

My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone

#Chapter 91 - 3.36: Lucian's Way Of Wait And Observe - Read My Villainess Ex Won't Leave Me Alone Chapter 91 - 3.36: Lucian's Way Of Wait And Observe

Chapter 91: 3.36: Lucian's Way Of Wait And Observe

Lucian looked so peaceful and collected, that it made the southern Vices look like savage barbarians in comparison.

They quickly coughed and straightened their backs, acting like they were the ones that had taught Lucian about compassion and goodness, and that it had nothing to do with their initial reaction of wanting to kill and gut the traitors.

Sometimes they thought Lucian was too kind for this world, but then they remembered how he had no problems smashing a guy's head against the pavement for breaking a promise to him, and it would make them rethink their opinion of him again.

Just be a decent human being, and you would never have to fear him. Lucian was like a father figure that would never hit you unless you did something wrong, and even then, he would only discipline you for your own good. There was no malice in it.

"Well, if Boss is not worried, neither am I," Goblin said, scratching his head. He was already on his feet and looking healthier, but still a bit pale.

"And the ship?" Leaf asked, "Are we going to let it go to waste like that?"

"It's not a waste, we will use it as Lorano's temporary research facility," Lucian replied, patting the railings, "Until we learn to navigate through the waters on our own, that is."

Lucian received their sad faces as a response. Their adventure as a crew was coming to an end faster than they wanted to.

"Now, let's check our competitors and how they are doing," Lucian said, heading to the ship's wheel to steer the ship out of the port, "Everyone back to their places."

"?!?" Fishbone quickly went to remove the anchor, Roland took care of the sails and Leaf was in charge of the ropes.

There was more than one harbor around the Breezy Cove (the town's name), and most of the ships were docked on the other side.

A flag with a golden flower on a white background fluttered on the ship's main mast.

The symbol was inspired by a flower of life, and was created in the similar way, by overlapping hexagons and circles, creating an illusion of a flower.

Lucian didn't operate under his name because there were too many Lucian Arclights in the world.

Not to mention his name wasn't the best way to gain customers' trust. He needed other ways to be identified.

It began with his store called Glory Of The Snow. With time, the first word Glory slowly became the brand name: Glory traded here, Glory hired there, Glory's employees, Glory's products, Glory's services. And somewhere along the way, Lucian became known as Glory's founder.

The Vices expected Lucian to retreat after he said they waited and observed, but they were dead wrong.

Lucian sailed straight to the harbor where the other ships were docked, and parked his own ship in the middle of the pier, blocking their way out, waiting and observing.

There were a few smaller ships, and five bigger ones. They could see at least a hundred people, possibly more, gathered on the docks.

They spotted Lucian's ship, and some of them were pointing at his flag, wondering what he was doing there.

"Inform your lord that I've arrived," Lucian called out, his voice carrying over the docks easily, "There were a few of my people he took with him and I just want to make sure they are alright before I go."

The lord's men looked at each other, and one of them left to deliver the message.

Lucian smiled at the remaining people, waiting patiently for the lord to come and greet him, "You have been busy, haven't you?" he said pleasantly, "I hope that your lord is treating you well?"

Lucian was wearing a casual white shirt, and beige pants. He didn't carry an intimidating aura, and looked approachable, with his golden hair waving in the sea breeze.

But the lord's men still looked at him warily. They weren't going to give away any information about their employer, especially not to someone who was clearly a rival.

Soon, rushed footsteps came from the dock and a large man appeared.

He wore a blue coat, and a feathered hat on his head. He also had a mustache, and a few rings on his fingers, each of them adorned with a different gemstone.

The Son Of A's father, let's call him A's, looked at Lucian with a sneer, "You have some nerve to block my ships in the middle of the pier. What if we decide to leave?"

"I just want to make sure the people you took from me are alright before I leave," Lucian repeated his intentions.

He leaned against the railing of his ship, and put on a friendly expression, "I would also like to thank you for taking them in and offering them a better deal. Forty five big silver coins a month for each sailor. I can't afford to increase more than that at the moment yet, so I appreciate that you are willing to do so. One hundred silver a month is not a small amount."

A's narrowed his eyes and his mouth pressed into a thin line when his workers lifted their heads toward him.

Hushes and whispers broke among them. One hundred big silver coins? Did the sailors their lord just took in earn that much?

They understood if a captain or a vice-captain of a ship could earn that much, but for regular sailors to be paid that much...

How come their lord wasn't willing to pay them that much as well? They didn't even reach close to the forty five big silver coins mark. Why did he have to be so stingy?

Lucian continued to press on the matter, adding more salt to the wound, "Do you pay everyone who works for you the same fair amount, Lord Ashtor? They seem to be very loyal to you. I've been having a hard time finding such people. Truly admirable of you to know their worth."

Chapter 92: 3.37: Lord A's

"Get back to work!" Lord Ashtor shouted at his workers. His face turned red as he tried, poorly, to keep the situation under control. They were not happy about the new revelation, "Go! Now!"

He then turned his attention back to Lucian, "Take your ship and move it away from my dock. If you know what's good for you, you'll disappear from my sight."

"Are you threatening me, Lord Ashtor?" Lucian's smile slipped slightly, "Shouldn't we talk like two gentlemen instead? I'm just here to inquire about the well being of my ex crew, not to cause any trouble."

Lord Ashtor clicked his tongue and ordered his guards to bring the thirteen people over to the dock.

"They are unharmed as you can see, but you are not going to get them back. Not after you tried to embarrass me in front of my people. I won't forget this," Lord Ashtor threatened, "I will make sure the merchant guild knows of your attitude. They chose me, not you. You lost. Get it?"

The Vices by Lucian's side just snickered at the threat.

The thirteen members looked uncomfortable, and their heads were lowered, but they didn't say anything.

There was no rule that said you couldn't leave one job for a better opportunity. The loyalty contract they signed didn't mention anything like this either. Only that they would be blacklisted from working for Lucian ever again.

They would have resigned the normal way, but Lord Ashtor had ordered them to hurry up and to not bother with such details.

So they did, not wanting to miss out on an opportunity to make more money. Only now, with Lucian standing here, did they realize how their actions must look.

They felt like they had been caught doing something illegal, when in reality they were just doing what most people did, looking out for themselves.

Goblin waved at them, making it worse with his big innocent eyes, "Hey, how are you guys? Nobody has threatened you to do something you didn't want to do, right? Like killing your families if you don't do it?"

Roland suppressed his laughter and joined in with his worry, "Do you need our help?"

Jax made a gesture that he was ready to fight, and Leaf was preparing his knives to throw, "We have your backs! Just whistle!"

The thirteen people received some weird looks from the staff on the ship. They were all thinking that they betrayed their old employer and friends for money.

It was a bad rep to have.

The thirteen people wanted to jump into the water and disappear. Lucian was making it hard for them to leave without feeling like the worst scums of the world.

Lucian didn't even say anything bad and Lord Ashtor already looked like he was about to explode.

His veins were bulging on his forehead, and his hands were clenched tightly, "I didn't threaten anyone!"

Lord Ashtor defended himself, putting all the blame on the thirteen people as if it was all their fault, "They agreed to the terms and accepted the deal! I didn't force anyone to do anything! Blame their greed, not me!"

"WHAT?" The captain from among the thirteen yelled in rage at the accusation, "You told us Sir Arclight fell out of favor with the guild council, enough to lose everything! I have a family to feed and can't take the risk of not getting paid!"

Lucian chuckled and walked back to the wheel of the ship, "Let's go."

The Vices followed him from behind, their ears perked at the fight that was about to occur, each grabbing their binoculars.

They didn't want to miss a single moment.

Somehow the fight they sought had come to them, and they were more than willing to enjoy it.

"The paddling," Lucian reminded them, "We are still short on manpower, and the wind is not on our side either."

They sighed, but obediently did as he ordered, moving inside the ship to paddle. They could still watch the drama unfold from here. The show must go on.

"Haha, look at that! They are going at it!" Jax whistled when the rest of the crew demanded a raise for working under the same conditions.

'Who knew someone's misfortune could bring so much joy to others?' Lucian mused, listening to his Vices who were having the time of their lives, *'Note it down Voice. It seems to be a universal trait.'*

'Don't include me in your jokes,' Voice replied. Lucian had begun to treat it as his student in belief that Voice was using him as a learning material, *'You also seem to enjoy the show. What does that make you?'*

'Someone who has a good eye for potential entertainment,' Lucian replied, *'And a person who has a refined taste to appreciate it.'*

'...' Voice went silent, as it often did when Lucian gave a self-praising, logical reply to its questions, or at least logical enough for it to have a hard time countering.

Lucian smiled and took a deep breath, letting the ocean air fill his lungs. He would like to go further away from land, but it wasn't safe enough with so few people, so he settled for traveling close to the shore.

'Voice, do I need to worry about A's taking revenge on me?' Lucian asked.

'I'm not a fortune teller, but he doesn't seem like a criminal mastermind. I think he is just a loudmouth,' Voice replied.

'I would rather not look down on him. See Celine for example and the way she behaves,' Lucian said, *'It's the small things that count. His connections, his ability to make deals and the fact that he can use his father's influence to create some problems.'*

Voice thought for a second before it replied, *'What do you have in mind?'*

'Observe how A's will deal with the rebellion and if he is able to reach a compromise. That should give me an idea of what to expect,' Lucian thought. *'And how big of a threat he could become in the future.'*

Lucian and his Vices parted with good moods and smiles, enjoying the day despite the minor setback they had with their plans.

Who knew, Lucian might actually get some new men willing to expand his fleet, some who valued loyalty and their work environment more than gold.

Chapter 93: 3.38: Daddy Issues

Lucian blinked at the rings around the man's fingers.

The A's noticed Lucian's gaze and began to remove them, "You want them? Here, take them," he threw them on Lucian's desk, "Now, fix the chaos you created!"

Lucian motioned for him to sit down on the chair across the table, "That's not how you conduct business, Lord Ashtor."

It was a shame that the A's didn't know how to make a proper bribe. He suddenly approached Lucian's ship, barged into his office, throwing things at him and demanding things in return, thinking he had no leverage to demand anything from Lucian.

The A's sat down, his foot tapping on the floor rapidly and his hands clenching and unclenching. When Lucian kept looking at him without saying anything, he began to speak again.

"The news about what happened today can't reach the board! The deadline is tomorrow. I need to show father that I can handle this, but the riot is ruining everything!" A's spoke in a hurry, his voice rising.

He was nervous and agitated. It was obvious that the situation was not under his control. But what made him think Lucian would be on his side?

"You're a fair man, right? I didn't have a choice! Everyone's been praising you, saying how great you are at running your business without any backing. Do you have any idea what it's like to live in your shadow? To be constantly compared to you?!"

Lucian shook his head innocently in response, "No. I have no idea what that's like."

"Of course you don't! You don't have a father who's breathing down your neck, waiting for you to make a mistake, and if you do, he'll rub your nose in it. You don't know what it's like to have a father who's always telling you how much better than you everyone else is!"

"And you think I'm the source of all your problems?" Lucian asked.

"No. I don't think. I know!" A's stood up abruptly, slamming his hands on the table. His face was flushed with anger, and his eyes were wide, showing that he was on the verge of a breakdown, "Turn down your hiring offer! That's all I'm asking. Then, the riot will stop, and I'll be able to deliver the goods on time. Simple."

"Simple," Lucian agreed.

"You don't understand!" A's got even angrier, "I need those guys to return to work or father will kill me! You know what they say about him! The Mad Hatter!"

The Mad Hatter was a ruthless merchant, known for his brutal business tactics. He had a reputation for crushing his rivals and taking over their businesses, leaving them bankrupt and destitute.

His nickname came from his signature hat, which he always wore in public. It was said that he would remove his hat and place it on the table whenever he was about to make a particularly ruthless decision. It was a signal that he was not to be trifled with.

He had many children with different women, and was rumored to have abandoned them as soon as they didn't take after him and his talent in business.

"Well, the harder the challenge, the sweeter the victory," Lucian said, inspecting the rings one after another. "Wouldn't defeating me make you worthy of his recognition? Don't ask for my help when you can just work harder than me and take what's mine."

That's what A's had been aiming at! Remove Lucian from the game and then replace him to become the Mad Hatter's successor.

"..." A's broke down, not knowing what to do. He couldn't handle the pressure of being thrown out of the house and left on his own. His world was collapsing around him.

Lucian returned to his work, leaving A's to his misery.

"If I die...my death...will be on you," The A's said, pulling his dagger, and pointing it at his neck, "I can't go back. Father will kill me. I have nowhere else to go. You...you will be responsible for what happens next."

Lucian looked up from the papers, "..."

"Father might even take revenge on you," A's eyes widened in realization, "Yes, he might!"

"..." Lucian kept looking at him.

"There's no point in living if I can't even keep my head up around my own father," A's steeled his resolve, and the dagger got closer to his neck.

He was getting crazier by the minute. Lucian could see that A's was at the end of his rope. He could snap at any time if someone gave him the last push.

"..." Lucian looked at him, then at the dagger, and then he returned to his paperwork, "Your death will not be on me. Everyone will know you gave up your own life because you couldn't face your failures, and tried to take an innocent life down with you. I will personally make sure of it."

A's eyes twitched, his grip on the dagger tightening, "Then I will take you down with me!"

He lunged at Lucian, his dagger ready to strike. But Lucian's left hand grabbed his wrist, and twisted it, while his right hand grabbed the hilt of the dagger, and pushed it in the other direction.

A's let out a cry of pain, his hand going limp as Lucian snapped his wrist like a twig.

"AAaahh!" He screamed in agony, his hand hanging uselessly at his side, as he fell to the ground, "Aaaah!"

Lucian took the dagger and placed it on his shelf, out of A's reach, before returning to his seat. "I just saved your life from that dagger."

"You broke my wrist!" A's screamed, his face contorted in pain, his voice hoarse from yelling.

"Because you tried to kill yourself and me," Lucian replied, picking up the pen and resuming his paperwork.

A's continued to cry in pain but didn't move from his spot, "My wrist...my wrist...my wrist...a physician...I need a physician...a physician..."

Lucian thought A's would finally run away from his office, but A's didn't move from his spot, still holding his hand, asking for a physician, and crying in pain. He dreaded going back so much that he would rather die it seemed.

A's eventually fell asleep on the ground. His loud snores continuously interrupted Lucian's work, who couldn't get anything done with all the noise.

Lucian had to drag the sleeping man outside his office to get some peace and quiet.

All his Vices except Lorano were packing their bags and preparing to return to their positions on land when they saw the snoring A's outside the narrow corridors, blocking their way.

"...the heck is this?"

Chapter 94: 3.39 - Lucian's Doppelganger

"Your new job," Lucian replied, causing the men to want to flee the scene immediately.

They did not sign up for babysitting someone else's adult son.

"Let's toss him into the ocean. The fish will enjoy him for sure," Jax suggested, ready to grab the body and throw it overboard.

"Is he unconscious or asleep? When was the last time he slept?" Goblin poked the snoring A's in the ribs, getting a groan in response.

"A week ago, if his eye bags are any indication," Fishbone answered, leaning in to lift the hat and take a look at the dark circles under A's eyes, which were so dark, they looked like bruises.

They left him to rot and returned to packing their luggage. They hated this guy, the way he treated their Boss, and were happy to see him suffer.

"Didn't you want to beat him up?" Lucian asked the crew, "This is the perfect chance to do it."

"Nah..." they said, waving their hands, not interested, "You made him scream enough. Any more and our ears will start bleeding from the noise."

They didn't know what Lucian did to make A's scream like that, but it sounded painful enough.

Lucian also didn't mention how A's tried to kill both himself and Lucian in a moment of desperation, and kept the ruthless persona they created for him in their minds.

It would make them stay in line.

Meanwhile on Celine's side of things, she was stuck inside a marriage party.

Her school break had barely started, and invitations to various events had already been pouring in.

The hostess was a lady her age, Priscilla, with whom Celine was friends.

The girl would soon be married to Earl Crestmont's son, which was quite the achievement, considering Priscilla's status as a daughter of a lowly viscount.

The party was held inside the Earl's family manor's garden.

Celine sat on a chair at one of the many tables placed around the dance floor. Her dress was a bright shade of blue, matching her eyes.

The engagement was a rushed affair. Priscilla's belly was starting to show, and her family wanted to secure the child's legitimacy.

The Earl's family was not happy about it. Their faces showed clear displeasure at the event, which was the only source of entertainment for Celine.

Priscilla's family, on the other hand, was ecstatic. They couldn't be happier. The marriage would elevate them, and their standing in the kingdom.

The earl's territory was a rich land that had access to the west sea and a couple of trading routes, mainly for seafood and pearls.

Though Celine was more interested in Lucian's affairs and the new trade routes, which he planned to secure.

She could have given him a whole port town in the Rochefort territory, a couple of ships, and a fleet of sailors to play with if he married her right here and now.

But he preferred to get everything without her name involved.

It was sweet and romantic, and she loved it. So much so, that she would sit at a boring party just so she could stay closer to him. The Breezy Cove was half a day of travel from her.

Celine covered her mouth, yawning a little, *'He is such a hard worker, I wonder how much sleep he gets... I hope he is taking care of himself.'*

The more she was away from him, the more her thoughts went back to him. It wasn't a good sign, as it showed a lack of self control.

'Am I becoming a love sick puppy? Ugh...'

she felt disgusted with herself for a second, but the warm feeling of love quickly washed it away, *'No, that's fine. It's a sign of true love. I'm in love, and I am proud of it. Who can stop me from loving a man I chose myself?'*

It was such a comforting feeling to have such a person in one's life, that it should be illegal. Celine could see why people were so obsessed with love. She wanted to sink deeper into the sensation, to keep onto it for dear life.

It didn't truly lessen her efficiency. No, the opposite was true. Her motivation was higher than ever. She had so many things to look forward to, it made her work even harder.

She looked around, observing the guests, wondering if they would be useful. She had a habit of calculating everyone's worth, not in terms of wealth, but in terms of what they could provide her with.

Priscilla, despite being from a lower status noble family, had a big bossom. The earl was not a saint, and was easily seduced by a pair of breasts pressed against his arm. Combine it with the academy's pressure, restricting his freedom and the deal was sealed.

Lucian was at the top since the moment Celine met him. And his value kept climbing up and up, never once stopping.

'That's my man. He is the best in the world!' Celine was proud of her man. She could brag about him for hours, but she had no one to brag to.

"...Meow..."

She felt something brush against her dress, and when she looked down, she saw a cat.

A light brown, fluffy one. The kind that you wanted to hug, cuddle, and squeeze.

It was the earl's cat, which was roaming around the garden, enjoying the sunshine.

Celine outstretched her hand to pet the cat, but it avoided her, as if offended by her touch.

'Lucian's... doppleganger!'

Celine sent it a mental glare, which startled the cat. It hissed at her and raised its paw to scratch her, but then realized the woman in front of it was not a good target for such a thing and hmpfed in a cat-like way, turning its head to the side.

"..." Celine wanted to pick it up and throw it away, but the cat was the earl's cat, and it would be bad form on her part to do so.

She had a good history with animals, except cats. She preferred animals like Seline, and even tried to steal her from Lucian a couple of times, but failed miserably. It was a loyal dog, and it wanted to stay by her master's side instead of her, even if Celine had tastier treats.

Good thing ToGo didn't fall for Lucian's charm like Seline did, or else Celine would have to question its intelligence and loyalty to her (not Celine just fawning over her man a few seconds before).

Chapter 95: 3.40: Idiots Have The Most Fun

'Ah, I wish Lucian was here, we could dance together...' Celine thought, stroking the cat, *'Or maybe go for a walk in the gardens, or sneak out for a quick make-out session... Or... a long one.'*

Her heart would usually thumb hard at these naughty thoughts, but in the presence of so many people, its beats remained steady.

The cat was sleeping peacefully in her arms, its fur was clean, shiny and silky smooth. It reminded her of a certain someone's golden hair, which was also soft to the touch.

Celine's dark hair was much thicker and the texture was harder than Lucian's. She could never understand how his hair could be so smooth and fluffy at the same time, no matter how many times she played with his hair.

"Bronze Knight? Without the backing of a noble house? Are you certain?"

Celine overheard a few men discussing something over the soft music.

"Yes, the Glory's founder has been investing heavily into strengthening his body. He had spent double the amount of what it would have cost a regular northerner to do the same. He is so young as well."

Celine recognized the men who were talking. It was a group of barons from the Crestmont's house earldom.

"I heard that too. I plan to offer my daughter's hand in marriage to him," one of the barons said, "His achievements are outstanding for a hay."

A nearby viscount laughed, "I already offered my youngest to him. She's not that great, but I thought a hay would take her and not be too picky, but it seems like he has a few options to choose from already."

"Meow!" the cat protested.

Celine's fingers dug into its fur, which caused the cat to wake up from a nice nap.

Marriage. Nobles have started offering their daughters' hands to him in marriage.

It was to be expected. The higher he rose, the more opportunities he would be given, and the more attention he would get from others.

'A humble gardener?'

Celine's lips curved downward slightly as she thought about Lucian's job title he had listed down whenever he tended to the Rochefort's garden, *'More like a humble flower boy...one that will be snatched up from under my nose...'*

Celine's fingers twitched. She had to hold back from grabbing the men by the necks and telling them to keep their hands away from what was hers.

The cat sensed danger, immediately jumping out of her arms.

Celine felt a tug on her heart as the cat ran away. As if it was trying to tell her that Lucian might, too, run away from her if she used too much force.

The bell around its neck jingled as it disappeared between the legs of the surprised servants, who had no idea what had gotten into the thing.

Celine stood up from the chair and followed after the cat toward the earl's estate.

It was not easy to keep an eye on Lucian, but she managed.

He was all over the continent with his businesses while she was also all over the continent, making sure her influence reached every corner of it.

The cat's bell jingled again and again as it ran away from her.

Celine hid behind a pillar, then behind a wall.

The cat stopped at the corner of a corridor, sniffing the floor for something, then continued on its way, until it disappeared from her sight completely.

'Maybe I should get him a bell, just to make sure I know where he is at all times,' Celine thought as she made a small detour around the bushes and walls, loosening her corset slightly to feel more comfortable.

Ding.

Celine caught the cat that jumped out of nowhere right in front of her, its eyes in shock as if asking: 'How did you know where I was going to appear from?'

She rubbed its belly, and the cat's leg twitched involuntarily, a sign of pleasure. The cat's eyes closed and it purred in satisfaction, forgetting that it was scared and confused by how it ended up in her arms just a second ago.

Celine carried the cat in her arms and walked out from the shadows. It was time to make sure Lucian was still her humble gardener.

'Power gets to one's head and makes them greedy. I wonder what will get to yours?'

Celine mused.

She liked how he was now, wanting to preserve it for eternity. Cute when he wanted to be spoiled. Mature when he wanted to be treated more seriously. Then there was the little bit of madness in him when he wanted to break the rules. All in the right amounts and in the right moments.

'He likes his freedom, but he also likes to be tied down and feel secure at the same time.'

She was not his prison, but neither was she his safe haven. She doubted he would ever give his whole self to a single person.

'He is like a cat. They are not loyal to anyone but themselves. They come and go as they please. They rub against your legs when they want your attention, and then ignore you when you finally give it to them. But they still sleep on your lap at times...'

Celine's steps slowed down until she came to a stop. She took a deep breath.

'...just to mess with your head.'

She was aware that she couldn't control him. All she could do was resist the control and influence he had over her.

She could feel it, the way he wanted to make her dependent on him, to become irreplaceable in her eyes. He was doing it subtly, not rushing things.

Sometimes, it didn't feel genuine and that's why it annoyed her so much. He wanted her to love the image of him that he created too much.

She bet he preferred to be like this cat right now, being rubbed against her chest, and looking at her with its adorable eyes.

'He should act more like an idiot in love...like me,' she smiled at the cat, petting it on the head, *'He is holding himself back too much.'*

The cat meowed and Celine rubbed the space between its ears, "You think so too? That he is an idiot?" she asked, and the cat meowed again, "And that I'm the bigger idiot?"

"Meow."

"Hmm..." Celine thought, "I guess it's the idiots of the world that get to do the most fun things. Being smart is restrictive. It doesn't leave you a choice, does it? It's all math and logic, and there's nothing you can do but follow the path you have calculated."

"Meow, meow."

"I'm glad you think the same," Celine smiled and nodded. The cat looked pleased as well, "Now let's look for your owner and ask them if we can take you home with us... for a reasonable price, of course."

"Meow...?"

Chapter 96: 3.40 - An Unexpected Delay

The cat didn't understand a single word Celine was saying, but it purred without a worry in the world, enjoying the attention it was receiving, not knowing it was going to be used as a pawn in a political scheme.

After observing the party and guests from a distance, this cat was Celine's best bet at approaching Earl Crestmont without making it seem intentional.

Demanding him to sell his cat as a spoiled noble lady would do the trick nicely.

Sending her father's people with money and a letter to include other things besides the cat in the transaction would do it even better. She would be out of the picture by that time, of course, and no one would be any wiser.

'The faster I deal with it, the sooner I can stop by Breezy Cove and get my proper dose of sugar,' she decided, marching towards her target.

Lucian wasn't expecting trouble.

The people on the docks didn't look like anything special, making him think it was just another tedious routine search like he didn't have enough time to waste.

So when the official suddenly changed his tone, it caught all of them off guard.

By the time Lucian realized it, hands were already grabbing at his men, and the whole ship was under siege.

"Hey, look where you are touching!" Jax yanked at a soldier's arm, who was checking his chest to see if he was hiding any weapons, "I don't like it when I'm being touched in that place by a dude, you pervert!"

"Shut up," the soldier pushed Jax down on the floor and kicked him, "You'll be singing in a different tune soon."

Jax groaned in pain as he was hit in the stomach. Another soldier cuffed his hands behind his back.

"What did I do to deserve this?!" Jax protested, but the soldiers ignored him.

The rest of the Vices didn't fare any better, some of them got a few hits before the soldiers decided to tie their hands.

"Why are there so many southerners in your crew?" the official asked, approaching Lucian, who was also being held down, "Are you planning to use them to commit treason against the crown and the king? What are you planning?"

"Excuse me, Sir," Lucian replied, trying to remain calm, "I'm just a merchant, not a criminal. My crew is made of men who have been loyal to me for years. We have committed no crimes or have any intentions to do so. You are mistaken, I believe, Sir."

The man snorted in derision, "A merchant? A merchant who had caused a riot and created a blockade in the port of Breezy Cove? You have disrupted trade and caused damage to the economy. That's a serious offense."

"My son!" a man cried out from behind the officer, "Where is my son?! What have you done to him?!"

Lucian lifted his head, seeing a noble, dressed in rich silks and wearing jewels, crying his heart out. The big hat was familiar to Lucian. The man was none other than A's father.

A's groaned in pain upon hearing his father's voice, waking up from his slumber. He looked around and saw his father, "Father...? What...what are you doing here?"

"Son!" His father exclaimed, running to A's side and embracing him tightly. The soldiers let him go when they saw their connection, "Thank the Gods! Did he hurt you? Did he touch you in any way?"

A's shook his head then hissed in pain, holding his wrist, "Aaarrrr...he...he broke my wrist..."

"Official Aran, arrest this man!" Mad Hatter demanded, pointing at Lucian, "He is the one who caused the riot in the port! The blockade! The loss of profits to my family! He even kidnapped my son and held him hostage! He is a criminal, a traitor, and a heretic! Arrest him and throw him in jail, where he belongs! Look at those eyes, he might even be a shackled!"

Official Aran didn't look pleased at being commanded, but at the mention of shackled, everyone sheathed their weapons and took a step back.

"BOSS!" Goblin screamed from the ground, the rest of the crew was also calling out to him, but Lucian remained silent, refusing to meet their eyes.

He was set up. He was set up well. There were no doubts about it.

Just when he was in a rush to get back home to his sweet little wife, this had to happen.

A's looked confused as well, probably being unaware of his father's plan to frame Lucian from the very beginning.

He suddenly began to cough and Lucian broke away from the guard holding him down with a quick pull.

He was faster than the soldier's reaction. He leaped at A's, grabbing him by the arm and kicked his father away before he could react.

His father was surprised, "Wha...let go of my son!"

"He's trying to sacrifice you," Lucian whispered in A's ear, making sure to keep his eyes on the surprised soldiers, "Your father used you as bait to set me up."

"What?!" A's father yelled, quickly hiding the syringe under his sleeve, "How dare you accuse me of such a thing! How dare you say I would sacrifice my own son?!"

A's looked at his father and then at Lucian.

"He looked so disappointed when he still saw you were breathing," Lucian whispered into his ear, "It's not hard to figure out his intention. I am a threat to his business and you are just a tool to remove me."

Lucian didn't look like the type of person who would lie and his words were too close to the truth.

A's began to tremble and shake.

"Let him go!" The soldiers demanded, taking a step forward, their hands on their spears.

Lucian released him and raised his hands in the air, "I was just saving his life. He needs an antidote. It should be on his father's person."

"You liar!" Mad Hatter shouted, "You broke his wrist! Now you've poisoned him and want to put the blame on me?!"

Lucian returned to the soldier, who held him down, offering his wrists to be handcuffed, "I apologize for the inconvenience. I will comply with the search. I just didn't want to see murder of one's kin happen in front of my eyes."

The soldier put the cuffs on him while another another soldier tore through Mad Hatter's coat for an antidote. They weren't stupid enough to pretend this was all Lucian's doing.

"He really advanced... Gabriel, take him. Your speed should be enough to pin him down."

The soldiers discussed Lucian's knight rank as they changed their formation around him.

A priest soon joined them with a staff in his hand.

Lucian could feel his skin tingle at the sight of it. His instincts were telling him to scam the hell away from it and hide.

The priest's white tunic had a red star with eight tips, representing the Earth's core. A circle which surrounded it represented the earth itself.

The tip of the star that was facing the ground was longer than the rest, representing the holy ground and the Church.

His grey almost white hair and black nails indicated he had officially been ordained as a priest.

All priests were required to take "medicine" to unify their image. It was mainly to remove any prejudice or discrimination against their appearance.

Not only outside but inside their circles as well. The past was meant to be left behind them and their new lives were to begin in the Church.

The priest went through the motions, checking to make sure none of Lucian's men were shackled in disguise.

"I'm sorry," Lucian apologized to his men, keeping his head lowered.

"Ugh," Cansan whined as the dull side of the staff was used to strike the back of his knee. He was forced to bow by the impact, his legs giving way beneath him, "Don't apologize, Boss. It's not your fault."

The priest moved on to the next one, doing the same to Jax. Then he moved to Fishbone. Roland, Leaf, Loreno and then Goblin.

Lucian got on his knees before the staff could touch him, and bowed his head.

The priest paused for a second before striking his back with his staff, forcing Lucian to bend his head even further down, making his forehead touch the ground.

Shackleds hated humans, so the more degrading the pose was, the better chance the shackled would lose its temper and reveal its true self.

The priest frowned, his eyes becoming even sharper, "You seem familiar with the process of inspection."

"Ah, yes," Lucian smiled, his face on the ground, remembering how he used to visit the church with his father, "In the name of security and safety of all, we must make sure we have no shackleds hiding among us. I'm a big supporter of that."

Another blow struck his spine. The priest was using more force against Lucian to check for his reaction.

"Where did you get that kind of thinking? What is your family background?"

"My parents..." Lucian repeated the story he was already used to telling the world.

He wished he could wipe the memories from his mind, but he was a slave to his past. He was forced to remember them, to relive them over and over again.

They priests loved to provoke him with their questions, to get him to reveal himself as a shackled. Or just to find him guilty of something. Anything.

He had to endure it. The less the priests liked him, the more thorough their inspection would be. The more they would find him innocent. The less they would bother him and his business later.

"Ugh!"

Groans of his crew followed after Lucian. The dull hits continued to land on their bodies as they were forced to bow down in a submissive position.

'I want to cry,' Lucian thought. He didn't know where the thought came from. But he felt like crying.

What was the point of wasting another treasure chest to advance to the bronze knight when he would still end up having to kneel before everyone?

Why bother to try to change your position in the world when the system would not change with it? When it would not bend in his favor, but rather snap his spine in the process?

"..." Lucian swallowed the words, not letting them out. Instead, he focused his attention on the present, on the priest's boots that were in front of him.

They couldn't force him to lick them. They were the good guys after all. They could not cross that line and still call themselves humanitarians.

"Please, don't hurt my men, they've done nothing wrong," Lucian begged the priest. That's all he could do. Beg. Even though it was the opposite of what he wanted to do. "Wronged you in no way. They are good men."

A hit to the back of his head was the priest's response. He didn't hit hard enough to break the skin or damage the skull, but it pressed his face against the floor, to remind him that his place was down here. On the floor. Below their boots. Below them. Forever.

"Sob...sob," Goblin sniffed, his tears falling to the ground. "Please, sir...sir priest, don't hurt Boss..."

The rest also joined in begging the priest.

It was a sad scene to watch, with grown men crying like children. They didn't cry to be spared from a whipping, but to save their Boss.

'Where did they learn to use the pity card?' Lucian smiled bitterly. 'It doesn't suit them at all.'

Acting all weak and submissive to gain sympathy only worked on women and kids, and these were all grown men. It was not a pretty sight to behold. It made his heart hurt even more to see them trying to save him with such methods.

They were on his ship for one reason only, and it was to make a living through honest ways. And for that same exact reason, they were being punished. If this was not injustice, Lucian didn't know what else would be.

A bucket of cold water was thrown over Lucian's head, waking him from his stupor.

He felt his hair being grabbed, and their strands being rubbed in between the priest's fingers, like he was feeling the fabric of a cloth to determine if it was worth buying or not.

Lucian kept his hair blond just so he could avoid this treatment. So why were they checking his hair for dye? Who would dye their hair blond to look weaker?

"Our boss is not a shackled! He doesn't have a heart of darkness!" Fishbone shouted, his face red as a tomato, tears streaming down his cheeks, "I swear on my father's grave."

"I swear on my father's grave too," Goblin echoed Fishbone, and then the rest joined in.

"We swear on our fathers' graves!"

It was Lucian's first time where he didn't have to defend his honor and good name by himself.

'These guys are something...!' Lucian didn't know whether to laugh or cry at their reaction, but it seemed to be working.

The soldiers were no longer treating them as harshly. Their grips had loosened. The blows had stopped completely.

"Your loyalty is commendable," the priest said, releasing Lucian's hair. He lowered the cane in his hand as well, "I apologize for the pain, but you must understand the seriousness of the accusation. A large fight has broken out in the harbor, many got injured and witnesses pointed fingers in your direction."

"I understand," Lucian said, keeping his head lowered, "I'm a man, a human, and proud to be one."

Low ranked shackleds would never say something like that. The high ranked though... they were tricky.

The priest raised Lucian's chin with the end of his staff, making him look up and into his eyes.

"These are human eyes," the priest declared after what felt like an eternity.

'You could have started with them,' Lucian thought, keeping a pleasant smile on his face despite the urge to curse, 'You could have started with the eyes, but no, you had to play the whole show first...what a farce.'

Lucian's Vices were still kneeling, their heads bowed. They were silent and obedient, acting their part well.

'Good boys,' Lucian thought, feeling proud of their performance.

"Very well," the priest patted Lucian on the shoulder with his staff, offering a prayer for his bruises to heal faster, "May the God of Light watch over you and your men. Don't stray from your path, but help others stray back to it, like you've done for your men."

The priest's eyes then scanned the people on the ship, landing on Mad Hatter, saying, "Wrong accusation is a heavy sin to bear, and you've added another burden on the young man's shoulders."

The Mad Hatter gulped, his face pale as he got on his knees to plead for mercy, "My fear for shackleds got the better of me. I beg for forgiveness, please, have mercy on my soul..."

The priest was indifferent to his plight, pointing at Lucian, "This man is not a shackled. The unnecessary pain and humiliation caused to him and his group have to be compensated with the same amount of pain and humiliation received."

The priest continued, "I will leave your fate in his hands and he will decide whether or not to forgive you, or to punish you for the crimes committed against him and his men."

Lucian's men sighed in relief. It meant the church wouldn't interfere in the dispute between Lucian and Mad Hatter, and let them solve it on their own, unless the kingdom's safety was threatened.

"No..." The Mad Hatter grabbed the priest's robes, "There must be something wrong...no, please...he's a shackled! Please, check him again. You must have missed something...there's proof...he had been ruining my trade...my businesses are failing...I lost so much money...all because of him..."

The Mad Hatter's voice was getting weaker and weaker as he realized that the priest was not going to help him anymore, and that the soldiers had already lowered their weapons.

Shackled paranoia used to be an easy way to settle personal matters, but the Rocheforts' influence had put a stop to it.

After all, they were under heavy accusations themselves. Targeted from all sides and from all kinds of people. It would have become an endless loop, which would eventually lead to a civil war.

Killing an innocent person on the suspicion of being a shackled would now be sentenced as a murderer.

The Rochefort house made sure to enforce this rule. So unless Lucian didn't reveal himself to be a shackled on his own, nobody had a right to claim him to be one.

The integration lasted for four whole hours before the priest finally left. The soldiers followed after him, leaving the two groups to deal with their problem by themselves.

They didn't search Lucian's ships. Their sole purpose was to confirm there were no shackleds on board.

The soldiers were undercover knights, and it was hard to see what rank they were at. They didn't want to show off, so they must have been on some kind of a mission.

Lucian's group were given letters of innocence. Something to make up for the misunderstanding.

Standing up straight and stretching his sore back and legs, Lucian crumbled the letter into a ball and threw it overboard.

"..." His crew, who were holding the letters to their chests like their life depended on them, watched the ball fly through the air, and fall into the water, "Boss!!!"

Fishbone was about to dive after it, but Lucian stopped him, "This is how they make extra money on the side. You come to them to get hit, and pay them a lot of money for a scrap of paper."

Lucian didn't want to sound too critical of the Church, so he stopped himself from saying anything more than a: "Thank you, everyone. I really appreciate it."

"Anytime, Boss." They rubbed the back of their knees awkwardly. Their expressions matched old men, as if their youth had just been sucked out of them.

Lucian folded up his sleeves, "Let me treat your bruises. Come here."

"...NOOOOO!" The entire group screamed and took off running, climbing the masts and the sails, running around like chickens with cut off heads, "STAY AWAY FROM US, BOSS! WE ARE FINE! DON'T COME CLOSER!"

They exaggerated playfully but also meant it at the same time.

Lucian laughed, watching their childish reactions. He knew they were doing it on purpose, to cheer themselves up, "It will be over fast, you won't even feel a thing. Trust me."

"NOOO!"

Life went on as they tried to forget what happened, because there was no way to get even with the Church for doing it.

It was a safety procedure and they were supposed to be thankful that their kingdom was safe from shackles, and that they could sleep at night without fearing an attack on their families.

There was no point in bringing up how Lucian seemed to be under heavier scrutiny than the others, or how he had to constantly prove his innocence again and again.

His smiles and jokes were enough to convince the rest of the group that he was okay, so they followed his example and tried to move on.

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

The recent activity from you guys had boosted my writing mood, so enjoy a little mass release. ☐

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Chapter 99: 3.44 - The Kereons

Lucian went to open the medicine box inside the infirmary and brought it out to the deck. It was full of bottles and vials, filled with liquids and ointments.

He placed it on the barrel and went to gather a few leaves from the potted plants near the windows. They were thick and fleshy. When he broke them apart, a thick white juice began to leak from them.

A's, who was still in a daze, came to his senses when his father approached him. He instinctively pushed his legs out in front of him to get away from his father as none of his four men dared to stand up for him.

Mad Hatter's expression darkened even further. A sound of a slap echoed through the deck, followed by a second and a third one.

The merry atmosphere on the ship had been completely destroyed.

"Useless, pathetic..." Mad Hatter cursed his son. A's face became swollen as his father shouted at him, "Can't even follow simple instructions! Can't even do a proper job! You had one job, and you messed it up!"

"Stop! STOP! PLEASE!!!" A's screamed, shielding his face with his hands, "I'm sorry! I'll do better next time!"

"There won't be a next time! You are a failure!" Mad Hatter shouted. The veins on his forehead and neck were throbbing as his body shook from anger, "I'll beat you to death!"

Lucian's men blinked at the scene, pausing their escape to stare at the father and son. It was a familiar sight for most of them, a glimpse at their past.

'Voice, I found your long lost twin,' Lucian said to Voice as A's father screamed obscenities.

Voice decided to ignore him, but who was Lucian? Whenever there was a chance for him to get back at Voice, he would take it.

'I bet if you had your own body, you would have treated me the same way,' Lucian knew it hated humans so he compared it to the biggest scums for the biggest effect, *'Just like him.'*

'Shut up,' Voice hissed.

'No, look,' Lucian continued to mock it, *'You should look at that man, you might be related to him...'*

Voice didn't say anything, but it made his illness flare up again.

Lucian was prepared and chugged down a vial with the medicine.

He didn't feel sorry for A's, thinking how everyone had their own battles to fight. It was so fun to tease Voice whenever he could, so he decided not to play a hero this time around.

"Hey! Get your hands off him!" Leaf shouted, a rare sight for him to be the voice of reason. "What kind of a man beats up their son like that?"

"Isn't it normal for fathers to treat their sons like that?" Goblin asked, succumbing to Lucian's treatment after running in circles around the mass.

Lucian made him drink a bitter potion and was now making Goblin rub the cold plant's leaves against his bruises.

Goblin pinched his nose, his skin was turning yellow from the plant's juice, "It stinks, Boss."

"It's good for you," Lucian reassured him, then broke another lead from the plant, and threw it to Fishbone to use, "My father always did this to me after visiting the church, and I turned out fine."

"You didn't turn out fine," Jax said, helping Leaf to separate A's from Mad Hatter, "But yours is better than mine for sure. Mine is a piece of shit. Can't wait for him to die, so I can piss on his grave."

"If only your mother heard you just now." Leaf said jokingly, making Jax shut up.

"Don't you dare snitch on me to her."

Jax's mother was a sore subject for him. He would become an unrecognizable docile version of himself around her, listening to her every word without saying a single complaint or objection. She was the only person who could make him behave properly.

Maybe they saw themselves in A's, or maybe they felt sorry for him because of how badly his father had treated him, but regardless, Jax and Leaf came to A's aid and tossed Mad Hatter into the sea, cursing and wishing death upon him.

"Did we just start a war with the Mad Hatter, a noble with a title of a baron?" Leaf asked, realizing what they had just done.

"Mad Hatter was most likely abandoned," Cansan said as the four men scrambled with their tails tugged between their legs when Lucian activated his bronze knight's powers, "By the merchant guild itself..."

True to Cansan's words, the Mad Hatter's crew had disappeared from the dock. The ships that were on the other side of the harbor were gone.

His wealth had disappeared overnight, making them realize that he was just a small fry in the grand scheme of things, one that was replaced by a bigger fish. Powerful enough to make a noble disappear like that.

The merchant guild refused to give an official statement about it. Only that Mad Hatter breached their contract, and that he was no longer a part of their organization, so they could not be held responsible for his actions.

Lucian wasn't convinced by the rumors. He recollected the priest's boots, and he noticed that those were only made in the Kereon Duchy. His dialect was also quite similar to those who lived there, so Lucian had a guess of where the priest had come from.

'Why would Kereons send one of their own this far west?'

The duchy of Kereon was the most religious one in the Diamante Kingdom. They were a big supporter of the church, lending their manpower to deal with the kingdom's shackled problem.

Lucian searched his mind for anything Celine might have told him about her family's history with the Kereons.

He recalled her mentioning that the Kereons were a bunch of stalkers who kept tabs on the lower and lesser nobles in the kingdom.

Celine was much more knowledgeable when it came to politics than Lucian was. His education was not nearly as thorough as hers. They had a lot of discussions on the topic, and it helped Lucian gain some insight into how the higher class people operated.

'Are they looking for someone?' He didn't see any reason why they would check his hair for traces of dye, unless they were looking for someone particular, *'Someone with dark hair.'*

Chapter 100: 3.45 - Asserting Dominance

The fact that some dark haired people, who were considered the elite of the society, could be forced to live in hiding was a strange notion, but it was the best one Lucian could come up with at the moment.

'Why did Edmund come to my mind just now?' Lucian tried to find the source of his sudden suspicion. It wasn't a completely unfounded one that it had something to do with the Rocheforts, *'Is it because he was so enthusiastic about learning how to blend in, not standing out, and not drawing attention to himself?'*

Lucian felt that he was a bit paranoid about it.

'She keeps saying that nobody will be able to touch us. That I shouldn't worry...But why am I worried then?'

The biggest duchy was still the duchy of Rochefort, that was a fact. The wealthiest, the most influential, and the strongest of all three.

And yet, Lucian felt it was a false sense of security, a lie she was telling herself and him.

'She can't fight the whole world. She may be smarter than most, but she is not omnipotent.'

Celine was a genius, and geniuses had a tendency to forget they were not perfect and could make mistakes. They were prone to overestimate themselves and overlook their weaknesses.

How did Lucian know?

Loreno was one, Mumbai (Cansan's wife) was one, and the list of geniuses around Lucian kept on expanding.

His Vices might not be the smartest themselves but they had to be good at recruiting and managing those who were. Those good with numbers, new ideas, or had the skills they needed. The best ones were always those who were a little bit mad.

'Maybe it's the price they pay for being so ahead of their time,' Lucian thought, *'They have to be detached from the reality that is holding them back.'*

The gap that he found too big to overcome, suddenly didn't seem that big anymore.

He had a feeling that he could make up for it in a different way. That he could be a support that Celine needed to keep her feet grounded in reality lest she flew too far from it and burned her wings.

'We are both dreamers. She's the type that would risk everything on one dice and be sure to win, and I'm the type that will have a backup plan, in case I lose. We are a good match, aren't we?'

Even though he never saw Celine lose for real, he was convinced it could happen.

'Her confidence scares me a little bit...she will have to have a taste of failure to know her own limitations.'

Lucian thought about his own experiences with failure, and how they made him the person he was now.

Their worlds were too different, yes, but they couldn't be exact opposites, could they?

He had dipped a bit into hers and she had done the same to his.

'I can't marry her yet.'

He couldn't do it yet, for her sake. She would understand that.

'Yes, she would. My Celine is smart after all. She will see it.'

What Lucian didn't expect was that Celine was of the same opinion as he was, thinking that he should be grounded in reality more and stop acting like a hero from the fairy tales.

He rushed toward the capital and ran into her on the way. They traveled together, though they kept their distance, and ended up at their wall-sharing hideouts.

She insisted on exploring the second floor of his shop, refusing to stay in his office room, where they would have the most privacy. In the end, he had the second floor cleared for her.

Lucian's body froze as he tugged at the ribbon around his neck, with a small bell attached to it.

Celine was sitting on his lap, her legs wrapped around his hips.

The Honeybell lane was a busy street. People and carriages were coming and going, so of course the first thing she had to do was open the window and look outside.

Lucian dragged her down before she could wave her hand at the crowd, and cause them to stop and stare.

That's how they ended in this position of her on his lap, under the window frame.

They had fought for a bit, her trying to climb out of his lap and him trying to keep her in his lap, until she was out of breath and exhausted.

She gave him a 'what do you think you are doing' look, but he returned a 'what do you think you are doing' look of his own.

"Tsk," she clicked her tongue, "Now that you are a bronze knight, you think you can challenge me?" she pulled at his shirt to match his eye level.

"Shhh...someone will hear you," he said against her lips, covering her mouth with his.

It was a terrible way to make her stay quiet. Lost in the kiss, his neck was suddenly squeezed by a ribbon to the point of being strangled. He coughed, letting her go.

And that's how he ended up with a ribbon around his neck.

"Who are you trying to dominate with brute force, huh? Who?" Celine hooked the bell onto it as he coughed. Dangling the bell, making sure it was functioning properly. Each swing made the little bell sing with a clear chime.

Lucian took a few deep breaths as he looked up, demanding her to loosen the grip. Maybe he went too far with the roughness, "I was just trying to—"

"—assert dominance," she said, loosening the ribbon. She didn't seem to be angry with him, more like she was trying to correct his bad behavior.

He was here to correct her bad behavior, okay? Not the other way around.

"You are the one being rough and trying to push me down and assert dominance," Lucian pointed out the double standards that she didn't seem to realize she had.

"You started it."

"After you risked our safety to prove your superiority to the world," he emphasized.

"You are exaggerating," she retorted, "If I wanted to reveal our relationship without your permission I would have done so a long time ago, with a lot of fanfare to boot."

"..." Lucian was at a loss for words, "So you admit you are doing it to get a rise out of me?"

"Don't we do that to each other all the time?" she asked, as if she was not aware that she had done something wrong.

Lucian sighed, knowing he had to be the responsible one and the bigger man, "Are we going to start every meeting with a fight from now on?"

Celine shook her head, "Only the ones that are worth fighting for."

"..." Lucian sighed, pulling her closer into a hug, not giving up, not surrendering, and definitely not letting her win, "Why is there a collar around my neck?"

"It's not a collar. It's a medal, made of silk and gold," Celine corrected him, playing with the bell, "I was going to give you a prize for becoming a bronze knight. But since you were so rude to me, I had to turn your prize into a punishment."

'Stay strong, Lucian. Resist!' Lucian thought to himself, ordering his heart to stay inside and not jump out, *'Do not get enchanted by her cute and adorable ways. No matter what, don't let her charm you into becoming her obedient pet!'*

