

## My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone #Chapter 81 - 3.26: Priorities - Read My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone Chapter 81 - 3.26: Priorities

*Chapter 81: 3.26: Priorities*

Celine touched Lucian's forehead with her cold hand, "How did you end up here?"

Lucian leaned into it with a smile, "Love sick. What about you?"

She thought for a moment. "Hay-fever," she said, making him chuckle.

Lucian grabbed the back of her head and pulled her towards him, kissing her lips. What would people think if they saw the girl with a hay head allergy kissing a hay head?

She was taken aback by his actions. He rarely initiated anything between them in a public space. She quickly kissed him back, tasting him as well, her lips moving in sync with his.

It was always her who took the first step forward, and him who was cautious about everything and everyone.

He parted her lips open with his, exploring the inside of her mouth. He felt her shudder as he moved his tongue further, trying to feel her deeper.

Her hands wandered, touching as much of him as they could, his chest, shoulders, neck, and arms, like she wanted to have him in her grasp and never let go.

She didn't care about where they were, getting bolder and bolder, her mind focused only on him.

You can't fake this, not this kind of desperation. Her body was too honest for him to think she didn't desire him, at least not right now.

He pulled away, and she had to catch a breath, her face flushed and lips wet.

She blinked at him curiously, wondering what brought that on, then frowned at the realization, "Don't be afraid. I won't let him look at you like that again."

"..." Who? His ears rang with her declaration, "Who is afraid?"

"Why else would you leave so quickly?" she asked. "You can't protect yourself from a Duremont heir. He will target your business, halt your progress and isolate you...isn't this what went through your head at that time?"

"No? I was afraid you would accuse me of flirting again if I didn't leave," Lucian replied with a wronged expression, "I didn't want you to stress about it."

"Oh? Really?" She looked at him for a few seconds before attacking his lips again, "You did? For me?" She smiled, kissing him over and over again, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Lucian grabbed her shoulders, stopping her assault. He was getting drunk from her again and his heart would give out, "Easy there," he smiled, "Don't leave visible marks. I'm still a teacher and you are a student."

She gave him a look that said: I don't give a damn.

"You can't stop me," she threatened him.

Lucian sighed, not having any strength to resist her when she acted this cute, offering her his collarbones, "Only a little."

She grinned triumphantly, diving in for a treat. Lucian's body was more honest than his mouth and it responded to her every touch, making her feel giddy and proud.

She loved to watch him react to her touches. The way he tensed at first, trying to resist her, then slowly melting into a puddle, and the way he breathed, trying to keep quiet.

She pulled away to appreciate her artwork. He was a mess, red all over and out of breath, a hot mess. She leaned towards his ear, whispering, "If anyone dares to touch you, kill them. If you can't, call my name and I will go to you and kill them."

"Celine, those are lines that should be coming from a man's mouth," Lucian protested playfully, "Not that I don't love to hear you being possessive of me, but it makes me question my own masculinity."

"Then say it," she dared him.

"Doesn't suit my style, I'm a softie," he said, making her raise a brow. "What? I am. My middle name is Tender from tender heart, haven't you heard?"

"I think it's Darcy from dark and twisted," she replied.

"I'm not dark and twisted. I am bright and shiny," Lucian couldn't believe she didn't see him as a ray of sunshine, "I'm a delight to have around. Everyone says that."

She cupped his cheeks with her hands, squishing them, "Then cover your shady transactions better and I won't question your innocence."

His heart thumped against his chest. Was she talking about his loan sharks and the way he had been collecting the money? Or the poison sales? Or was she just teasing him again?

She grabbed the walking cane that was resting against his bed, pressing a mechanism that made a needle pop out of its end.

Lucian followed her movements, gulping, "My subordinates are very protective of me, so they added that in case I needed it."

"Not concealed enough, order them to change it," she said, pressing the tip against the plant next to the bed. Its leaves began to wither.

She figured out the whole mechanism of the cane within a few seconds of inspecting it.

"Yes ma'am." What subordinates? Lucian wanted to cry internally. He crafted his cane himself and was quite proud of the design.

Compared to the lighter she made herself, his cane looked like an expensive toy. He carefully took back his cane from her grip, and put it in its resting place.

Celine probably realized what she had done a moment later and her face fell, "I'm sorry. It's a good weapon to have, and very practical. Whoever made it must have been a genius to craft it this way. Your subordinates are very talented...you are amazing for gathering such people."

"It's alright. Any tips on how to improve are always welcomed," Lucian smiled at her.

She smiled back and he could see her shoulders relaxing. The gap in their status was one thing, but now a gap in their capabilities was starting to show too.

She knew he wanted to catch up to her one day, feel worthy of her, and not just become a pitiful creature that was being kept as a pet.

"I'm going to miss you," she said. After today, they won't be able to meet at the academy for a long while. Their time together would be more limited.

"Me too, I will try to visit more often when I'm in the capital," he promised.

"Don't, not until I deal with that worm," she said, moving to the bed furthest away from his bed to lie down, "I'm going to think, no distributions allowed."

Lucian turned to lie on his side, so that he could watch her think, "How can I help?"

"Be quiet."

"..."

Ignored. He got ignored.

It was funny how his own trait was being used against him and how annoying it was to be at the receiving end. Efficiency and productivity at its best.

Just a moment ago she was all over him, and now that her priority has switched, she became as cold as an iceberg, trying to come up with a way to destroy whoever stood in their way.

*Chapter 82: 3.27: Juiciest Gossip*

Lucian didn't want to fall behind and started thinking about his future steps as well, closing his eyes.

The steps went too far and he ended up falling asleep, dreaming about their future.

There he was the ruler of the world. He had a throne made of gold, and an army bowing to him. He was strong, feared, and respected. Not a single hair would fall from Celine's head because of him.

She could be herself and he could shower her in all the affection he desired, not having to hold back on his own feelings.

All the steps he had laid out so far were bearing their fruit. Anything seemed possible with Celine as his partner in life.

Then he woke up to his body feeling hot. There was a thick pile of blankets on top of him. Celine was no longer in the room, but her presence lingered.

The rest of the three beds had their blankets stripped. They were all on his bed, burying him under their weight.

"Haah..." Lucian sighed, melting into his warm cocoon, *'Why can't I just become her pet? I don't need a throne or power. I would be happy to sit on a cushion by her legs and do nothing.'*

He recollected Mathieu's servant from earlier, the one Celine had picked on, the dead look in his eyes, the humiliation...

*'Where does all this pride come from, hm?'*

Lucian bet he could have made a fortune by being a male courtesan to pay for his medicine in the past, all the hay heads could. But one could search the whole kingdom and wouldn't be able to find a single female or male who would enter this line of work.

They would rather suffer through the mines, or kill themselves before they ever reached that point. Not in public anyway. Behind closed doors, Lucian was certain it happened.

*'Why do we care so much? About what others say and think, and how much our lives are worth in their eyes?'*

*'My little wife has it all figured out, doesn't she? I bet she does. I will have to ask her when we meet again, I can't wait to hear her answer.'*

He got off the bed and walked over to the window. The lanterns shone brightly in the dark, illuminating the gardens.

*'Let's see...'*

While he was here, Lucian wanted to at least help Celine with catching some hidden spies or anything spicy in the school's territory.

Voice was weak for a god like being but too strong for a mortal. Apparently, it was being limited by Lucian's capacity to withstand its full power and thus, looked weaker than it was.

*'So, can you bless me or not?'*

*'You can ask your subordinates to bless you.'*

*'Hm? What do you mean?'*

*'The more people worship you, the greater the effect of their prayers will be. It doesn't have to come from the priests, but from the people.'*

A blessing could fasten and enhance the body's growth. It was a process that allowed the receiver's body to adapt and tolerate higher amounts of energy that would otherwise not be possible to achieve with a mortal's physique.

*'Wouldn't war erupt if this information gets leaked? How many oppressors would try to force people to worship them?'*

Lucian thought.

*'How do you think the Duremonts rose to power so fast? It's already happening in the background. People play heroes in the name of justice and honor, but it's the same old song every time. War will always find a way. It's just a matter of time.'*

Lucian overheard the Dean speaking to Young Master Duremont, discussing Lucian like a piece of cattle.

They talked about how Lucian was the new rising star in the business, but his lack of political experience would make him easy prey for those seeking to manipulate him. He was too useful to be left alone and too weak to stand up for himself.

The Dean suddenly frowned and looked around as if sensing someone was listening to them.

Lucian quickly withdrew his presence and strolled through the corridors as if nothing had happened.

He passed by the dormitories of the male students, the garden and the lecture halls, where he stumbled on more and more people, who could sense that someone was watching them as well.

'...' Lucian sighed inwardly. Too many rivals, too many people to compete with, and too many enemies to keep an eye on.

*'You should fall out of love with her. There's too much baggage she brings with herself,'* Voice offered a quick fix like it would be that easy.

*'You talk like I didn't try.'*

*'Try again,'* Voice said after they saw a few hard working knights in the training field, bench-pressing logs like they were toothpicks.

The world behind the walls of the Royal Academy was a different one compared to the one outside. The disparity was too big.

There were a few servants that badmouthed Celine behind her back, but not as many as Lucian expected there would be.

*'That's strange isn't it?'* Lucian continued to listen on. Mistreatment of servants must have been viewed as something normal for them to take it so lightly. *'The streets don't talk about her much either. At most they would say that she is arrogant and spoiled, but never with ill-intent in their words...'*

Celine wasteful spendings were a good thing for the economy, so the merchants had no reason to complain. In the face of money, even the poor would choose to close their eyes to injustice.

*'So it's only the people in power that despise her,'* Lucian concluded.

The common people were more interested in what she was wearing than in what she had said. And she used that to her advantage as the duke's most doted upon child. Everyone knew her father had a soft spot for her. She made sure to show it off whenever she could.

With that in mind, Lucian left the Academy's territory, calling sick for the last day and not coming in.

He was not interested in being called a plaything, and made it quite obvious that he disliked the rumors (there were barely any).

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Lucian didn't know how much Celine meant by her words until one day, when Jax came to him with the juiciest gossip.

"Young master Mathieu had gone blind in both eyes!" Jax exclaimed as he climbed up the ship's ramp and onto the deck.

"..." Lucian almost dropped the cannonball, his hand stopping mid-air.

He was about to load the cannon and test fire it into the ocean. It was a sunny day, and the weather was perfect to go out on a trial voyage after finishing with the maintenance of the ship.

"What did you say?" Goblin called out to him from the other side of the ship, where he was helping two men with the sails, "Mathieu? Who is that guy?"

┌──────── Author's note ─────────┐

What do you think of MCs that are not a magnet for trouble? Lucian is the one who has to pick up fights for his goals (as a loan shark, etc), and get into trouble consciously. ☐

He is good at avoiding confrontations, so there isn't much action going on right now.

I don't want to force it either, but he can't avoid it forever for sure. He can't allow his little wife to steal his spotlight and let her poke other's eyes in his stead, can he? 😊

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Chapter 83: 3.28: Split Opinion

Jax, who always entered the scene with the most dramatic line, noticed that barely anyone beside Lucian and Goblin gave him attention.

Roland and Cansan continued to chat with each other at the wheel, Leaf was in the middle of tying knots around the mast, and the rest were getting ready to take a break, slowly leaving their posts to head down the ship.

Only Lucian's group stayed behind. It was a small fishing town with not much going on, so they had no interest in exploring the area.

"You heard me. A Duremont heir is now permanently blind in both of his eyes. A hay...I mean one of his servants went mad and poured acid in his eyes..." Jax said, a bit louder this time.

A powerful guy being taken out by a mere servant? Finally some interesting news.

Young master Mathieu was a top candidate for the next head of the family. This accident meant that the Duremonts would have to rethink their succession plans and start grooming the second-best candidate.

"Where's the servant now?" Lucian loaded the canon. The speed it needed to calculate the trajectory and the wind resistance was something that couldn't be interrupted.

"Dead," Jax answered.

'*Celine...*' Lucian thought, feeling cold sweat dripping down his back. When someone was too miserable to go on, so little was needed to push them to the point of no return. It was probably the servant's case, something or someone had pushed him into that point.

*'It's almost the end of the semester. Four months to make someone snap. It took her four months to make one of the most promising young masters permanently disabled.'*

Lucian was certain it was Celine's doing.

*'The question is whether the servant was working for her from the beginning or just a convenient victim she came across.'*

Jax continued, "He drank poison and killed himself. Nobody knows where he got the idea from, and the Duremont is now on the hunt for anyone related to that servant."

BOOM! A loud explosion followed, the sound echoing from the cliff's rocks. A splash of water and a destroyed dummy boat could be seen in the distance. A hole was in its center. Lucian hit the target.

"..." The crew stared at Lucian. His aim had gotten too precise. He would have made it big in the naval fleet.

Unfortunately, this ship was being modified into a merchant ship, not a war one. So any dead weight that couldn't be of use had to be discarded. Including the cannons and the cannonballs, which they were leaving behind.

They didn't want to be seen as a threat to other ships and have their ship sunk, or worse, be mistaken for pirates. The crew would rather avoid any trouble in the waters.

In case of pirates, or other scum, they would have to deal with it with the manpower that was aboard.

Jax covered his ears, a bit late, but still trying to protect his hearing in case of another blast, "Aren't you having too much fun?"

"Never. This is serious business," Lucian said, his face straight.

Jax rolled his eyes, knowing exactly what kind of serious business this was. They weren't even going to use the cannons, but Lucian insisted that he had to learn how to operate them to better understand how the mechanism worked in case they got under fire one day.

"Don't roll eyes at your boss," Roland said from behind.

"Boss? I only see a walking, talking treasure chest," Jax said, making Lucian laugh.

"Listen here you..." Roland didn't take his words kindly, "You are lowering his credibility and your own in the process. How do you think it will look if people find out that you disrespect him like that?"

Lucian's reputation in the south was far more different than in the north. Being associated with people like Savage, Scythe and Roland gave him the image of a dangerous individual. Most of his transactions were done via middlemen and few people had actually seen him in person.

Whereas in the north, people assumed him to be a harmless and kindhearted man. His reputation was one of a fair businessman.

The Vices had a split opinion on what his image should look like. Roland and Fishbone were in favor of building a reputation of a man who should not be messed with, or one would face dire consequences. It helped keep people in line and the competition intimidated.

Cansan and Goblin were in favor of the best business owner, who was willing to go the extra step to satisfy his customers, building loyalty and long-term partnerships.

The third group, Jax, didn't want Lucian to change into whatever superior the Vices thought was appropriate. He didn't want him to become a corrupt and greedy pig. Keeping his boss grounded and humble would be the best.

"What credibility, huh?" Jax challenged Roland, "I don't remember you being his second in command."

"..." Roland was about to lose his cool, "Boss is taking pity on you. It's because you can't handle anything beyond passing out messages and reports," he mocked the younger boy.

Jax gritted his teeth. His position as the courier was a joke in the gang. He was bad at trading, had no eye for business. Numbers made his head spin, and he couldn't keep his mouth shut when he should.

Jax couldn't be called a personal bodyguard, nor a personal assistant. Lucian made him a Vice in charge of intelligence gathering, but everyone thought it was a made-up position. They didn't see it as a real thing (everyone was doing it besides their own duties).

That's until Lucian squeezed the most out of it. It made them respect Lucian more, but also look down at Jax more for not having to do any real work. At least that's what they thought.

Jax was a frequent visitor of a red light district. Whenever Lucian was tied up in the office or stuck in a meeting, Jax would pass the time roaming the streets and then pick him up at their agreed-upon place.

#### *Chapter 84: 3.29: Your Boss Is Not Your Equal*

At that time, Lucian began to sell products that catered to the needs of the ladies, investing in the existing market.

He did so with Celine in mind, to maintain her beauty and health for as long as possible (after Celine complained that she wouldn't be young forever and that he should marry her before she became old and saggy).

Perfume, soaps, lotions, essential oils, makeup, and the list went on. The ladies had a tendency to stick to their beauty routines religiously, and were always happy to test the new products Jax brought to them as gifts. He would then return with a pile of gossip for Lucian to go through.

Building an intelligence network wasn't cheap, nor easy. It wasn't something Lucian could afford to invest into in the beginning, so having Jax and the ladies research and set new trends for him saved him a lot of money.

"Alright, you two," Lucian interfered when the argument between Jax and Rován started to get heated, "If you want to squabble so badly, do it while making me something to eat. It's lunch time."

"Tell him to stop provoking me then, always going on and on about how I'm a charity case. Like he is not," Jax said, pointing accusingly at Rován. "The guy has zero respect for his seniors. I was here first. Me! He has no right to talk back to me, ever!"

"Now you are mentioning hierarchy when you treat your boss like he is your best buddy? Which is it?" Roland walked toward the ship's kitchen, rolling up his sleeves, "If your boss tells you to get him food and you complain and talk back, it means you are an ungrateful brat who doesn't know his place."

Jax was the only one who took the friend thing literally. Others viewed Lucian as their boss, and understood that their positions were not equal. But Jax didn't seem to catch the hint and Lucian had too high of a tolerance level to find a problem in it.

"We are Vices, not servants," Jax followed after Rován, not letting his remarks slide, "It's not our job to fetch food. If anything, we should pass the order down to our men, not do it ourselves."

They continued to argue about what was their role as a Vice.

"Was it a good idea to send them to the kitchen?" Leaf asked, turning his head in their direction, "There are lots of knives there. What if they kill each other?"

"Their deaths will serve as a reminder for the rest of us to not be stupid and get along," Lucian said, lifting another cannonball, "We will learn from their mistakes, and move on."

"...I can hear you!" Jax protested, "You don't care if I die, do you?! You only care about profit! You would even sell my body parts to the highest bidder if you had the chance, wouldn't you?!"

"No, I wouldn't!" Lucian called out, reassured him, "I would bury you and put a flower on your grave. Then sell your assets to cover the funeral costs and the flower I gave you."

"Are you telling me my assets are worth a flower?" Jax asked in disbelief.

Leaf, Goblin, and Cansan roared with laughter.

"What's with the attitude he is giving Boss lately?" Leaf asked Fishbone, who was also laughing.

"I bet it's jealousy," Fishbone replied, "Probably another one of those courtesans used him to get closer to our boss, or...Jax had spent all his money on one of them and got

dumped after he ran out of coins. Broke and ugly people usually blame the handsome and rich for their own shortcomings and failures."

Leaf took his hat off, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, then looked at Lucian, "You don't mind? If he was one of my men, I would have smacked him back in place a long time ago. He is starting to forget where he came from."

Fishbone agreed, "You saved him from slavery and gave him a new life, but this is the thanks you are getting? He should be grateful to have you as a Boss, not be so... rude."

"I agree," Cansan said, flipping his low ponytail to the side while walking down the stairs from the upper deck, "Who knows what lies he is spewing to those women to impress them... 'Ohh yes, I'm such a great fighter, so talented and skilled. Look at my muscles, look at how big they are. Ohhh~'" he imitated Jax's deep voice.

"Ahaha, that's exactly what he does!" Goblin laughed. He could imagine Jax doing just that, "But Boss, you are too soft. He is using his connection with you to get to those ladies."

"Let him," Lucian said, patting the cannon as if praising it, "It's a good practice for him to get better at talking. One day, when he is confident and skilled enough to leave us, that's when we will crush his spirit. For now, he can have his fun."

He paused when they looked at him as if he had grown a second head for letting Jax get away with his rude behavior again.

"Life is not about serving others and fulfilling their dreams. It's about fulfilling your own," Lucian reminded them.

They all had a common dream: to get rich and to never be looked down upon again. They believed they would be able to achieve that dream under Lucian's command, and they would be damned if they didn't.

"Someone must have made Jax feel small," Lucian inserted the cannon ball and searched for another target in his binoculars, "Small enough to make him act on it like this. Ask around if you have time."

"..." Leaf and Fishbone exchanged a look, "It's not us, is it?"

"Hm?" Lucian's lips formed a smile, "Do you feel guilty about something?"

His voice was a little too playful, and he seemed to enjoy their discomfort a little too much.

"We are going to help in the kitchen," Fishbone quickly bowed, Leaf following after him to flee the scene, "Make sure those two don't burn the food..."

"..." Goblin scratched his cheek, asking Cansan to explain it to him.

Cansan chuckled and ruffled Goblin's head before heading to the kitchen as well, "Someone doubted Boss's abilities to discipline his subordinates, and Boss is letting their doubts pay for it. Jax never doubted him, but the rest of us have at some point, right?"

"Ooh~!" Goblin's eyes lit up, then he rubbed the goosebumps on his arms at the thought of doubting Lucian and being punished for it, "But you were just worried about Jax taking advantage of Boss."

Cansan smiled, "It's not about that. It's about having faith in Boss."

"Ooohh~!" Goblin's eyes shone even brighter, "Is that why your blessings always give Boss the least effects compared to mine? Because of those doubts?"

Cansan coughed a few times in embarrassment, disappointed that his blessings were not enough to give Lucian the best support, "It seems so...the effects of the blessing do seem to depend on how much we believe in Boss."

After Lucian returned from the academy, he immediately began the knight training with the support of his Vices.

*Chapter 85: 3.30: Blocky*

Goblin bowed to Lucian and ran off to join the rest in the kitchen to help as well.

The routine at the harbor had been set, the ship's maintenance was done.

Now, Lucian could start training his body while they prepared their minds to offer their blessings to him.

He lit up the cannon fuse. The cannonball followed the imaginary trajectory he conjured in his mind, striking the rock on the shore. A part of it blew off and a part of it cracked from the impact.

He looked again through his binoculars at the damaged rock, *'A diamond knight would need five of those to his face to receive some damage...'*

Lucian was still far away from becoming a 12lb (11kg) shooting cannon ball that could shatter cliffs with a single blow.

He didn't need to reach that far either since there wasn't a single diamond knight in the whole world and he hoped it would stay that way.

From legends and old books, the diamond knight's punches were a hundred and thirty times more powerful than an iron knight's punch, enough to destroy a defence wall built out of stones with their bare fists. Or so the stories went.

If one were to appear in this era, the power balance would shift overnight.

Lucian just wanted to feel like one for inspiration, shooting the cannonballs was the closest one could get to experiencing the sensation of a diamond knight's punch.

Sighing, Lucian turned around.

There was a wooden dummy with a target painted on the deck, representing a human torso. Made out of the most dense wood, reinforced with metal plates and secured to the heavy planks of the ship.

It was designed to be an immovable object and withstand the force of a charging boar, which equaled the silver knight's punching power.

Without giving himself time to hesitate, Lucian threw a punch at the dummy with his left hand. He didn't hold back, using his full strength.

"Ugh..." he groaned, shaking his fingers.

The dummy didn't even shake. Lucian's fist was the one that took the beating instead, not the other way around.

Attempting the impossible and making it happen. It was the first step to becoming a ranked knight.

Humans couldn't create matter from nothing (no convenient magic and no elemental magic either). They couldn't control anything outside of themselves. The only thing they could influence was the weapon that they practiced with as a part of their body's extension.

Lucian took a stance again and closed his eyes, breathing in and out, imagining his fist as a cannonball as stupid as it sounded.

*'It's not my hand, but a cannonball, not my fist, but a cannonball, not my hand, but a cannonball...'*

The weight of the cannonball, its speed, its destructive power, all that became his left hand. He could imagine it flying through the air, striking the dummy, breaking its wood and turning it into splinters. He could see it clearly. He believed in it.

He opened his eyes and threw a punch, but the dummy continued to mock his efforts, as if saying: Imagination is not reality, and your reality is that you are a weak, puny, mortal, incapable of destroying me.

*'Stupid block of wood.'* Lucian hit it again and again.

He was using less and less force each time. Having his fist damaged equaled failure, but so did not breaking through the wood. He had to find the sweet spot.

*'Break, break, break, BREAK, BREAK, BREAK!'* he chanted louder and louder as if it could cover the lack of power behind his strikes.

He lost count of how many punches he had thrown at it. The dummy was still standing, and the more he punched it, the more it seemed to be in a better shape than Lucian was.

His knuckles were starting to tear and blood was beginning to show, but he didn't stop despite already failing (failing to prevent his fists from getting damaged).

He started to think he would have better luck by using his forehead instead, and was considering it.

*'If my fist cannot be a cannon ball, why not my whole head be one? It's probably the size of a cannon ball after all...'*

His stomach growled. Or maybe it was his brain telling him that hunger was clouding his judgment, and that he should go and eat something before he really ended up breaking his skull on the dummy.

"Haah..." Lucian took a step back, looking at his bleeding knuckles, *'I will let you go this time. Next time I won't be so forgiving.'*

He already gave the dummy a personality and a name: Blocky. He hated Blocky. That stupid Blocky who didn't want to be broken. Blocky didn't like Lucian either. He could feel it.

*'What are you? A child?'* Voice asked him, *'Stop blaming a piece of wood for your failure. It's pathetic.'*

*'It's not my fault that Blocky doesn't want to die,'* Lucian muttered even more childishly.

*'The whole purpose of training is to break your limitations and go beyond them. It's you, who doesn't want to go past your limits, not the wood.'*

Lucian raised his bloodied knuckles to show the world how hard he was working on breaking his limitations, and failing.



It didn't mean they had a harder time growing stronger than the rest. It just meant that they had a different set of problems to overcome.

*'That's why you wanted me to become rich fast? To feed my body with resources? And here I thought you just wanted to see the world burn...'*

All this time, Lucian thought Voice was only in it for the drama and chaos, not because it wanted to help him. But it was helping him. In a way that didn't seem helpful at all. It was a bad motivator, that was for sure.

Instead of telling him it would help his growth, Voice told him he had to get rich to get back at the world. Instead of telling him that his body needed resources, it told him he had to impress people with his wealth or else he would be bullied for being poor.

Everything was done with intimidation, fear, and humiliation.

*'Too much,'* Voice made him correct the force behind his punch to match the exact amount of force needed to hit Blocky, which Lucian found to be too little to be able to break anything. He was not convinced.

Voice made him hit it from various distances and angles, making him adjust the power each time to the required minimum, not a single bit more.

There was a difference in the required amount of force needed depending on the distance from which he threw the punch.

*'Again. Too much.'*

The angle, the force, the distance, the speed, they had to be perfect.

*'You're not holding back enough. Again.'*

*'You are focusing too much on the wood, and not enough on yourself.'*

Lucian grabbed Blocky's 'shoulder' with his right hand, and punched it lightly with his left.

*'Feel the air resistance, how it's moving around your hand. Any force that's opposing your movement needs to be eliminated before your fist touches your target.'*

Lucian tried to remove the air resistance with Voice's instructions. He controlled his breath and motion, decreasing the pressure around his fist.

*'Transfer heat of your body to your wrist and knuckles, the area where your hand will connect with your target. Move it from your torso.'*

This was where the hard part started. Lucian had to increase his body temperature, then concentrate that heat in the palm of his hand, making it hot enough to burn someone's skin from touch alone.

"..." Lucian rubbed his fist against his shirt to create some friction to make the heat transfer faster, but Voice wasn't pleased.

*'It has to be instant like a thought that crosses your mind.'*

*'How?'*

*'Think. Your body will obey if you train it to. It's just like when you are about to sneeze. You don't need to command your body to cover your nose, it does it on its own, faster than you can think.'*

It was like building a new habit, one that would become natural over time.

Lucian continued to output the same amount of force, but could feel the difference. Before, his fist would bounce off, now, the wood was deforming slightly under the same force.

Same force, different results. It was as if he was touching it with a hot iron. The heat transferred was what made the wood weaker.

Voice was teaching him the fundamental basics, the way he could break Blocky with his bare hands was to understand the nature of the wood.

*'Do other knights also have to go through this kind of training?'*

*'No, they mostly learn how to use their hands as an axe instead of burning their target. You don't have their bodies or muscles, so we'll have to use the resources you have to make up for the difference.'*

*'I've grown taller and gained some weight since the last time I measured myself,'* Lucian defended himself, continuing to multitask between questioning Voice and deforming Blocky.

He was as tall as Cansan, who had an average height. Five foot ten (178 cm) to be exact, and he had a few pounds on him too. He didn't look weaker than the average person in his age group, in fact, he had a pretty good physique, with muscles in the right places.

He might have worked harder to achieve the same result, but that didn't make the end product any worse.

Lucian's shirt was dry from stopping the sweat from cooling down his body. It felt like standing in front of a campfire, but at the same time, he was comfortable.

His body was adapting to the heat due to the copper stage. Once he unlocked it, he would be able to hone his skills further.

"Hahh..." Lucian slid down to the ground, resting against the mast after depleting his energy.

His right hand was still intact, so he pulled his pocket watch out and checked the time. An hour had passed, and his stomach was twisting itself in protest from not getting any food.

His head burned too much to think about anything other than food.

Placing his left arm over his knee, Lucian leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

From what he heard, most knight training involved surviving in the wilderness and learning from the harshness of nature.

They would be doing things like climbing mountains with heavy weights, running through obstacles, getting their bodies hit with heavy logs and stuff like that.

Lucian did some research on the topic.

Those were logically the best ways to temper one's body, and were proven to be effective over the years. Their bodies had to heal, then be broken and rebuilt again.

What Lucian was doing now was quite the opposite.

The knights were mostly using external forces while he was using internal ones to enhance his body.

They had to go through hell and high waters to achieve what they wanted.

Lucian had to figure out how to summon hell and high waters inside his body.

### *Chapter 87: 3.32: Not A Special Snowflake*

Money didn't grow on trees, so even though adventures in the forests and mountains sounded fun, Lucian was already busy enough to add one more thing to his plate.

Whatever place he was at, he would use it as a training ground. Be it his office or middle of a ship's deck.

Lucian continued to treat Blocky as a fragile egg and only hit it with the amount of force required to crack its shell.

It was hard to resist the temptation of adding just a tiny bit more force, but he held his ground.

*'Are my powers sealed or something? Is this how you break the seal?'* Lucian asked. *'That would be nice. I would feel important then.'*

*'Stop looking for a meaning where there isn't one.'* Voice replied, *as meanly as possible, 'No, you are not a special snowflake. Or any other crap like that.'*

*'If I'm not a special snowflake, who is?'* Lucian asked.

*'The Crown Prince for starters.'*

The Crown Prince had reached the emerald stage, a monstrous achievement.

Lucian and his bronze stage were far too behind.

He would need to go through the stages in this order:

1. Copper stage
2. Iron stage
3. Bronze stage
4. Silver stage
5. Gold stage
6. Emerald stage
7. Sapphire stage
8. Ruby stage
9. Diamond stage

Lucian found out he reached the copper stage during his travels to the Southern Alliance.

It was a stage that helped him stabilize extreme internal temperatures. He could also survive more blood loss before fainting.

His wounds would not heal faster but they would be more resilient to infections.

Iron was a metal that let every creature breathe and live, thus reaching the iron stage would allow him to survive in places with thin air.

The improved blood circulation would increase his stamina, allowing him to run faster and longer without getting as winded.

Reaching a stage didn't mean he had perfected the previous one, only that he had met requirements to start the stage's knight training. It was a bottle neck of some sorts that could only be crossed with a blessing.

Bronze stage was the stage Lucian was at now. It was a fusion of the first two.

His body would have an easier time remembering and learning how to react without him having to think about it, allowing his experience to fuse into instincts faster.

He didn't have to focus on the tasks that were second nature to him and could multitask much better.

Lucian continued to punch the dummy with feather-like strikes, trying to ignore the judging stares his crew was giving him as they brought out the food.

*'They must think I'm lazy, and not putting any effort in my training,'* Lucian mused, his cheeks turning red as he increased the strength of his blows.

He had to make sure that his progress was noticeable but not suspiciously fast

*'Seal, seal...'* Lucian sang in his mind, coaxing an imaginary thing that he made up off the top of his head. Shackles got their power boost from somewhere after all, and it wasn't the priest's prayers, that was for certain, *'You are in my way. Be good and break for me, so I can return to my Celine sooner...'*

"Did you get hurt, Boss?" Goblin asked, his mouth full of bread.

"Nah, it looks more like he is hitting the dummy as if he is scared to break it," Jax commented, catching on to what was going on.

"I'm practicing restraint," Lucian explained, "If I am not able to hold back, how could I stop myself from accidentally killing someone?"

Goblin didn't understand the reasoning, "I thought the point of combat learning was to kill someone faster and more efficiently, not to hold back."

"You are right, but that's not how you make the blessings stronger," Lucian was of the same opinion until he met Celine.

Her self control was the only thing that made him not doubt Voice's instructions.

Women didn't have the constitution to cultivate their bodies like men, or else he would have thought Celine was going through some knight training as well.

They were better with blessings though, so if a girl with this gift appeared, she would be coveted by all the houses around.

Lucian thought his little villainess would be better with curses and hexes, not blessings. But he had no problem with it as long as he could be the target of her love spells.

'*Focus*,' Voice said, and Lucian stopped day dreaming, returning his attention to his subordinates.

"Is the food ready?" Lucian asked, and the crew nodded.

Each brought a large bowl, setting them on the barrels.

Most of the dishes had meat, meat, and more meat in them.

Since they were in the sea, seafood was the main course.

They had a lot of fish, octopus, crabs, and shrimps. There were a couple of vegetables and a small portion of fruits as well.

"Let's eat." Lucian was the first to reach for the crab.

Picking it up, he used his bare hands to crack the shell open like a walnut, taking the meat out, and eating it.

"Ah, this is life," Leaf sighed with contentment, artificially improving his mood so his blessing would be more potent. "A full stomach and a beautiful ocean view to enjoy. What else does a man need to be happy?"

The rest of the crew followed his example, cracking the crabs' shells, and enjoying their fill of seafood.

They looked at Lucian's left hand, which was red and swollen, then at Blocky who had a fist imprint in its stomach. It wasn't deep but visible to the naked eye.

They were quite invested in Lucian's progress, and they had a reason to be.

If Lucian could break through the limitations of a normal person like the knights did, their standing in society would change drastically.

The world would have to recognize him and give him the appropriate treatment.

It would reflect on the people around him, on them, his subordinates, his crew, and his followers. All of them would benefit from it.

They didn't say it, but Lucian could feel how they wanted him to work even harder, to push himself more.

It was a bit annoying to feel their expectations and their desires to see him succeed.

Greed, ambition, and hunger for recognition, all mixed together.

It wasn't a bad thing.

They put lots of faith into Lucian, and their belief in him would make it easier to advance.

#### *Chapter 88: 3.33: Four Months Worth Of Blessing Result*

Lucian wiped the grease from his mouth with the napkin, looking over the side of the ship.

Thirteen people were missing from his group of twenty.

"Did something happen in the town? They haven't returned from their break yet."

The port town was small, with barely a thousand people living here. There was a small festival in honor of the God of Sea and Harvest being held today, but it shouldn't be a reason for their absence.

Cansan looked over as well, chewing on a lobster tail delicately to not make a mess, "I was thinking the same, but didn't want to ruin the mood before the blessing."

"Let's start the blessing ceremony then," Lucian agreed with him, turning around to face his crew.

Lorano, who had been hiding in his lab, also showed up and was waiting for the ritual to start.

They formed a semi-circle before Lucian.

While the southerners could draw power from the sun, the northerners could draw power from the earth's core.

The northerners were more in tune with metals and minerals and could absorb them with the help of others. The more infused by the earth's core energy the mineral was, the more potent its effect.

The first one to make an offering was Goblin.

"May Boss' wealth and power grow," he whispered, holding three gold coins in his palm, his head lowered as if making a wish to a deity. He was an open minded kid and didn't think twice about using the northerners' blessing methods, "May he become a man worthy of the title of a king!"

All the coins in his palm turned to a whisp of smoke, moving in Lucian's direction.

It made his skin shine with an inner glow, and then it disappeared. The feeling was energizing. His body warmed up and he could feel an itch in his chest, a desire to move and act upon Goblin's words.

Lucian bowed his head slightly towards Goblin in gratitude, catching the boy's body before he could fall down.

A southerner blessing a northerner was a taboo, but Goblin did it anyway, and paid the price. The tattoos on his skin faded, and his body weakened. He would need time to recover from the backlash, but he seemed content with his sacrifice.

Lucian placed Goblin carefully on the floor so that he could bask under the sun and absorb its energy to recover.

This showed how different the southerners' and northerners' upbringing was. The southerners could gain power by absorbing it by themselves while the northerners needed the other's support to do so. It sounded quite unfair, didn't it?

Jax, Roland, Leaf and Fishbone weren't vocal like Goblin was. They kneeled on one knee and combined the southerner's way of praying, which they were more familiar with.

They had to focus and will the sun's energy to do their bidding, seeking its help with blessing Lucian. The amount of gold they could transfer to Lucian was limited, but even a small bit helped.

Cansan and Loreno joined in as well. Northerners had a tendency to keep to themselves rather than work as a pack, but they respected Lucian enough to make the blessing work.

Lucian focused on his breathing in order to advance, trying to ignore the fact that he had already spent a small chest of gold coins to unlock the copper stage.

Most of his ancestors had to be priests or priestesses, and probably didn't know what to do with the absorbed energy and blessings he received from others.

Lucian was afraid his bloodline wouldn't have much knowledge to help him out in the process, but it was less of a struggle than he thought it would be.

It felt like he had eaten a lot and now had to lie down to digest the food. He could feel it moving through his body, like a liquid, seeking to be shaped and formed into something.

*'How could I do it like the southerners?' Lucian thought, 'Or do I need to follow the northern way and let it envelope my body like a halo? I really would like to connect with Celine through a tattoo...'*

*'She's not a southerner and doesn't have a tattoo,'* Voice responded.

*'Oh well, a halo would have to do...'* Lucian didn't give up, *'I will just have to come up with a way to connect to her in a similar way.'*

"Is that a glow I see?" Leaf asked, looking at Lucian with wonder, "Boss is actually doing it..."

Fishbone squinted his eyes. And true to Leaf's words, there was a subtle glow coming from Lucian's veins, barely noticeable, with an irony hue to it.

Everyone cheered, celebrating Lucian's success.

"We've finally got a knight in our midst, boys!" Jax shouted, "He somehow leaped past copper and landed straight into iron! An iron knight!"

The rest of the crew followed with a loud, "AYE!"

"So you've been in both the copper and iron stages this whole time?" Cansan asked, eager to find out, "How does it feel?"

"New and improved," Lucian cheered together with them, jumping and shaking a few times as well, to feel the change, "Bronze too, but I'll probably need to devour another chest of gold before I budge any further."

"Hip, hip..." Leaf started.

"Horray!" The rest cheered.

"Hip, hip..." Leaf began again.

"Horray!"

Lucian lifted Goblin and they all threw him up into the sky.

Goblin landed back in their arms, and was thrown back up again, laughing like crazy. He contributed the most for the past four months with his blessings.

They then slapped each other on the backs and shoulders to congratulate themselves on a job well done.

"Let's test it out," Lucian suggested, and they all agreed.

The southerners didn't have knights but the ranking system was very familiar to them.

From ten percent of their skin being covered to ninety percent. With ten percent equal to the copper knight.

Goblin had around four percent of his skin covered. Fishbone and Leaf had seven, Jax and Roland had nine.

Cansan and Lorano stepped aside, moving Goblin away as well, not wanting to participate in an unfair battle.

"Come on, come on!" Jax called out, waving his hand for them to attack, eager to advance as well.

They jumped on him and the brawl started.

It was an all-out melee.

Punches, elbows, kicks, and headbutts were being thrown around like candy. The sound of flesh hitting flesh could be heard, accompanied by the occasional grunt or curse.

#### *Chapter 89: 3.34: A New Overpriced Product*

Leaf was sent flying through the air after a particularly vicious punch from Lucian.

He landed in the water, creating a big splash. "Damn it!" he shouted, spitting out water.

Lucian was next to Fishbone in a second. He grabbed him and flipped him over his shoulder, slamming him to the deck.

Fishbone grunted in pain, his speed no match to Lucian's. "Damn, Boss...ugh... is in another league now."

Jax and Roland both attacked from the side, trying to take him down. But Lucian was already ahead of them.

He grabbed their fists before they could punch him and pulled them toward him, hitting their foreheads against each other, causing them to stumble back from the impact.

Jax held his forehead, his face red and burning from the blow, while Roland shook his head to get rid of the dizziness.

Lucian didn't give them any time to rest or think. He moved forward and struck Jax's stomach with his leg then Roland's, sending both of them overboard.

Their screams were followed by a pair of splashes as they hit the water.

Fishbone quickly jumped overboard to escape the same fate as the rest. He was a big guy, so his fall caused a small tidal wave that rocked others back into the water.

The subtle smoke was still coming off Lucian's body after the fight, creating a haze around him.

His senses and instincts were running wild. It wasn't overwhelming like Voice's power was. Everything was enhanced, yet his body didn't feel overexerted.

"..." Goblin, Cansan, and Loreno stared at Lucian, who won against four southerners. Easily. Effortlessly. Like they were a joke.

While regular southerners were superior to regular northerners in terms of strength, northern knights and southern hunters were on the same level.

Jax and Roland would have to awaken at least twenty percent of their tattoos and advance to two marked hunters to stand a chance against Lucian's iron knight level strength.

*'Let's try again,'* Lucian turned to Blocky, positioning his left hand for a punch, and threw it.

This time, the hand imprint went deeper into the wood until he reached the metal plate. The force of the impact didn't crack the wood, but rather melted it.

Grinning in satisfaction, Lucian removed his shirt and jumped into the water to join the rest, his body cutting the surface neatly, leaving almost no splash behind him. He surfaced a moment later, shaking his head, spraying water everywhere.

He didn't expect the difference between an iron stage and iron knight to be so drastic. The bottleneck was a real deal.

Cansan also decided to jump into the ocean, swimming around and enjoying the sea breeze, "Fishbone, could you ask your wife to pass a message to my Mumbai?"

"Sure," Fishbone agreed.

Mumbai, Cansan's wife, ended up having motion sickness and couldn't join them on the voyage. She stayed in the capital, keeping an eye on things for him.

"Arghh," Goblin tried to absorb the sun's energy faster so he could join the fun in the water as well, "...arghh!!"

It was a terrible decision.

Goblin regretted it very much as he got sunburnt from absorbing too much too fast. He looked like a roasted turkey, his skin charred to a crisp.

Loreno went to fetch a bucket of water with a towel. He placed the items next to Goblin's shoulders before returning to his lab.

"Ugh, thank you," Goblin groaned, slowly dipping the towel into the water, then wringing the excess out. He slapped it over his face, then continued to sunbathe while muffling in pain, "May my beast be in a good mood today and not bite me..."

To be able to awaken more of his tattoos and become a marked hunter, Goblin had to tame the guardian beasts of the tattoo. Ones that could kill him easily if they didn't take a liking to him.

Southerners' violent nature was often due to their inability to tame their beasts, which made them prone to outbursts of violence.

The northerners often accused them of being shackled in disguise, waging war and spreading chaos.

The southerners would retaliate back by accusing northerners for being shackled, who were spreading lies to bring destruction to the world like true shackleds would.

It was a never-ending loop.

Lucian swam deeper and deeper. Sea plants tickled his sides and fish swam away in fear. He was looking for a gift to bring back home. Something to make her smile.

He didn't have gold coins to spare and he bet she would also rather have him not waste it on her, who already had it all.

He still wanted to congratulate her for blinding their enemy, and show his support.

Awed by the colorful and beautiful sea plants he saw, an idea came to his mind.

An exotic glass tank of sea plants and fish could be sold as a decoration inside the noble houses. It would be another overpriced product for the wealthy, to show of their wealth.

The idea was too tempting not to try.

Lucian immediately swam up and signaled for the crew to help him collect the sea plants and fish. The crew was confused but helped him nonetheless.

Lucian climbed back up to the ship and marched inside Lorano's lab, "I need to use a corner."

He was dripping water all over the floor, his golden hair soaked and sticking to his face.

He moved an empty glass tank that was used for Lorano experiments into a corner, removed the small wooden ship from it, and then asked Lorano to start pouring water into it.

"If we can help tropical plants survive in a different climate inside our glass palaces, then the same can be done for these as well," Lucian said, just in time for Leaf to carry in a batch of sea plants and a fish.

They had no idea how the fish and plants would survive inside the glass tank, but they could experiment until they found out.

*Chapter 90: 3.35: Too Bright*

"Find a good ratio of salt to water, so it can be replicated in a controlled environment," Lucian ordered Lorano, "temperature range in which they survive, how often they have to be fed, and if they can be bred."

Lorano nodded his head, then asked through gestures about what to do with his current research regarding the ship's structure and the materials that could be used to create a lighter and more spacious hull for it. His two assistants were not enough.

"I'll get you some assistants that failed the Academy's entrance exams. They should be able to at least follow simple instructions," Lucian promised him.

"Weren't we supposed to sail west?" Leaf covered his mouth, whispering to Fishbone.

Fishbone sighed helplessly, "Give Boss a chance to enjoy some free time in the waters and this happens..."

They thought Lucian was going for a swim to relax a bit and cool off from the sun, but it turned out to be a fishing trip for new ideas instead.

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The group was supposed to go on a trial voyage after lunch, so Jax and Cansan went to check on the missing manpower, wondering what was taking them so long.

Their Boss's no wasting time habits had rubbed off on them. They were irritated at the fact that they had to fetch the guys themselves.

Cansan was ready to negotiate a huge discount, to make up for the delay, but it turned out to be not necessary.

They returned to Lucian with even more irritated expressions, "Boss, someone poached them right under our noses by offering them a better deal."

"Who was it?" Lucian asked, looking over the dock to see if there were any suspicious people or ships lurking about.

"It's that old geezer's son with BIG connections in the merchant guild, the one who made fun of you when you were registering your ONLY ONE ship," Jax huffed, getting easily annoyed, "What was his name again? Son of a..."

The group called him various colorful words, none of them being his real name.

"Could it be the reason why the merchant guild rejected my offer at a partnership?" Lucian lifted his head in thoughts, looking at the sky above, at the white clouds that were moving slowly with the wind, the seagulls that were flying above the ocean.

"A noble who has a better reputation in ship making and sea traveling does sound better than an upstart who had just entered the market," Lucian thought aloud, trying not to take it personally.

That's just how business was done. He couldn't be petty about it like his subordinates were.

His share in the South Alliance trade was solid enough for the merchant guild not to try and screw him over.

They also knew that if he tried to limit his exports from the South Alliance as revenge, it would be a pain in his neck and cost him a fortune to circumnavigate the problem.

They weren't afraid to refuse his offer, but they weren't foolish to intentionally antagonize him. They were just trying to get a bigger share of the cake by cutting out the middleman, or in this case, with a cheaper middleman.

"What do we do? Sailors are extremely hard to come by, especially ones that are not aligned with the naval fleet, or any of the existing guilds," Cansan rubbed the bridge of his nose when he saw others' expressions, "Most fishermen don't have any experience with large ships and long travels."

"WAR TO THE SON OF A BITCH! DOWN WITH THE TRAITOROUS SAILOSERS!" Jax yelled and the rest of the Vices from the south raised their fists to cheer him on. They acted like they were ready to go down with the ship, "Boss is the iron knight now, he will make them regret it!"

"We wait," Lucian said, stopping Jax's outburst, and then he turned to address his Vices directly, "I'm in no rush to reach Varia Kingdom. If someone else wants to be there first, good for us."

He continued, "They might be better sailors but not better traders. Return to your old posts and in the meantime, observe the competition and focus on making sure that our people won't be lured away by a bigger fish."

Cansan and Lorano nodded, feeling relieved. They were scared that Lucian would make them sail on their own and get into a war with the merchant guild or the nobles.

The southern men, though, looked disappointed. Lucian's decision wasn't alpha enough to satisfy their desire to see a fight. They wanted a fight. Blood needed to be shed.

It was hard to believe that they used to be at the bottom of the food chain not so long ago. Forgetting how badly violence had affected them, they wanted to be the ones to deliver it now that they had a chance.

"What about the contract of loyalty they signed? Should we not enforce it?" Roland asked, concerned, "If we don't, there might be rumors that our contract is just for show and has no weight behind it, which will make us look weak."

They were terrified of looking weak, and of being seen as a bunch of nobodies. Getting bullied was a real fear they lived through.

"Why do you think they switched sides so readily? Nobody hires traitors, right? So why would they do it?" Lucian asked them, "Unless they were threatened to do so, and had no choice but to obey. A debt is also a good leverage. Let's look for the good in people and not assume the worst first."

"Ugh, too bright," Jax covered his eyes with the back of his hand, cringing, "You're shining like the sun. Turn it down a notch. No need to blind us."

Lucian chuckled, "You know how it is. You get a new fancy suit and can't stop showing off in it," he was referring to his new iron knight rank.

The southern Vices calmed down a bit from their rage, trying to match Lucian's attitude towards the situation.