *'A reminder of who holds the power here.'*

Lucian wanted to tell it to go to hell, but it knew he wanted to live to meet up with Celine, so it took advantage of it to make Lucian do its bidding.

*'Alright, you win,'* Lucian said, his mood in shambles. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, his fingers coming away stained with blood. *'You have successfully established dominance and proved your point.'*

He wanted to die so badly right now. Just end it all whenever Voice did something like this to him. He was a human too, so of course, it hated him.

The bitter metallic tang that coated his tongue and throat reminded him of his place. That he was nothing more than a puppet.

The pain slowly subsided as he lay there, staring at the chair's legs and dust bunnies that clung to them. He didn't want to get up; he just wanted to lie there and rot.

Lucian remained on the floor until the morning sun filtered through the window, casting long shadows across the room.

The door creaked open.

"What..." Celine began as she entered the office, her eyes widening at the sight of Lucian on the floor, the empty vial, and the bloodstains. She rushed to his side, her hands hovering over his neck and wrist to check his pulse.

"Morning," Lucian said before she could call for help, his voice hoarse as he pushed himself up into a sitting position.

"Don't move," she commanded, but he still did, wrapping his arms around her waist and burying his face in her stomach. She was wearing men's clothes again.

"How did you get here?" he asked. Did his employees just let her in without question? She probably told them they had an arranged meeting or something. He would need to have a word with them later.

"I thought consulting the landscaping project at your place would be a good start to my day," she explained, not rejecting his advances. "You look awful."

"You look beautiful," he mumbled, his words muffled by the fabric of her coat.

She didn't ask about the blood. There was a good chance she already knew, or at least had a good guess, "Should I storm the church and question the quality of their products? This is obviously a sign of poor quality control, and the Rochefort family can't have that."

Lucian shook his head, chuckling, his arms tightened around her. "It's my own fault."

"Is that so? Then I will have to punish you for being irresponsible." Celine said, pulling him up. She was much stronger than she looked, as if her slender limbs were made of steel.

Lucian wanted to go back to being a corpse on the floor when she said that. Punishment this, punishment that, he would prefer her to be sweet and gentle with him.

She brought him to the bed and lay him down. There was a basin of water, a bar of soap, and a towel by the bedside. He usually cleaned up before going to bed, but he didn't get the chance last night.

Instead of cleaning him up, she tucked him in like a child to keep him warm. She then started to inspect the room, her eyes scanning every corner and crevice.

She removed her coat and draped it over him. She then checked the water in the jug on the desk and found it to be cold. "I'll get you some hot water."

"Don't leave me," Lucian pleaded, his voice cracking. He didn't want to be alone with his thoughts.

"I will order the servants to bring it," she said.

"...Don't..."

"..." Celine sighed and went to lock the door. She lit a candle on the nightstand with a match and poured a cup of water from the jug. She then held the cup over the candle, heating it with the flame. "If they leave you over a sickness, then they are not worth keeping."

Lucian blinked, *'Oh, does she think I'm afraid of people leaving me? I'm not ten anymore.'*

He found her guess to be quite cute and continued the act, "What if I'm too much of a burden?"

She brought the now-warm water to his lips and helped him drink. "I don't know... I can always turn you into my hug pillow if that's the case."

*Chapter 44: 2.29 Unstable Boy*

Celine checked his temperature by placing her hand on his forehead and found out his temperature was back to normal.

Lucian wanted to kiss her but he didn't brush his teeth and his breath probably smelled like death, so he didn't.

Celine squeezed a wet towel to wipe his face and hands, then poked his cheek when he kept his usually talkative mouth shut, "What are you thinking about?"

"My breath."

"..." She stared at him, unblinking. Then she threw her head back and laughed. She actually stood up and went to look for his toothbrush and tooth powder, finding them in his cupboard.

For a spoiled noble lady, she sure knew how spoiling worked, understanding his petty needs. The problem was that it made him want to be "sick" more often, just to be taken care of by her.

He sat up and took the toothbrush from her, brushing his teeth with a mixture of mint powder and salt.

"Better?" she asked.

He nodded, his eyes were still glued to her. He couldn't help but admire her, even though she was dressed as a man. She didn't panic, she didn't cry, she just took control of the situation and did what needed to be done.

His heart was pounding so hard that he thought she could hear it. Or at least see it, the way his chest was heaving. He was a goner, truly.

What worse, the more he fell for her, the more Voice would take advantage of it. It no longer wanted to take over his body through a deal, no, it wanted him to accomplish its goals through coercion.

Celine sat next to Lucian on the bed, her shoulders slumping. She played with his fingers on his left hand, while his other one held the toothbrush.

Her commanding presence was replaced by a soft one, now that the crisis was over. Her lashes suddenly looked longer, her cheeks rosier, and Lucian had to remind himself that she was the same person who could bark orders like a general.

He rinsed his mouth and placed the toothbrush on his nightstand. He stood up to grab a new shirt and Celine followed like a lost puppy, not letting go of his fingers.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Suicide is not a joke, Lucian. You cannot just...leave me behind," she whispered.

"I wasn't trying to kill myself," Lucian said, irritated by her accusation, "I was just trying to kill my feelings for you."

He regretted it the moment he said it, because she froze. His half joke came out wrong. Her grip on his fingers tightened, and her eyes grew colder, the change visible to the naked eye.

"Oh," she breathed, "So it's my fault."

"That's not what I said," Lucian covered his face. What was this tendency of his to take out his frustrations on her? "Forget what I said. I'm not myself."

"Okay," she said, "I will pretend you never said it." She continued to hold his hand, and even forced a smile. "Better get dressed, or you will catch a cold."

She released his hand and turned around to give him some privacy. She sat on the bed, her posture ramrod straight.

"..." He opened his wardrobe, giving her a side glance. He didn't know why she didn't press on the matter and pretended everything was fine. Maybe she was like him, putting on a strong front to avoid vulnerability.

"Are you not going to change my clothes?" he asked in an attempt to salvage the mood, a poor one but still an attempt.

"..."

He began to unbutton his shirt, revealing his bare chest, "I can't compare to the soldiers in the barracks, but I bet you won't find a more muscular blond man in the kingdom."

The corner of her mouth twitched upward, "What do you expect me to do? Worship your body?"

"I will definitely worship yours if you ever decide to show it to me," Lucian said, not in a flirtatious way, but in a matter-of-fact way, as if it was the most natural thing to say. "No, I take that back. I don't have to see it. I already do."

He pushed himself to cheer both of them up, even if it meant making a fool out of himself.

"Alright," she said, "Come here."

He walked over to her carefully, expecting a punch or a kick, or both. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed his stomach.

"Whaa—" He flinched at the unexpected contact, his hand automatically cradling the back of her head. He could feel her hot breath on his skin, her lips soft and gentle, and his whole body went rigid.

"You worked hard," she whispered.

His stomach had defined muscles from all the labor he'd done. She traced the lines with her nose and lips, pressing kisses along the way.

He didn't get to choose what body he would be born to, but she made it feel like a gift.

She was trying to comfort him in her own weird way and Lucian couldn't hold back his emotions any longer.

He fell to his knees and buried his face in her lap.

He didn't cry, but he did hold onto her tightly, as if she was the only thing keeping him from falling apart, "I hate it."

"I know."

"It's not fair."

"I know."

"I want to give up."

"I know."

"Then why are you still here?"

"I have nowhere else to go," she said.

"..." He stayed like that for a while, with him venting his frustrations to her.

She didn't say anything else, just stroked his hair and let him have his moment.

"I promise to be less of a burden," Lucian mumbled and got up on the bed, straddling her. He pinned her down, his hands on either side of her head.

"Are you sure you are alright?" she asked, probably still finding him unstable.

"I am now," he whispered, kissing her cheek, "As long as I have you."

He covered them with a blanket, and then started to unbutton her shirt.

"Lucian...?" she hesitated.

"It's okay," he said, his lips finding hers, "We don't have to go all the way. I just want to be close to you. I can't have you take charge all the time."

*Chapter 45: 2.30 [NSFW15+] Planting A Path For The Future*

"...Ngh...hah...ngh..."

She nipped at his bottom lip, then soothed the sting with a flick of her tongue, pulling back just enough to let him gasp.

He could barely focus on unbuttoning her shirt and she was enjoying the way his fingers fumbled with the simple task.

"Hehe...mhm, keep breathing for me," she cupped his cheek with one hand, pressing her thumb against his racing pulse on his neck with the other.

Lucian made a soft sound in his throat that she answered with a deeper kiss, her tongue mapping out his mouth, tasting, exploring, claiming.

Their legs intertwined, one of hers between his and she shifted, pressing her thigh into his crotch.

He jumped slightly as a jolt shot through him.

"Hmm..."

Her last button came free and he groaned in relief, sitting up on his knees, his eyes fixed on the skin of her torso.

The binding around her chest made his breath catch, and she watched him swallow hard, his Adam's apple bobbing.

She was skinny, her ribs visible. She was usually so layered in clothing, it was easy to miss.

He always wondered if her small waist was from the corset she wore. It seemed not. But there was still strength in her, even as her form looked so fragile.

Celine licked her swollen lips, looking to the side. Lucian noticed her expression fall into something melancholic.

He ran his knuckles along the side of her stomach, the muscles in her abdomen contracting at his touch. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her navel, "You worked hard."

She chuckled softly, a light airy sound that made him smile, "I'm a Lady. I don't work."

"..." He puffed a hot breath onto her skin.

"Haha...stop it..." She tried to push his head away, but he didn't budge, "Haha...that tickles...Lucian...!" she protested quietly.

He grinned and slid his hands under her back, lifting her slightly and arching her into his mouth, "Shh...I'm trying to appreciate you..."

She pumped his head with her fist, her legs squirming at the sensation of his wet mouth sucking at the skin below her navel.

"Lu-cian," her voice trembled, "D-don't leave marks..."

He let go of her, kissing the spot one last time before moving up, pressing his lips against her chest, above the binding.

She was breathing heavily, her eyes half lidded. He pecked her chin with a wide smile, then her cheek.

She also grinned, her arms wrapped around his neck.

It felt like it was just the two of them in the world, content. For just a moment, everything felt okay.

"...pfft...stop...haha..."

"I'm not doing anything," he laughed.

She covered his face with her hands, "Too much smiling. It's unlike you."

"I'm the one who should be saying that," he mumbled through her fingers, "You're always scowling at me."

"You give me reasons to," her hands dropped away and she kissed the tip of his nose.

He was about to say something, but his ears caught on a faint sound, and his head snapped to the side, towards the door.

Celine quickly began to button up her shirt.

Lucian swore under his breath and slid off the bed, removing his shirt to put a new one on. She fixed his hair for him as he buttoned his own shirt.

She kissed him for the last time, a quick peck, before stepping away as a knock echoed through the room.

She cleared her throat and made herself at home by taking a seat before his desk.

Lucian dragged a curtain that separated the bed from the office, hiding the mess they made. He then went to the door and opened it.

"Boss?" Jax called out from outside the door. "There's a problem with the storage. Some rats got in and ate a part of our inventory."

"Can't you handle it yourself?" Lucian's voice came out rough, his mind still on Celine.

"I can," Jax said, his voice sounding a bit panicked, "The customer who ordered the goods is here. He's demanding compensation."

"Then just compensate him," Lucian sighed, running a hand through his hair as he followed Jax outside. There were two of her guards standing by the staircase and probably more undercover ones scattered around his store.

He dealt with the problem, gave a refund and a promise of a discount for the next purchase, then returned to his office.

He found Celine looking at the rolled out map of the Rochefort's house outdoor layout. She brought it and then left it on the ground when she found him on his floor.

He lifted her up from the chair by the waist, making her yelp in surprise.

He moved her toward his chair, sitting her down on his lap as he took over. He rested his chin on her shoulder, looking at the map.

"..." she was speechless.

"This is better," he said.

"..." she still didn't say anything, but her expression said it all. 'I like it.'

He wrapped an arm around her stomach, the other hand pointing at a spot on the map, "I'm thinking of using the pond as a starting point. It has potential. A big gazebo, perhaps, a few small boats, and some weeping willows for shade. For the path, I want to use something that matches the house's stone. Maybe... a light gray flagstone, with grass growing in the gaps. It would look natural. What do you think?"

She just listened as he placed a sheer sheet of tracing paper over the map, sketching out his ideas with a charcoal pencil.

He couldn't draw beautifully as her, but his lines were confident, showing he had a clear vision in his mind. "The Rocheforts have a lot of land. We could section it off. The large labyrinth can be improved upon. A maze of hedges is classic, but I was thinking of something different. Maybe... add a few hidden paths that would lead to small secret gardens, each with its own theme..."

If he wanted to meet up with her in the future, he needed to carve out a path. In his case, plant. Literally.

#### *Chapter 46: 2.31 - New Spot For An Office*

Lucian noticed Celine's interest spark at his words.

She took the pencil from his hand, adding her own touches.

"..." Lucian stared at the maze she came up with.

It didn't follow a traditional pattern. The paths were curved, forming shapes that resembled a five petal flower if seen from above, five different entrances, three different end points.

"I'm not much of a gardener," she said, "But I know what I like."

He definitely noticed that.

"You saw a lot of the world, right?" He asked, wanting to hear about her travels, even if it was just through words, "Young Ladies from a good family usually stay close to home."

She didn't say anything for a moment, and he feared he'd crossed a line. But then she spoke, "You never know when your day will be your last. So I try to make each one count."

His brows furrowed at her words, "You don't have a terminal illness, do you?"

It would explain why she had so much freedom. And why she was so reckless. And why she was so...alive.

She looked at him from over her shoulder, "Worried?"

"...Should I be?" he asked, "You talk like you're going to die soon."

"I talk like I want to live, like really live," she corrected him, her eyes back on the map, "Not just trying to survive."

They should be talking about work, but they continued to stray off topic, each becoming more and more philosophical.

"I can usually suppress that feeling of frustration," he shared, "Around my parents, my employees... But I can't around you."

"Frustration?" she raised an eyebrow, "About what?"

"About everything."

"Hurting me probably benefits you in some way," she said, her voice a little too casual, "So you don't suppress it like you do around others. I figured I could use that for my own gain. Like making you seek me out whenever you want to let it out."

"..." He stared at her, his arms tightening around her waist, "This is not how you seduce someone, Celine."

She gave him a dead pan look, "Act like someone who can be seduced, then."

He blinked innocently, "I'm a respectable man. I have standards."

"Sure you do. You wouldn't have your hands on me if you had none," she said, her nose in the air as if she was above it all.

Chuckling, he cuddled her like a clingy child, not wanting to separate, "Winter is coming soon, so I won't have to travel as much, and could work from my home office. Maybe..."

"Hm?"

He looked at the maze she drew again, "Maybe I could build a second office in your room. So when you're asleep, I could be there to keep you warm."

She excitedly turned around at the idea, "We need a thorough plan for that."

Their smiles mirrored each other's, mischievously, as if they were two thieves planning a heist.

"You will need a safe passage in and out," Celine said, tapping her chin with the pencil, "There are too many balconies and windows overlooking the area. Going through them would be too risky."

The guards were the biggest hurdle. They were stationed at the gates and patrolled the perimeter, but they also made irregular rounds inside the grounds.

"I have a wide crinoline," Celine offered hiding under her dress as a solution, "You could hide there when I'm walking to my room. But that would require you to match my pace and walk in a crouched position as silently as possible. Would you be able to do that?"

"We won't know until we try, right?" he was up for the challenge. "We can't leave anything to chance. We need a plan, a backup plan, and a backup plan for the backup plan."

He would have to take off his shoe once inside to reduce the noise of his steps on the hardwood floor, and be able to walk up the stairs without making the fabric of her dress bend in a weird way.

They discussed whether they should do it during the night when there were less staff members around to see them. Or during the day, when everyone was busy with their own tasks. They even considered the possibility of a distraction, like a false alarm.

The office wasn't big, but they still used it to try it out. She wrapped a blanket around her waist, while he crouched down and followed her.

It was harder than they thought. They didn't have a crinoline to help with the shape, which increased their difficulty.

But it was fun, and a few times, they fell down laughing at how ridiculous they looked.

"Could you count the steps at home for me? From the start to end, together with the obstacles," Lucian said, "We need to be precise. One misstep and I'm done for."

He would be a temporary visitor at the estate to work on the landscaping, so he would be living in a caravan outside on the grounds.

He could use the excuse of planning to walk around the estate, not within it, to "get a feel of the space".

The Rochefort's was the largest estate after the royal one after all.

Celine left before lunchtime, but not before he snuck a few more kisses. They parted ways with the promise of meeting again soon.

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Lucian spent the rest of the day thinking about her, while looking for some sparring buddies (he didn't forget about the Voice's wish, and wanted to appease it somehow).

He visited a tavern famous for its brawls, his attention locked on the strongest, most agile men.

It didn't take him long to find them. Two men, brothers, who were built like oxen. They were arm wrestling with some other men, a small crowd gathered around them, cheering and jeering.

Bandits attacked in groups of three to five, not a threat to the Duchy, but a nuisance to travelers and merchants.

And that's what Lucian needed to prepare for. These guys were no bandits, but they should be similar in skill level. Or at least, close enough.

Lucian touched his ginger dark hair, a new look, after dying it from his natural blonde, before "accidentally" pumping into onlookers and spilling their ale.

"What the hell, man?" the man yelled, turning around to glare at Lucian.

*Chapter 47: 2.32: Looking For a Sparring Buddy*

People rarely picked up fights with Lucian, if ever. His weak constitution was a well-known fact, so most would think he was an easy target. But his eyes always had a certain gleam in them that made others think twice.

It annoyed Voice somehow. It would rather have everyone pick up fights with Lucian instead (to prove Lucian its point that he couldn't avoid confrontatios forever).

Thanks to that, Lucian's experience in fighting could be summed up in three words: he had none.

His success kill rate though, was a hundred percent. So far.

If Lucian listened to every of Voice's whims, he would have been a lonely assassin, who would rather solo missions than work in a group. A poor one. So poor, he would die from hunger before his first kill.

*'I hear you,'* Voice said, but Lucian ignored it, showing his dissatisfaction in the form of a silent treatment.

The man who was yelling at Lucian, stopped mid-sentence, "..."

Lucian smiled at him in a way that said, *'Fight me, fight me now, or I will fight you.'*

The man backed away, his hand raised in surrender, "Sorry, my mistake. I didn't see you there."

Lucian grabbed his shoulder, "I don't think you are sorry enough. Let's go outside and have a friendly chat, shall we?"

The man yanked his shoulder, a fist aimed at Lucian's jaw. Lucian's quick reflexes grabbed the man's wrist, using the momentum to spin him around.

A kick in the back of his knee made him lose his balance, and Lucian used the opportunity to slam his face on the table.

A loud groan filled the tavern, and the room went silent.

Lucian tried a few moves he saw in the fights he witnessed, but he still felt like an imposter.

His eyes scanned the room for his next target.

This was not the reaction Lucian expected. He expected a brawl, a fight, something that would get his blood pumping and his adrenaline running. Not caution.

Well, when he thought of it again, the northerners weren't known for being aggressive as the southerners.

"Ah, my bad," Lucian said, his voice suddenly changing to a soft, apologetic one. He let go of the man. "I just started today, so I'm still new to this, sorry."

The easiest would be to throw the man at the crowd and make others join the fight, but did he want everyone to gang up on him? Not really. Lucian's plan failed before it even began.

*'I need to learn how to fight, not how to win,'* Lucian thought to himself, his eyes fixed on the man he had just attacked, "I'm just here to collect the debt. You owe Lucian Arclight, the landscape contractor, a lot of money."

The man scrawled away, his friends making path for him. "I... I will pay. I will pay. Just give me some time." He scrambled out of the tavern.

"When?" Lucian called after him, "I need a date."

"Next week! I will pay next week!" the man yelled from the street.

Lucian sighed, his shoulders slumping. He had just lost a potential sparring partner.

*'This is not working,'* he thought to himself.

He didn't want to pick up fights with random people and the idea of paying someone to beat him up was not appealing either. He would just get arrested.

Martial arts were a kept secret, reserved for the nobles and the knights. The city guards were usually failed knights who had managed to pass a physical test. The rest of failed knights would return to their families and live a normal life.

All men had some level of training, except the blond ones. Giving them a chance would be a waste of resources. The blonds were destined for the life of artisans, peddlers or priests.

The priest was the most popular one, since it gave them easier access to medicine and the profession also held more prestige than a regular citizen.

"Any mercenaries for hire?" Lucian asked the people present and the two brothers from earlier raised their hands.

"Follow me," Lucian said.

The two brothers followed him out of the tavern.

Lucian led them to a secluded alley, away from prying eyes. "I'm looking for someone to train me. I need to learn how to fight."

"..." The brothers looked at each other, wondering if Lucian was taking them for a joke.

"You just took down a man without breaking a sweat. And now you want us to train you?" the younger brother, who was a bit more hot-headed, asked.

"Yes," Lucian said, his expression serious. "I want to retake the knight's test in the future. And you two look like you know what you're doing. You can also get some money for your troubles."

The brothers looked at each other again, their minds racing. They were in need of money, and this looked like an easy job.

They would just have to pretend to train him, and he would pay them. Easy money. "We accept."

Lucian nodded, his expression still serious. "Good. Come with me then."

He led them to his shop, the backyard. It was a small space surrounded by brick walls, with a well and a few empty pots stacked in a corner.

"First, I need to test your skills," Lucian said, his voice low. "I need to know if you're good enough to train me."

"Alright," the younger brother said, finding his reasoning fair, he cracked his knuckles. "Let's do this."

"No," Lucian said, shaking his head. "Not with me. I want you two to fight each other."

The brothers looked at each other again, this time with confusion written all over their faces.

"Us? Why?" the older brother asked.

"I need to see your fighting style. How you move, how you attack, how you defend. I need to know if we're a good match," Lucian explained, his eyes scanning them from head to toe.

The older brother sighed, "You heard him. Let's give him a show."

The younger brother grinned, "With pleasure."

They exchanged a few blows, their fists and feet connecting with a dull thud.

They were evenly matched, and it was hard to tell who was winning.

*Chapter 48: 2.33: Lucian At Your Service*

Despite being failed knights, the two brothers still had the capacity to become mercenaries for hire, which made them more powerful than most regular citizens and city guards.

The hoods they wore slid down. Their hair was slicked back, bright orange and spiky at the tips, showing their "fiery" nature.

Their fight moves were as flashy, flying kicks and flips made them seem like acrobats in the heat of battle.

Lucian tried to copy them from a distance, thinking he was doing the right thing, maybe even progressing. (Most of the things he learned were from his observations of others and copying them.)

The brothers tried not to laugh, but it was hard to keep a straight face when Lucian looked like a dancing spider.

"That's not how you do it," the younger brother said.

A question mark appeared on top of Lucian's head, "Then how am I supposed to do it? Show me again."

"No, your whole approach is wrong," the older one stepped in, "No wonder you have to take a re-test. Did the instructors not show you the basics?"

"Not really. They said I have no talent, and I should find a different career path," Lucian then looked down, playing the part of a dejected student who was trying his best but failing miserably. "I'm trying to prove them wrong."

"They were right," the younger one mumbled under his breath, but Lucian heard it.

The older one elbowed his brother, "He is our client."

"What? It's true." the younger one said, "He moves like a girl."

Lucian's head snapped up, "What did you say?"

"I said you move like a girl." the younger one repeated louder, not backing down, "Don't take me wrong. That's how the instructors treat the newbies. If you want to pass, you need to move with power, not like a sissy."

Lucian's smile was slow to form, "Is that so?"

Before the younger brother could react, Lucian's leg shot out, catching him in the stomach.

"Like this?"

The air whooshed out of the man in a rush, and he doubled over, gasping.

Bad habits died hard without prior training, and Lucian, despite his act, had never learned a single 'proper' form.

What he knew was an efficient and ugly way to start and end a fight, as quickly as possible.

"That was a dirty move!" he choked out, cursing.

"Shouldn't an experienced fighter be able to deflect that?" Lucian asked, his booth touching the muddy ground, "It seems to me, you're the one who can't take a hit."

"You little..." the older brother snarled, lunging at Lucian.

The younger one, still gasping for air, staggered to his feet and joined in.

They were both larger than Lucian, with more muscle mass. They came at him from both sides, a coordinated attack that would have crushed a lesser man.

Lucian blocked the older brother's punch with his forearm, the impact sending a jolt up his arm.

Another punch came from his other side, and he wasn't fast enough to dodge it completely.

He took a hit to the ribs, the force of it making him see stars.

He didn't cry out, but he did stagger to the side, his breathing coming in ragged gasps.

The older brother smirked, "Not so tough now, are you?"

Lucian ignored him. They were not his targets, *'Here you go, Voice. Weak and pathetic Lucian at your service.'*

*'You crazy son of a bitch,'* Voice's thoughts cut through the pain.

*'I didn't ask for your past life commentary, yet you still made me pay for it,'* Lucian thought back, *'No wonder you ended up the way you did.'*

He took another hit, this one to the back of his head. He stumbled to the front, his vision swimming.

The light rain that had been falling all day suddenly intensified, turning into a downpour.

The ginger dye in Lucian's hair began to run, streaking down his face and neck, the colour of diluted blood.

Lucian let them push him around, chuckling in the face of their aggression.

It unnerved them, seeing Lucian barely pay attention to their fists, his focus elsewhere.

══════ Author's note ══════

Song Recommendation:

Save yourself while there's still time - Mathew's Silent Chapter



*Chapter 49: 2.34: Teaching A Lesson*

*'You can't use my methods on me and expect it to work, Voice,'* Lucian continued thorough the one sided brawl, *'Don't take advantage of my little wife's existence to make me succumb.'*

Voice had tried it all before. Enticing Lucian with power and promises of glory. Threatening him with the eternal suffering of his soul, with the loss of all that he held dear.

The boy would always find a way to mirror back whatever was thrown at him.

*'You are weak,'* some would say, to which he would respond with, *'Everyone is weak in the face of a god, so what's your point?'*

Lucian's defiance did not come from ignorance. He was well aware that the Voice was not a being to be trifled with. But so was he, in the sense that he was also a being with a will, and his choices, even if they seemed limited, were his to make.

*'You think this is funny?'* Voice asked, *'You're getting beaten up by a couple of amateurs, and you're laughing about it?'*

*'You called me weak, so I'm proving you right, the smartest Voice to ever exist, my savior, the reason I'm still alive, the reason I am who I am today,'* Lucian thought back, *'Enjoy the product of your own creation, all powerful being who can't control a mere boy.'*

Voice cursed, a string of words that Lucian didn't understand. *'I will teach you how to fight,'*

it offered instead of an apology, *'A real lesson.'*

Lucian's eyes softened into a smile, *'I thought you'd never ask.'*

The older brother aimed a kick at Lucian's stomach, the impact sending him sprawling to the ground.

He coughed, a wet, rattling sound that made the brothers hesitate.

"Is he... still laughing?" the younger one asked, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

Lucian was indeed laughing, a low, raspy sound that was more of a chuckle than a full-blown laugh.

The older brother seemed to have had enough, "We are leaving. This is over."

"What? No! He's not getting away with that kick!" the younger one protested.

"He's insane," the older brother said, dragging his brother away, "Let's go."

Lucian got to his feet, his body aching all over, "Come on, now. The lesson is not over, or are you two scared of me?"

The brothers didn't turn back.

"Scared of someone who moves like a girl?" Lucian's laughter followed them, "What about the money? I still have the money! Come back here, or I'll tell everyone you ran from a girl."

The older one turned around, his face red with rage, "What the hell is your problem?" he asked, walking back towards Lucian, his fists clenched, "A hay head like you shouldn't be wasting your time on the impossible. It's a dead end."

Lucian needed an excuse to appear stronger than most hay heads without raising suspicion. He needed a story to go with his physical condition. If he was too strong, people would ask questions, and he didn't have the answers.

Patience. That was what he needed to show Voice. It was the one thing that the ancient thing lacked.

"Everything is possible with enough money, no?" Lucian replied, not moving from his spot, "And a little bit of hope." He added, watching the two as they got closer.

"So what if you did have the money? You think you can just... buy your way into knighthood?" the younger one asked, a cruel smirk on his face, "Is that your grand plan?"

They already lost their hopes and dreams. They were just like him once upon a time, but at least their chances were higher than his. He had none, yet he was the only one who had the audacity to still believe.

"I eat thrice as much as you," Lucian said, removing his shirt, revealing a body that was surprisingly well-defined for a hay head, "I can run for a whole day without stopping and carry a hundred pound crate on my back. The only thing I'm missing is a teacher."

The bruises from their kicks and punches were already starting to form, a patchwork of purples and reds on his skin, but underneath it all, his organs were fine.

All the traveling, all the heavy lifting, all the exposure to the harsh weather had taken its toll on his body, but it had also forged it into something else.

His body had died and came back to life, over and over again, until it became the proof of Voice's will. Not Lucian's. Voice's.

"Power of the mind," Lucian said, pointing at his own head, "The body can do incredible things if the mind believes it can. That's my secret to how I achieved so much, with so little."

He finished, looking at them as if he was trying to sell them a miracle.

"Boss, what are you doing?" Jax entered the backyard, his sight widening as he took in the scene.

Lucian stood shirtless in the center of the yard, rain plastering his hair to his forehead, two mercenaries looming over him.

"Boss?" The two brothers looked at each other, then at the dye that got washed off from Lucian's hair, "You couldn't be the Land Contractor everyone's been talking about, right?"

Jax walked over to Lucian, ignoring the brothers completely, "What in the name of all that is holy are you doing?" he asked, his voice urgent.

"Right on time, Jax," Lucian tilted his head towards the new arrival, "I brought some sparring buddies for you, to make sure you don't get out of practice as well."

Lucian used his shirt to wipe the rain from his face, his muscles flexing as he moved, the rainwater tracing patterns on his skin.

Jax ran a hand through his own soaked hair, looking from the brothers to Lucian's bruised torso, "Why did you let them do this to you?"

"I started it, I kicked first," Lucian said, as if that explained everything. Not that he wanted to tell them that he let them humiliate him so he could humiliate Voice in return. That was his little secret. "It was a fight. They fought back."

The brothers gave him a look that said, 'It was definitely not a fight' and 'This guy is crazy' all at once. This was beyond them. The stories they heard about the Land Contractor did not include this kind of behaviour.

A gentleman did not start fights with common thugs, and a rich one did not let himself get beaten up by them!

*Chapter 50: 2.35: Me, Myself and the Better Me*

Lucian removed the shirt earlier not to flex his bruises but to see his own body move.

He could currently see himself from an outsider's point of view at the back of his mind. Voice projected this image and forced him to see how ridiculous he looked.

A sixteen-year-old with dark circles under his eyes and a posture like a wilting plant. Lucian instinctively straightened his back when he saw the image.

Another image played in his mind simultaneously for comparison. A version of him with an entirely different aura.

If Voice had a body, it would probably act like this one. His chin raised a fraction, his eyes looking down a smidge, superior and cold. This version of himself would terrify most people he came across.

*'Don't you have your own identity to use, Voice?'* Lucian tried to mock, but there was no heat behind his words.

Voice probably used his identity because it was easier to demonstrate what Lucian was capable of. The projection wasn't meant to intimidate him. It was meant to be a goal.

*'Get into a stance,'* Voice stated, and Lucian found it weird hearing his own voice, albeit deeper and more resonant coming from his mouth. Its body also moved with the commands, showing how a proper stance should look.

Lucian copied him. His feet were shoulder-width apart, with one foot slightly forward. The other projection allowed him to see himself from all angles, so he could correct any mistakes.

He wiggled his toes inside his shoes. This posture felt alien to him. He felt like his legs were stiff as a board, and his arms were up like a scarecrow's.

*'Whatever, I'll just go with this for now and build some training dummies later,'*

he thought to himself, motioning for the brothers to come at him.

"Let's continue, just don't touch the face," Lucian said to them. "Never the face. That's the only rule I have."

"A spar, then," Jax said, "Two versus two? The two of you against me and the boss here?"

They all looked at Lucian.

"Sounds fair to me," Lucian said, "But let's make it interesting. If I lose, I'll pay you triple the usual rate for your time. If I win, you train me for free."

"No," the older brother immediately shot down the offer.

"But I'm weak," Lucian said, and was shot down again.

"Just pay the normal rate," the older one said, "No tricks."

Jax laughed, a short, sharp sound that was almost swallowed by the rain. "Northerners are truly different. Where I come from, a deal's a deal. We don't back down from a challenge."

"You're not from here?" the younger brother asked, his interest piqued.

"No," Jax said, "I'm from the south. A place where you learn to fight before you learn to walk."

A southerner? The brothers gave Lucian a dirty look before sighing in relief. They made the right choice by rejecting his offer.

Lucian dashed towards the younger brother, startling him, but the guy managed to sidestep, his hand shooting out to grab Lucian's arm.

Lucian twisted, using the momentum to his advantage, and swept the man's legs out from under him. He fell with a splash, mud and water flying everywhere.

The older brother came at Lucian from the side, his fist raised, but Jax was there, meeting him head-on.

Voice's instructions were a constant stream of information telling him where to step, how to angle his body, when to breathe. It was overwhelming, but it was also fun. He didn't have to study on his own while wondering if he was doing it right anymore.

"Ugh—!" Lucian grunted as the younger brother tackled him, driving him into the mud. He flailed, trying to get a grip on the slippery ground, his legs and arms flew everywhere, making him look like a bug flipped onto its back.

He saw his own form struggling from Voice's eyes, saw the openings, the wasted movements, the clumsy attempts at breaking free. He could see his own mistakes so clearly, yet his body refused to cooperate.

He threw a few sloppy punches that were easily blocked. There was no surprise momentum from earlier to carry him through.

It was an ugly, desperate kind of fighting. He was all sharp angles and panicked jerks, but he was improving. Slowly. He managed to get on his feet again.

*'Keep punching. If you want your arms to move faster, just keep swinging them. You'll build muscle memory, whether you like it or not.'*

The younger brother noticed that Lucian began to focus more on his arms, and he took the opportunity to kick his legs out from under him. But Lucian saw this one coming.

He managed to sidestep just enough to avoid the brunt of the kick, his ankle twisting painfully as he landed awkwardly. He gritted his teeth, hissing through the pain, and lunged forward, his head connecting with the man's chest.

"What the fuck?" the younger brother yelled as Lucian wrapped his arms around his waist and drove him backward, slamming him against the wall of the backyard.

Fists and rain alike pelted down, but none refused to yield.

Lucian's vision swam, the rain blurring into a grey wash that filled the world. His body screamed with every move, feeling the aches and sharp pains from falls and impacts he'd only half-blocked. Yet, he was still on his feet, swaying but upright.

"How are you still standing?" the younger brother panted, leaning against the wall, his own chest heaving.

"Power of will," Lucian managed to rasp out, a grin splitting his mud-caked face.

The rest of the workers had returned from their work and stood at a safe distance, their heads popping out from the windows and doors of the main house.

They looked at Lucian as if he was some sort of mythical creature, but then they thought about the money and hard work he put in over the years and it only made sense that he'd be able to hold his own.

"BOSS! You got this!" someone from the crowd shouted, and a few others joined in, their voices a ragged cheer, "BOSS! BOSS! BOSS! Show him who's boss!"

Jax flared his arms in protest, "What about me? I'm fighting too! I'm fighting better than him!"

"BOSS! BOSS! BOSS!" they chanted, ignoring Jax's complaints.