Before the Fall

by Aizenat

Summary

As a child, Lucca’s mother would pull him in her lap and show him the way women used to look. She was fascinated with life before the war changed everything. When the Nation was called the United States of America. When leaders were elected. When America boasted about individualism.

“They had a choice,” she would say. “They could choose who to be with. The women would marry for love. They could decide what job they would do. They could choose what they wanted out of life. Everyone could.”

That was why Lucca was the way he was. Because his mother told him about a time where people had a choice. If she never showed him the magazines or the books, he would be just like any and every surrogate. He would be able to accept his role.

Notes

Just a few notes and warnings before this begin. The biggest warning is simply to mind the tags and warnings listed. This story is pretty heavy all around, so just be aware before you start.
Another note; I actually started to post this before but felt wrong about something I didn't notice until later. The main character refers to himself as "intersex." I started this story years (like, at least five, if not more) ago, before I learned more about intersex conditions. My point is that Lucca isn't really intersex, and I didn't want this to offend actual intersex people. Aside from the one time in this chapter, that term isn't brought up again. I didn't want to post this without noting my past self's ignorance.

With that said, this is a light intro to this story. Please enjoy it because it's just going to get worse from here.
Chapter 1

Lucca’s earliest memory was of his mother crying. He was in the bathtub, splashing around as most children did, and looked up. His mother, who was kneeling outside the tub with a rag in her hand, silently washed him as tears poured down her cheeks.

The strangest thing was that he never saw his mother cry after that. In Lucca’s memories, she was always smiling. She was an energetic woman who kept her hair in a short afro. Her dark skin, high cheekbones, and slight frame made him think of the models he’d seen in the old magazines his mother kept hidden.

As a child, Lucca’s mother would pull him in her lap and show him the way women used to look. She would laugh at the idea that women as skinny as her were the ideal. That her dark skin and hair was once a sign of hideousness. Before the war.

When it wasn’t the magazines, it was books. Books Lucca didn’t realize until later that he shouldn’t be reading. George Orwell, Jack Kerouac, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Toni Morrison. His mother loved Toni Morrison most.

She was fascinated with life before the war changed everything. When the Nation was called the United States of America. When leaders were elected. When America boasted about individualism.

“They had a choice,” she would say. “They could choose who to be with. The women would marry for love. They could decide what job they would do. They could choose what they wanted out of life. Everyone could.”

That was why Lucca was the way he was. Because his mother told him about a time where people had a choice. If she never showed him the magazines or the books, he would be just like any and every surrogate. He would be able to accept his role.

“Look at this one.”

Lucca was brought back to the present. He was sitting on the park bench, a large photo album in his lap. Next to him, his childhood friend, Monty, sat pointing at different pictures. Lucca followed his friend’s long finger to a picture of Lucca and Monty as kids, racing across the front lawn of Lucca’s old house.

Lucca couldn’t help but smile. He was short, even as a child, his sable skin darker than normal due to hours of playing in the sun. Trailing behind him was Monty, despite his taller legs. Monty’s pale skin and slim body was proof that he wasn’t a child who liked to spend hours outside; it was the only reason why Lucca could believe he was beating his friend.

“You’re much tanner now,” Lucca joked, turning the page.

And it was true. A lanky kid, Monty had grown into himself. His honey complexion now better reflected his Greek background, as did his dark hair that he kept short and perfectly coifed. Lucca, on the other hand, still felt like the teenager he was. He was still short, his body lean but slender. His dark curls were shaggy and hung in his face; something his mother would never have allowed as a child.

“I’m surprised you were allowed to keep some of these,” Lucca said, looking at the ones that had his mother in them.
“That’s why you can’t let anyone know,” Monty said, leaning closer as he turned the page. “As far as they know, I wouldn’t show you pictures with her in them.”

“Good thing there’s no chaperone.”

“You’re right. There isn’t.”

Lucca paused, realizing that the air had changed. He kept his eyes on the album, trying to pretend he didn’t notice anything. But when he felt Monty’s arm wrap around his waist, he knew he had to play along. This was the part Lucca hated about his meetings with Monty.

“Just a small one, Lucca,” Monty said.

Lucca nodded, letting Monty gently guide his head so they were facing. He met Monty’s dark eyes and didn’t turn away as his friend leaned forward and kissed him. For a moment, they simply stared at each other. Then Lucca shut his eyes, silently cursing the fact that Monty loved watching him when they kissed. When Monty finally pulled away, Lucca felt his heart racing and his face hot.

“You really need to get more comfortable with that stuff,” Monty said, leaning back on the bench and running a hand through his hair.

“I could if it didn’t have to be like this,” Lucca muttered.

Monty sighed. Lucca knew it was stupid complaining about this to Monty. He knew that neither of them could change how things were. All they could do was make do with what they had.

“At least this way, we have a chance,” Monty said, leaning closer and turning the pages to the album again. “If it weren’t like this, we couldn’t be together at all.”

“It’s easy for you when you’re not the surrogate,” Lucca said, shrugging.

“If I could switch places, I would.”

Meaningless words. And Lucca didn’t feel better after hearing them. He turned his attention back to the album, looking at pictures of the two and their families as children. They were neighbors, which was why they were so close. Monty’s parents were also very sympathetic since Lucca’s father died when he was a baby. They were always trying to help his mother. Since Monty was only a couple years older, it was inevitable that the two would be friends.

“How’s the center?” Monty asked, absentmindedly.

“Don’t ask me that,” Lucca snapped.

“Lucca,” Monty sang. All it did was piss Lucca off more. “I know you hate this, but we need to talk about this sort of stuff. You—”

“Please don’t treat me like a surrogate.”

Lucca hated how his voice sounded; weak and soft. But he really didn’t want to talk about this. And it wasn’t like he was the type to scream or shout.

“Lucca,” Monty finally said, taking the album away. “Lucca, you know that’s what you are, right?”

Lucca just shook his head. He wanted Monty to stop. Why wouldn’t he just change the
“You are,” Monty continued. “I know you hate this, but it’s because of this that we can be together. And you don’t have that much more time. You’ll be eighteen this year—”

“Not for six months,” Lucca interrupted, feeling his voice shake.

“And then your bid will be up. So it’s just a bit longer, okay?”

Lucca nodded, just so the conversation would end. Monty seemed satisfied, so he handed Lucca the album. He opened it to a random page, and right in the middle was a large picture of Lucca’s mother holding her young son. Lucca bit his lip, wishing he could ask Monty for it.

“She’s gorgeous.”

Lucca’s head snapped up. A young man was standing above them, eyes on the album. He had a tawny complexion and hazel eyes that seemed mesmerizing. His sandy hair was pulled back into a long ponytail; a strange hairstyle for a man. But it was the long, black trench coat the man wore despite the spring air that made Lucca tense. Something about this person made Lucca feel that he was dangerous.

“Devon!” Monty said, standing up, shaking the guy’s hand. “I haven’t seen you in months. What? Did you get fired?”

The man laughed lightheartedly. Lucca watched Monty, his body relaxed and a smile on his face. So Monty knew this stranger. Lucca remained silent, still not trusting this person.

“I’m apprenticed to Dr. Shaw right now,” the boy said, as if that explained everything. “Apparently I have to start there if I want to be a surgeon.”

“So you’ve been on that floor,” Monty muttered, glancing at Lucca. Lucca caught it and frowned.

“Have you done any yet?”

“Not yet. But he told me my first one would be in a month. A woman. She looks, actually…”

The man’s voice trailed off and Lucca looked up. The man was looking at the album in his lap. Lucca closed the album and pulled it to his chest. He didn’t like the knowing and sympathetic look on the man’s face while he was staring at his mother’s picture.

The man then playfully slapped Monty’s arm before gesturing towards Lucca.

“Aren’t you rude?” he said, smiling. “You haven’t introduced me to your friend.”

“Shit, you’re right. Sorry,” Monty said.

He reached out for Lucca’s hand. Lucca hesitated, before taking it and himself be pulled to his feet.

“This,” Monty said, looking prideful of Lucca, “is Lucca. He’s the surrogate I’m interested in. Lucca, this is my friend from work. His name’s Devon.”

Lucca withheld the glare he wanted to give Monty for referring to him as a surrogate. Instead, he shook Devon’s hand, giving the man a tight smile.

“You can call me Dev,” Devon said, giving a perfect smile.

Lucca nodded, but didn’t answer. Like that was going to happen. Lucca desperately wanted Devon
to disappear so he could look at the album again. He just wanted to look at his mother a while longer.

“He’s gorgeous,” Devon said to Monty.

“What do you say, Lucca?” Monty said, turning to look down him.

Lucca’s head snapped to his friend, not bothering to hide his glare. Monty was really pushing it today. Monty raised his eyebrows and jerked his head slightly towards Devon’s direction. Lucca huffed before turning to Devon.

“Thank you,” he said, meeting Devon’s hazel eyes.

“Lucy and I were talking about bidding on one,” Devon said. He was talking to Monty, but watched Lucca as he spoke. “We were wondering if we should do it before or after the wedding.”

“It’ll end up being before considering the rate you two are going,” Monty said, laughing.

“Hey, we finally set a date.”

“Oh yeah? When?”

“In sixteen months.”

The two men laughed at some joke Lucca missed. He glanced around the park. It was oddly empty considering how nice it was. Then again, Lucca remembered, most people were at work or classes. Monty just so happened to be on vacation. He was awarded a certain amount of vacation days, but Monty never took them. Since his renewal was coming up soon, his boss forced him to take off for two weeks so they didn’t get in trouble for it.

“If you’re serious,” Monty was saying, pulling Lucca from his thoughts, “there’s a mixer at the center on Friday. I’m going to see Lucca, so you can ride with me.”

“Why not?” Devon said, nodding. “Maybe I’ll score some points with Lucy’s parents for not holding off on this too.”

The two made plans to meet and said their goodbyes. Devon started to walk away, allowing Lucca to sigh in relief. He wasn’t sure why Monty’s coworker seemed dangerous, in retrospect, but the feeling of dread wouldn’t leave him.

“Oh,” Devon said, pausing before he got too far. He turned around and looked at the two of them. “That woman in the picture with the dark skin and short hair. Her name isn’t Madeline, is it?”

Lucca felt his body freeze. Why did this person know his mother’s name? Lucca glanced up at Monty, who had tensed as he watched Devon carefully. Lucca knew immediately that Devon knowing his mother’s name meant something terrible.

“She prefers to be called Maddie?” Devon continued.

Lucca turned his gaze back to Devon. He was looking at Lucca now, his face sympathetic. Something was horribly wrong. Terribly wrong.

“I’m sorry,” Devon finished, before turning and walking away.

Lucca watched him walk down the path, his black coat trailing behind him like a villain in a
movie. He felt Monty slip the album out of his arms, pulling Lucca back to the bench. Lucca sat down, trying to process what just happened.

“Monty,” he started, his voice catching. “Monty, why does he know my mother?”

“He’s a doctor, Lucca.”

“So?”

Lucca felt everything spinning. What did being a doctor have to do with anything?

“Well, he said it earlier. He wants to be a surgeon. And in order to get his license, he has to learn how to do lobotomies.”

Lucca shook his head, tears stinging his eyes.

“Lucca, calm down,” Monty said, his voice low.

He gently held Lucca’s face, trying to force the boy to look at him. Lucca pulled away, not wanting to be touched. A part of him knew this would happen. His mother had lied about her status since giving birth to Lucca. She refused to behave. His worst fears were happening and he couldn’t even see her before she would stop being the mother he knew.

“Everything’s going to be okay, Lucca,” Monty whispered, pulling Lucca into a hug as the tears spilled.

Lucca didn’t fight back. Monty’s words were empty promises and lies. They always were. There was nothing either of them could do. And even in Monty’s arms, where he normally would feel safe, all Lucca felt was despair.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Lucca makes a deal with the devil.

The cafeteria at the Center had transformed. Tables lined the back wall full of snacks and drinks. The lights were dimmed for a romantic feel, light music playing from the sound speakers. Lucca watched the men in suits walk around him. The only way to tell surrogates from the bidders was by their hair; surrogates were mandated to grow theirs out.

Lucca stood in the corner with his roommate, Vic, as they sipped their bottles of water and accessed the men. Vic was already eighteen, but had no bidders. It made sense since the boy went out of his way to turn men off. His small stature and fit body made him a perfect target. As did his green eyes, light hair, and russet skin.

As such, Vic had to do everything in his power to make sure no one approached him. He wore a constant scowl on his face, even cutting his hair short enough to be disciplined. In fact, the only reason his hair was in its current shaggy state was due to recently being beaten when he tried for a crew cut four months ago.

“I hate these things,” Vic muttered, stating the obvious.

“You know if you don’t at least start seeing someone soon, they’ll send you to a reprogramming center, right?” Lucca reminded him.

“I’d rather have a lobotomy than deal with this. At least that way, I’m not forced to bury my pride and play princess to these scumbags.”

A man came up to the boys, tall and muscular looking. He looked like a soldier with his broad shoulders and sharp features. He smiled at both of them but settled on Vic.

“Hello,” the man said, flashing a set of perfectly white teeth. “I’m Carlos. How are you this evening?”

“Lo siento, signore,” Vic said, smiling back. “¿Estás hablando conmigo? No habla inglés.”

Lucca turned and looked at his friend in horror. English was the official language of the Nation, and it was explicitly forbidden for surrogates to speak anything but. Lucca knew his roommate was originally from Puerto Rico, but he never heard Vic go this far to turn someone away. He was asking to get in trouble again.

“¿Habla español?” the man asked.

The smile slid off Vic’s face as the man continued in Spanish. Lucca bit his lips, trying to hold back the grin climbing his face. It was his roommate’s fault. If anything, the boy was lucky the man also spoke Spanish; he’d be less likely to report what Vic did.

Eventually, the man said something and pointed to the back doors open to get some air circulating in the room. Vic frowned, but didn’t protest when the man grabbed his hand and walked the boy
over to the doors. Of course not too far from the chaperones. Lucca waved as Vic gave him a
desperate look before disappearing in the crowd.

“What a pretty smile.”

Lucca’s head snapped up, shocked to see Devon standing in front of him. Lucca looked around.
Monty and Devon were supposed to come in together, so he assumed Monty would be close to the
man. But he couldn’t see him anywhere.

“Are you so used to compliments that you don’t say ‘thank you’ when you get them?” Devon
asked suddenly, grabbing Lucca’s attention.

“I’m sorry,” Lucca replied, giving the man a wary look. “Thank you.”

“Much better,” Devon said, taking a swing of his cup.

Lucca looked the man over. He looked dapper in his dark suit and tie. Lucca even noted that it was
tailored. His long hair was slicked back, but Lucca noticed that the ponytail was gone.

“You cut your hair?” Lucca asked.

“It was my fiancée’s request,” Devon chuckled, smoothing his hair back with a hand. “Do you like
it?”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Lucca said, shrugging. “Where’s Monty? You two came together,
right?”

“Change of plans. I decided to come alone. He was stuck in traffic when I talked to him last. He
should be here soon.”

Lucca felt a wave of panic go through him. He didn’t want to be alone with Devon. Not in this
corner where no one was playing attention to him. Not without Monty there as a buffer. He took a
sip of his water, looking down at the hardwood floor.

“Speaking of Monty,” Devon said, taking another sip of his drink, “he scolded me for mentioning
your mother. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Lucca bit his lip but didn’t answer. He really didn’t like this man and wanted him to go away.
Wasn’t he supposed to be here to look for a potential surrogate? Why was he bothering Lucca?

“She’ll actually be my first patient,” Devon continued when Lucca didn’t respond. “I’ve been
meeting with her to see if she really is ‘beyond rehabilitation.’ I decided last week that she is.”

“Please stop telling me this,” Lucca finally said, his voice low.

“You don’t want to know what’s happening to your mother?”

“No this. I don’t want to hear this.”

Lucca felt like he was just seconds away from crying. Where was Monty? Why wasn’t he here? He
thought about just walking away from Devon. It wasn’t like Lucca had to be at the mixer. He was
there to support Vic and meet Monty.

“I was just wondering,” Devon said, still going, “if maybe you wanted to see her before I have to
do the procedure.”
Lucca’s breath caught. He looked up, meeting Devon’s hazel eyes. The devilish smirk on his face let Lucca know that this was some sort of trap. He had ulterior motives.

“What do I have to do?” Lucca asked, deciding to cut through the bullshit.

Devon didn’t answer right away. His smirk widened as he took another swig of his drink. Lucca hated the look in his face. Devon had him right where he wanted him, and Lucca hated him for that.

“I want to fuck you,” Devon finally answered.

Lucca wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but he knew he should have expected this. And yet, for some reason, he didn’t.

“More specifically,” Devon added, “I want to be the first one to fuck you.”

Lucca opened his mouth to deny that he was a virgin, but stopped himself. He knew Devon would be able to easily tell it was a lie. Hell, it wouldn’t surprise Lucca if Devon had grilled Monty on how far they’d gone. Monty would have passed it off as friendly conversation.

“You have to be affianced to me for that to happen,” Lucca said.

“I can easily arrange that,” Devon said, drinking from his cup.

“You have to bid on me for that to happen. And win.”

“I can easily win against Monty in a bid.”

“I’m not eighteen yet.”

“I’ll wait.”

“Please, don’t,” Lucca said, hearing his voice finally crack. “It has to be Monty. We’ve been so good this entire time so it can be him.”

Devon rolled his eyes but didn’t answer. He finished his drink, watching Lucca carefully. Lucca wanted to see his mother, of course, but even that wasn’t worth giving up his future with Monty.

“Montgomery’s not even engaged,” Devon stated. “He might not be able to bid at this rate. They wouldn’t give a surrogate to someone who doesn’t even have a family.”

“Then I need more,” Lucca said. “You have to make sure she never gets a lobotomy.”

Devon raised an eyebrow, obviously surprised.

“That might be difficult,” he admitted. “But if I can, you’ll gladly accept me bidding for you?”

Lucca nodded, feeling his stomach turn. He suddenly felt terrible for Monty. After all they’d been through, he could wind up in another man’s home. He didn’t want to think how Monty would react. He couldn’t think about that. At this time, he just wanted to save his mother.

“But your first is mine no matter what happens,” Devon stated.

Lucca hesitated. He wasn’t giving up his life if his mother still ended up a mindless ghost of her former self.
“I think you misunderstood me,” Devon said, tapping his now empty cup. “If I get you a meeting with your mother, you’ll give me your cunt. Even if we have to do it before your bidding, I don’t care. It’s mine. And if I can stop her lobotomy, you give me the rest of your life.”

Lucca suddenly understood. The moment he saw his mother again, he’d be sealing his fate. He bit his lip, hating this. It wasn’t fair. None of it was fair. He shouldn’t have to whore himself just for a chance to see his mother.

“Okay,” Lucca finally answered. “I’ll agree to that.”

Devon’s smirk returned, much to Lucca’s chagrin. Thankfully, he didn’t have long to be smothered by it; a hand appeared on Devon’s shoulder. He turned, revealing Monty looking tired and winded.

“Hey, you made it!” he said to Devon. “You were keeping Lucca company?”

“He asked me to talk to him so no one else would approach him,” Devon said, grinning.

Lucca wanted to puke. He watched Monty thank Devon before turning his attention on Lucca. Devon walked away, raising his cup in a silent cheers.

“Miss me?” Monty grinned, leaning down and kissing Lucca.

For once, Lucca was happy to feel Monty’s lips on his, despite the circumstances. He nodded, reveling in the way Monty lit up at his response.

“Should we go up to your room?”

Lucca paused. With most people, that would be an invitation to sex. But with the two of them, it meant a night of them talking. And maybe a light make-out session. Normally, Lucca wouldn’t want anything more than that. But considering the fact that he just sold his virginity to the devil, he wanted to feel owned by the person he wanted to own him.

“Monty,” Lucca asked, looking up at his dark eyes, “can we practice the thing with my mouth?”

“What thing?”

Lucca glanced down before looking back at Monty. He immediately understood. He grabbed Lucca’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“You sure?” he asked.

Lucca nodded. Monty kissed him again before leading him through the throngs of people to the doors. They disappeared inside the large building to be alone.
“So you actually like him?”

Lucca watched Vic carefully as he tossed a jacket over his shoulders, glancing in the mirror on the back of the door. It had been two weeks since the mixer, and Lucca had to listen to Vic talk about Carlos nonstop. From what Lucca gathered, his roommate liked best that they were from the same country.

“You know, he works as a translator, so he gets to speak Spanish all the time,” Vic was saying, deciding his outfit was decent enough to leave in. “I didn’t even realize how much of it I lost until we got to talking.”

“So you like the guy?” Lucca asked again, not letting his friend dodge the question again.

“Why do you keep asking me that?” Vic said, grabbing his backpack.

“Because you never liked a guy before.”

Vic just shrugged, but still didn’t answer the question. Lucca rolled his eyes, turning back to the photo album on his desk. Monty had given it to him the day before so he had one for himself. It was smaller than Monty’s; about the size of a notebook. And, Lucca was noticing as he went through the old pictures of the two’s childhood, without his mother.

Lucca knew it would have been dangerous if pictures of her were in it, but it still didn’t stop the wave of disappointment he felt. As he went through the pictures, he saw a few of Monty’s parents. They looked happy and smiled brightly. And yet Lucca wasn’t even allowed to look at pictures of his own mother.

“Are you skipping class?” Vic asked, laying on his bed and watching him.

Lucca glanced at the time. They had about half an hour before their afternoon lecture. Lucca finally tore himself from the album and stood up. On Fridays, the two boys only had their afternoon lectures and counseling sessions. As such, they’d both developed a bad habit of not getting dressed until after lunch. Which they’ve both also gotten into the bad habit of skipping.

Lucca went over to his closet, pulling out a pair of jeans and a button up shirt. He quickly changed, leaving the first few buttons open. He was told it was suggestive, but Lucca hated having things tight around his neck. He glanced at the mirror on the door before heading into the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Fifteen minutes and an argument about whose knitted cap it was planted on Vic’s head later, the boys headed out of their room. They walked the long hallway, talking about anything that happened during the week. They’d been roommates for years, and Lucca was surprised that despite being around each other just about all the time, the two still had anything to talk about.

They left the building, walking along the green campus. The spring air seemed to give everyone an energy they all lacked during the cold winter. Halfway to their lecture hall, Vic took off his jacket, deciding it was too warm for it. They got to the old brick building, ignoring the wandering surrogates as they slid into the hall.

Vic noticed Josiah, a boy in their peer group, first, and walked over to him. Josiah simply nodded as the two sat next to him. Vic was cool with Josiah, but Lucca didn’t particularly like the boy.
Probably because he was too perfect. He had the perfect honey complexion with perfect wavy locks that fell down his perfectly slim neck. On top of that, he actually tried to be as perfect as a surrogate as he could; since turning eighteen last month, he’d been the subject of a bidding war that was rumored to be close to breaking records.

Lucca didn’t know what Vic saw in the kid. Lucca had always liked Vic’s rebellious nature. Vic would challenge the teachers, turn off potential mates, and laugh in the faces of people who tried to correct his behavior. He had calmed down a bit after a six-month stint in a Reprogramming Center two years ago, but he still had no problems sharing with his friends how stupid he found everything. So he couldn’t fathom why Vic seemed to enjoy Josiah, who was the complete opposite of him.

“You two skipped lunch,” Josiah said as Vic pulled a notebook out of his backpack. “Again.”

“Are you going to narc on us?” Vic asked, half joking and half threatening.

“I probably won’t have to. Derek was looking for you, Lucca.”

Lucca rolled his eyes. Derek was their group leader. He was just as obsessed over being perfect as Josiah, if not more. That’s why he was the perfect person to be the group leader for the boys on their floor.

“What did he want?” Lucca asked.

“To give you this,” Josiah said, handing Lucca a folded up piece of paper.

Lucca took it, seeing it was an official form stamped from the Matching Office. He looked at the time listed on the form, and assumed it was telling him that he had a date after his evening counseling.

Lucca sighed. This happened from time to time. Even though Lucca had Monty, he still was supposed to be open for prospects. And even though Lucca didn’t actively seek any, the center would occasionally prepare a date for him. And Lucca knew it wasn’t Monty because he was gone for the weekend on a seminar at a Reprogramming Center in DC.

“You didn’t tell me you were going out with Monty,” Vic said, reading the paper over Lucca’s shoulder.

“I’m not,” Lucca said.

Vic and Josiah nodded understandingly just as the lecturer came in. He was a man in his early thirties who didn’t sugarcoat his lectures.

“Hello boys!” he said, standing at the front and throwing his stuff on the desk chaotically. “Let’s get right into today’s topic: the sin that is premarital sex.”

Vic and Lucca exchanged annoyed glances while Josiah dutifully scribbled in his notebook.

“As we all know, premarital sex is a sin no matter who does it. For today, we’re going to focus on how premarital sex, for surrogates, is always your fault.”

Lucca bit his lip. He didn’t want to listen to this bullshit. All the man did was go on about how surrogates were sexually deviant people who were always seducing men. As such, when a man acted on his desires, it was the surrogate’s fault. Lucca imagined his mother clicking her tongue at the man’s words.
“Being born intersex doesn’t make you a deviant,” he heard her soft voice say.

Intersex. Lucca had always preferred that word. Better than surrogate. Much better than surrogate.

“For example, Lucca here,” the lecturer said, directing his pointer at the boy.

Lucca watched as the man approached him.

“Lucca’s outfit is a good example of a casual seduction. He left the top of his shirt unbuttoned, which signifies to men that he is sexually available to them. Button your shirt up, Lucca.”

Lucca didn’t move. Was this man serious? It wasn’t like his entire chest was out. What idiot would look at his outfit and assume he wanted to have sex with them? The lecturer slapped the pointer on the desk. Lucca couldn’t help but jump.

“Button up your shirt, Lucca,” the man repeated.

Reluctantly, Lucca buttoned up his shirt. He kept a steely gaze on the man, not taking it off even as he nodded in approval.

“Now Lucca looks like a respectable surrogate,” he said to the class, his point made. “Now, regarding hair length and how that may be inviting for men to rape you.”

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Lucca somehow made it through his lectures without vomiting. He spent dinner in the cafeteria with more boys from his hall before heading upstairs. In typical fashion, Lucca simply brushed his teeth again before leaving for his date. He only wanted Monty bidding on him, so he wasn’t trying to dress to impress.

He went to the main hall where two receptionists manned the front door. Whenever Lucca thought it was strange seeing women in charge of the doors, he remembered that just outside were more than enough security guards to take out anyone who tried to force their way out or in.

“I have a date,” Lucca said to the shorter woman with large, monolidded eyes.

“May I see your id?” the taller blonde next to her cheerfully sang.

Both women broke into a fit of laughter, obviously sharing a joke he wasn’t getting. He decided to write it off as just the TGIF excitement that hit everyone Friday nights. He took his id out of his pocket and the blonde looked at it.

“Lucca,” she said, writing something down on the binder in front of her. She turned back to him, singing the rest. “He’s not here yet, so please take a seat!”

The women laughed again as the blonde dramatically gestured to the small row of chairs next to the desk. Lucca took his id case back and walked over to the seats. He fiddled with it as he waited, listening to the women talk about one of their coworkers who they both didn’t like. From what Lucca could gather, the woman was very cheerful. He concluded that the blonde had been mocking her.

The door opened then, grabbing his attention. His jaw dropped as he watched Devon walk into the
room. Devon was dressed in casual khakis with a light jacket over his dark shirt. Lucca had almost forgotten that he ever met the man. He gulped as he watched the man smile at the receptionists. Lucca was silent as he watched the man sign them out, and the blonde half joked with him to not try to ditch the chaperone.

“Been a while, hasn’t it?” Devon said, standing over him. “Let’s go.”

Lucca considered just getting up and walking back to his room. He’d be in trouble, sure, but it had to be better than whatever Devon had planned. Then, remembering that a chaperone would be present, he stood and followed the man out.

They walked off the campus and into town, which was only half a mile away. Lucca had asked the man if he had a car. Devon said he did, but thought Lucca would feel better if he knew he could physically run away at any point. Lucca didn’t admit that he didn’t.

Devon took Lucca to a family restaurant. They were put in a corner, their chaperone at a table within sight, and ordered appetizers from a girl with a long ponytail. Lucca had been quiet the entire time, afraid to ask about what was really on his mind: his mother.

“Let’s just get down to business,” Devon said as soon as the woman left. He leaned forward, lowering his voice so only Lucca could hear him. “Today, I will be filing as a potential match for you. And you will approve it.”

“I want to see my mother first,” Lucca said, ignoring how anxious he felt at Devon’s words.

“I have to do this first,” Devon said, shaking his head. “I need to be able to take you somewhere without a babysitter.”

Lucca glanced at the chaperone, but still felt unsure. The moment Lucca signed the form, Devon would be allowed to bid on him once he came of age. And he knew the man planned on making do of his promise if everything worked out with his mother. But he also knew that if they were casually dating, they would never be allowed to be alone. And that would mean he couldn’t see her.

“Okay,” Lucca finally agreed. “When can I see her?”

Devon pulled out a folded up piece of paper from his pocket. He opened it and put it on the table, facing Lucca. The boy glanced at it, seeing a few stamps to verify it was legitimate. But it was just a bunch strange symbols that Lucca couldn’t understand.

“I can’t read,” he admitted, feeling a bit abashed.

Devon raised an eyebrow.

“You can’t? I guess I assumed that mother of yours taught you.”

“She was afraid to. So she settled on reading the books to me. She said it was better that I learn how to listen anyway.”

“Really? How did she figure?”

“She said people are more dangerous with what they say than what they write. And she said I needed to train myself to hear it.”

Devon smirked. Lucca really hated that grin on his face. The man tilted his head at Lucca before
speaking.

“So you can tell when someone is dangerous just by how they speak?” he asked.

“Yes,” Lucca said, nodding.

“Am I dangerous?”

“Yes.”

“Your mother is a smart woman,” he said as the waitress returned with a large plate of fries.
Lucca stared at the woman sitting across from him. She was beautiful, to say the least. She had a warm complexion and round, honey eyes. Her hair was thin, so she kept it in a short bob with a side fringe; it suited her small face. She was tall, though still smaller than Monty. She looked like the perfect wife.

It was a difficult situation. Remembering what Devon had told him, Lucca had told Monty that he might not be able to bid on him if he wasn’t at least engaged. For the past month, Lucca had been pressuring Monty to find someone to marry as quickly as possible. Only then would he have a shot.

When Monty asked where this new fear was coming from, Lucca had lied and said the center had been setting up more blind dates. He was afraid someone would try to bid on him when he turned eighteen. He didn’t mention Devon. There was no way he could.

And in that month’s time, Monty had managed to find this golden beauty with the sweet face. Lucca wasn’t sure what the entire story was, nor was he sure that it was normal for a girlfriend to have dinner with her boyfriend and the surrogate he’s interested in. In fact, Lucca knew this entire situation was suspicious. And as such, Lucca doubted the girl would go along with them.

Lucca glanced around the room. They were in Monty’s condo, given privacy for this meeting. The white walls were bare, the black table they were sitting at the only thing separating the living room from the kitchen. A smorgasbord of food littered the large table, prepared by Monty’s maid, Belinda, who was given the night off after making the food. Lucca watched the woman lightly eat the penne pasta, trying to remember her name again.

“How many rooms are in this condo?” the woman asked, looking disapprovingly at Monty’s bachelor pad.

“Four,” Monty answered, glancing at Lucca’s uneaten plate.

“We’d probably have to move to a bigger place.”

Monty simply nodded. The woman had been asking all sorts of weird questions. Questions that made Lucca feel she already knew what the two wanted from her. She asked about Monty’s job at the RC centers, surprised that he was one of the coordinators who came up with inventive ways to encourage acceptance of roles. She asked if Belinda would move in if they got married, and seemed pleased when Monty said she would. The woman asked for her own room, which Monty had no problems conceding.

The entire affair seemed more like negotiations after a war than it did a date. The woman turned her light eyes to Lucca, giving him a smile.

“How many have you been estimated to have?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

Lucca didn’t want to answer her. He hated this question and everything that came with it. The expectations he never wanted to fulfill. The fact that he was literally being reduced to a baby-making machine. But he knew better than to not respond, so he swallowed and gave her a half truth.

“They said I’m healthy enough for at least four,” he said.

“Lucca,” Monty scolded.
Lucca turned to him, annoyed to see Monty giving him a disapproving frown. Was it necessary to give the exact number? The goal was at least four; enough to replace the three of them, and then one extra to increase the population. And Lucca should be able to do it. But the steely look Monty gave Lucca made the boy turn back to the woman and give the full answer.

“They said six for now,” Lucca said. “But they don’t want to overestimate, so they’ll see how I am after the sixth one before they see how many more I can have. So at this time, it’s six.”

The woman nodded in approval, maintaining the sweet smile.

“How do you feel about being a surrogate?”

Lucca’s eyes snapped to Monty immediately. Monty, however, was focused on his steak and potatoes, and refused to look up to help him. Lucca turned back to the woman, her smile waning.

“I’m…” Lucca started, his voice trailing off as he tried to think of how to respond. “It’s just, I mean, this is just what I am.”

The woman sighed and turned back to her food. The table was silence, and Lucca wondered if he had answered wrong. It was a weird question. One he only got from his counselors at the center. Why was she asking? What answer did she want to hear?

“My only concern,” the woman said, turning to Monty when she spoke, “is him. I get you two are in love and want to stay together, but if I can’t get what I want out of him, there’s nothing in it for me.”

Monty nodded, not looking at Lucca. The woman turned to Lucca, giving him a worried look. Lucca noticed her eyes dipped to his plate, still untouched, and shook her head.

“He hasn’t touched his food,” she said. “Does he normally skip meals?”

“No,” Lucca answered before Monty could speak. He decided to butter the woman up. “I’m just nervous about meeting you.”

“Sweet,” she said, giving him a smile before turning back to Monty. “At least it’s easy to tell when he’s lying.”

Lucca frowned. He turned to his plate, taking in all the insanely healthy vegetables, meats, and rice. His plate, of course, was much larger than the others’. Lucca picked up his fork and started eating, starting with the salmon.

“Lucca, do you want to know something about people before the war?” the woman asked, seeming to be satisfied that he was now eating.

Lucca glanced at Monty, who was watching him carefully, before nodding at the woman. People did this often with him, not knowing Lucca knew a lot already because of his mother. Whatever it was, he probably already knew it.

“There were people,” the woman continued, taking a sip of her wine, “who had no desire to have sex. They were called asexuals. It didn’t mean they couldn’t love, they just didn’t care for sex.”

Lucca nodded. Okay, so she got him: this was new information. Lucca had heard about the queers of the twenty-first century. He’d heard about the many identities that were too many to list. But he never heard about this.
“In our current society, with things the way they are, that’s not tolerable,” the woman said. “So I was very lucky when I was found infertile.”

Lucca blinked, understanding now why she was telling him this. But he was still a bit confused.

“Despite that,” the woman continued, glancing at Monty, “I still want kids. In the past, there were options for women like me. Adoption and the like. But things are much different.

“Being that I’m infertile, I’d have to marry and rely on a surrogate. Which I was okay with. However, the surrogates are not supposed to be, well, loved. Do you understand me?”

Lucca didn’t answer. He understood that; that was why what he and Monty were doing was dangerous. Surrogates were a necessity to keep the population going, but their bodies were seen as a deviance in the design God had originally created. Therefore, a “proper” family, one woman and one man, raised the children the surrogates had.

Surrogates were to be fucked until they got pregnant, give their family a child, and then the cycle repeated. But they weren’t supposed to be loved; not the way a husband would love a wife.

“What I’m saying,” the woman said when Lucca didn’t respond, “is that surrogates aren’t supposed to replace the woman’s role in the bedroom, but rather step in for her inability to bear children. Therefore, I’d still be expected to please my husband in the ways a woman should.”

“Oh,” Lucca said, realization setting in. “You don’t want to do that.”

The woman smiled, taking another sip of her wine.

“You’re very smart,” she said. “This set up works in my favor, because I can have the children I want while not having to have sex with my husband. Nothing personal,” she added to Monty, who only smirked as he drank from his own wine glass.

“So, you’re okay with us,” Lucca said.

“You’ll be his lover and I just the beard,” the woman said, shrugging. “It’s perfect as long as everyone plays their part. Which is the only thing I’m concerned about.”

Lucca didn’t answer. Now he was realizing her hesitation. She could see Lucca hated the surrogate thing. It wasn’t like he was in a particular rush to get knocked up and pop out as many babies as he could. Even if it was his “role.” But if he didn’t, everyone would lose. He bit his lip, considering this.

“You really are smart,” she said again, finishing her wine. “You’re supposed to have at least six children, and I want them. I don’t want this to be a struggle, Lucca. I want you to do anything in your power to make sure that happens. So you’re going to let Montgomery fuck you, you’re going to eat properly, you’re going to take all your vitamins and fertility medicines; you’re going to be good.

“If you can do that, I will marry this guy so he can have you. I won’t care how often he fucks you; in fact, you can attend to all his manly needs. I’ll play the dutiful wife in public so you two can carry on your love affair. But only, Lucca, if you can agree to give me what I want.”

Lucca glanced at Monty, who was watching him very closely as he sipped his wine. None of this should be surprising. Lucca, after all, would be expected to do what this woman wanted no matter who he was with. At least this way, he could be with Monty. They wouldn’t have to keep it a secret, even in their own house. This woman, despite her slightly abrasive demeanor, was their
ticket to paradise.

*If Devon doesn’t steal it first,* a dark thought trickled into his head.

Lucca shook the idea away. At this moment, Devon didn’t matter. Devon wasn’t a factor. Devon could fall through; he could turn out to have been a man who was all talk. Or Monty could manage to outbid him. Whatever the case, Lucca wasn’t guaranteed to Devon. So he nodded, looking the woman straight in her face.

“I can do it,” he said.

He turned back to his food for good measure, focusing on finishing his meal. He glanced at the woman, who was smiling in approval. She turned to Monty, lifting her empty glass to him.

“Then you, Montgomery, have yourself a fiancée.”

“And a darling one at that, Chelsea,” Montgomery said, returning the gesture.

Lucca finished his food, committing that name to memory. *Chelsea.*
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The ball finally drops...

Lucca was starting to hate his visits to Monty’s condo. It had been a month since Monty and Chelsea were engaged, and yet she had practically moved in. She was always there, a young girl by her side as she planned a wedding that she was determined Monty would have no say in. Not that Monty seemed to care; it wasn’t as if they were marrying for love or anything. It was a business deal as far as he was concerned, so he didn’t care if he wasn’t part of the planning.

But Chelsea was determined to have as easy a time in her marriage as possible. And that meant she was laying down the law early. Monty didn’t offer her much resistance; he’d already let her redecorate every room except for his office. But Lucca wasn’t in the mood to play house. He mostly wanted to see the photo album with his mother. But with Chelsea in his face during his visits, that wasn’t a possibility.

And Chelsea was always in his face. She was always around, making it impossible for Lucca to ask about his mother. And she was constantly encouraging Lucca to eat. It was all he could do to not snap on her. With Monty’s encouragement, he simply played along,

“You’re pretty skinny for a surrogate, aren’t you?” she mused as Belinda, Monty’s house keeper and cook, put a plate of a beef stew and potatoes in front of Lucca.

It was Sunday, and instead of spending the day outside and walking around the campus, he was forced to spend it listening to Chelsea’s plans for Lucca’s room. They were taking a break only for lunch. Which Lucca had hoped a little bit of picking would satisfy her. Of course it wasn’t.

“We’ll have to really monitor his eating,” she said, to Monty this time.

Lucca glanced at Monty, who was answering emails on a tablet. He didn’t look up, simply nodded to what Chelsea said. Lucca wished he would protest something instead of letting her run everything.

A phone went off. Lucca watched as Chelsea pull the small device out of her pocket and look to see who is calling. She stood up, about to walk away before giving one last look at Lucca.

“Don’t get up until you’ve finished eating,” she said, before disappearing into the other room to take the call.

“She’s annoying,” Lucca said the moment she was out of earshot. “She doesn’t shut up.”

Monty chuckled, hitting the tablet a few times before setting it down on the table. He gave Lucca a sympathetic smile. Lucca frowned at him, realizing Monty had been purposely tuning her out.

“Just bear with it,” Monty said, pushing the bowl of stew towards Lucca to eat. “She means well.”

Lucca begrudgingly ate his lunch.
“Am I going to be able to see the album today?” he asked between bites.

“Not today.”

“Can I see her soon?”

“I’m still working on it.”

Lucca didn’t respond right away. Monty’s job had allowed him the ability to set it up so Lucca could visit his mother even though he wasn’t supposed to. Not since Lucca was sent to the center to prepare for his life as a surrogate anyway. He knew he was lucky; Vic hadn’t seen his parents in seven years. But with the news that his mother was heading for a lobotomy soon, Lucca had been pressing for Monty to set up another meeting. And if Lucca could get in through Monty, his deal with Devon would be unnecessary.

But he knew that it was hard for Monty to arrange these meetings. It was easier when Lucca was younger. But the older he got, the less frequent the meetings became. He hadn’t seen his mother in over two years because he’s supposed to be focusing on his upcoming bid. And with Lucca’s mother being deemed a lost cause, Monty’s research wouldn’t justify the two of them meeting like it did in the past. But the doctor who was supposed to perform the lobotomy could definitely manage it.

And that’s exactly what Lucca feared: Monty failing to come through while Devon easily making the arrangements.

Monty noticed Lucca’s silence and sighed.

“Lucca, you know I really want to make you happy,” he said, hesitating slightly before continuing. “I know you love your mother. But you really have to understand that the second she was found out—the second you were found out—you two would have to be separated.”

Lucca blinked, looking up warily at Monty. What the fuck was he saying?

“I mean, Lucca, at this point, the counselors are right. You need to focus on your bid and your new family. Surrogates aren’t supposed to have this much contact with their parents for a reason. You’re supposed to be concerned about the family you’ll help create.”

Lucca shook his head. Was Monty lecturing him?

“So do you really expect that from me?” Lucca asked, incredulously. Tears bit the back of his eyes and he struggled to hold them back. “I’ve been doing this shit for over ten years. What more do you want from me? You want me to pretend she never existed? Pretend I don’t know she’s out there thinking of me, crying over me, and missing me? Not think about her at all when she spends every day wishing she could see me?”

Monty stared at Lucca, eyes slightly wide. Lucca knew he shouldn’t have gone that far. For starters, he sounded ungrateful for the times Monty did break the rules so he could see his mother. Monty could have gotten in as much trouble as Lucca and his mother if they’d been caught. On top of that, Lucca had never cursed at Monty or gotten angry like this. Frustrated, sure, but never on this level.

But above all else, his tirade was deplorable as a surrogate. Surrogates don’t have the right to complain about their lives. They don’t have the right to cry if they’re beaten, or make demands. They don’t have the right to expect anything more than what is granted them. Some get happy lives. Others, not so much. But it wasn’t their place to question that.
Lucca wasn’t sure exactly which part of that had silenced Monty. But in the second it took Monty to process it all, Lucca saw his mistake in the hardness that set in Monty’s face.

“I’ve spoiled you rotten,” he said, his voice low. “It’s my fault. This is why we have to treat you like this, Lucca. To prevent this.”

Lucca blinked away tears and opened his mouth to apologize. But Monty cut him off immediately.

“You won’t see her,” he decided. Lucca’s heart dropped. “Not now anyway. Not until she has her lobotomy. After she recovers. And not until after you’ve done your part and given Chelsea a few children. Not until you realize, fully and completely realize, your role. Only then will I consider letting you see her again. Only when I can be sure seeing her won’t cause you any more confusion will I think about it. Do you understand?”

Lucca couldn’t hold back the tears anymore. This wasn’t just a betrayal. For so many years, he hoped Monty’s encouragement was simply so they could be together. Because Monty loved him—had since they were children. But he really hoped, deeply wished, that Monty didn’t believe in this shit. It was one thing if Monty just wanted Lucca to behave simply because society forced him into his role. It was another thing entirely for Monty to believe his role is deserving and necessary.

And so Lucca cried openly, hoping, pitifully, to appeal to Monty’s old memories. Of the two of them racing in front of their houses. Of playing hide and seek in the woods behind their houses. Of the mission to chase out the ghost they were sure haunted Monty’s attic. Of the naps they took in the fort they built in Lucca’s basement. Lucca shook his head, pleading for so much.

“Please, Monty.”

“I asked if you understood what I just told you,” Monty replied starkly.

“Monty, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Do you need me to help you understand?” Monty snapped, standing abruptly.

At that, Lucca flinched, a small cry escaping his lips. He wrapped his arms around himself and looked down at the floor as if hoping he would get smaller. The tears were flowing now, sobs wracking through his body. Monty has never gotten like this with him. Even the thought of Monty hitting him made Lucca go cold with fear. Monty closed the space between them, and Lucca closed his eyes.

“Lucca, I swear to God, I am asking you a q—”

“What in the world is going on here?”

Both boys looked up at Chelsea as she stood in the room, putting her phone in her pant pocket. She took one look at the scene—Monty looming over Lucca’s crying form threateningly—and immediately directed her glare to Monty. In an instant, she was by Lucca’s side, pulling him into a hug and rubbing his back as he cried into her shoulder.

“It’s okay,” she soothed, rocking him a little. It reminded Lucca of how his mother would hold him when he cried as a child, and so he cried even harder. Chelsea shushed him even more. “You’re okay, Lucca. Whatever it is, you’re going to be okay.”

“Jeez,” Monty said, and Lucca heard the creaking of him sitting back in his chair. “You immediately take his side?”
“Surrogates are sensitive,” she scolded Monty. “And the last thing we need is you getting him all anxious or depressed. That affects his fertility, you know.”

“I know,” Monty resigned with a sigh.

Lucca ground his teeth angry. Chelsea wasn’t even genuinely concerned about him: she was just concerned that he’d worry himself so much he’d make himself infertile. The reality of his situation hit him hard. No one around him cared about what he wanted. All they cared about was what he could do for them. And he was helpless to do anything about.

So he sat there and cried some more on Chelsea’s shoulder, wanting the world to end.
Lucca kept his attention on the trees passing by. Summer had snuck in and in a blink faded to fall, and the green scenery was slowly reddening to a somberness that matched Lucca’s mood. He hadn’t been sleeping well since his argument with Monty, and he struggled to recover mentally. He’d skipped a few classes over the past week, getting reprimanded in his last counseling session for it. When the counselor asked him what was wrong, he lied and said he thought it was a flu, and then had to deal with a lecture on making sure to report to the infirmary when he felt ill. But that was better than what would have happened if he dared to tell his counselor he was feeling depressed.

He glanced at Devon in the driver seat next to him. He was surprised Devon insisted on a drive for their “date.” The last time they went out, he simply took Lucca on a walk through the nearby park. He learned quickly that Devon enjoyed the outdoors as much as Lucca did, and it annoyed Lucca that they had something in common.

“You seem down,” Devon finally said, breaking the silence between them. “Do you detest me that much?”

“Yes,” Lucca responded immediately, then realizing his rudeness quickly added, “but it’s not that. Not you, I mean.”

“Really?” Devon questioned, his tone lightly mocking. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

Lucca frowned. Doctors these days were trained in just about everything before they focus on their specialty. Especially if Devon was working with patients who were to be lobotomized, he would have to do a bit of clinical counseling. But Devon wasn’t his counselor, and so Lucca didn’t have to indulge him.

“No,” he snapped, sinking in his seat a bit.

“Come now. We still have a while to go and it’ll be quite boring if you don’t talk to me.”

“Then think of something else to talk about.”

“Something else? How about how I can’t wait to win your bid and get you pregnant with my children? I can’t wait, you know. You’ll look so pretty with a round tummy.”

Lucca shifted in his seat and glared out the window.

“It’s Monty,” he said.

“Monty?” Lucca could hear the smirk in his voice. “Really? Monty did something to upset you? I’m surprised.”

“We had an argument. That’s all.”

“Let me guess; he finally grew a pair and put you in your place?”

Lucca flinched and glanced at Devon. Devon’s eyes were on the road, but he knew Devon was
watching him out from his peripheral.

“Monty’s not like you,” Lucca finally said.

“Yes, he is. You probably thought Monty didn’t really believe in this. That he finds your lot in life unfortunate and wants to save you from it. It’s not true. Monty genuinely believes in this. All of this. His role, a woman’s role, and your role.”

“Monty’s not religious,” Lucca countered, which was the truth. Usually it was the religious nuts who believed wholeheartedly in how things were. Everyone else just went along with it because they had to.

“Has nothing to do with it. I’ve known Monty since we started our medical training. He gets frustrated with you too, you know. How you refuse to fully accept your role. That’s why he’s trying to come up with techniques to help people settle into their roles. Because he wants you to embrace what you are.”

Lucca didn’t respond. He didn’t want that to be true. And, yet, he couldn’t help but know it was. His last encounter with Monty proved it. Having it confirmed was painful, but not surprising. Not completely anyway.

“Want to know a secret? Monty told me something that will probably make you cry if you hear it.”

Lucca glared at Devon openly now. Devon, for his credit, ignored Lucca’s glare and smiled as he continued down the road. Whatever “secret” Devon had, Lucca knew he didn’t want to know. But at this point, he didn’t think his opinion on Monty would change. Maybe Monty admitted to actually being more religious than Lucca had thought.

“What?” he finally asked, hating the way the smirk slid off Devon’s face and was replaced with a sympathetic frown.

“He told me he was glad I was going to lobotomize your mother. He said he blames her for how you are. And that if you don’t adjust after he wins your bid, he’ll have you get an elective lobotomy.”

Lucca’s blood ran cold and he swore his heart stopped. There was no way Monty said that. The first two parts, maybe. But that last part? No. There was no way Monty planned to lobotomize him too. He couldn’t believe that.

“You’re lying,” Lucca said, hating Devon even more now. “You’re lying. Monty would never do that to me. He loves me.”

“He does,” Devon conceded. “The idiot really does. That’s why he’s considering doing it. Because he knows it’ll be easier on you that way.”

“Monty’s not like you. He—”

“You think I would give you a lobotomy? Just because? Please, Lucca. You’ll submit to me; simple as that. Hate it, I’m sure. But you’ll do it. Monty and I are very different, you’re right. I don’t believe in this roles nonsense. It’s bullshit. I know it. You know it. Probably more than half this country knows it.

“But it’s the way things are and we’re not going to change that any time soon. And, honestly, I ended up with the winning ticket on that front. I get to marry a beautiful girl whom I can fuck anytime I want because I don’t have to worry about getting her pregnant. I can pursue my career
goals without anyone holding me back. And once you turn eighteen, I’ll win your bid and get to fuck you and watch you to have my children. I accept the way things are because I win in the end.

“Monty doesn’t just accept things because it is what it is. Or even because he benefits from it. He accepts it because he thinks it’s right. It’s natural. That this is the way we should be living. The only thing he probably disagrees on is how we treat surrogates. I’d guess he believes you should have the same status as women and treated as such. That’s probably how he justifies his love for you.”

Lucca didn’t say anything when Devon finished. There was nothing to say to all of that. It was true. Deep down, Lucca knew it to be the truth. Especially because it was the very reason he and his mother were even found out. Because as kids, Monty adored Lucca. And admitted he loved Lucca. And then cried because boys weren’t supposed to like boys the way he did Lucca.

And Lucca, being too young to know what any of it meant, told him the truth his mother had told him to keep secret. Because it was Monty and surely Monty was safe to tell. And so he told Monty that he was partly a girl. Because he wanted Monty to feel okay and to stop crying. And Monty even made Lucca pull down his pants to show him.

And two days later, a government official showed up at his house with two soldiers behind him.

“You only get to bid on me if you stop my mother’s lobotomy,” Lucca said lazily, suddenly feeling exhausted and ready to go home.

“True,” Devon said, and it was unspoken how unlikely that was. “But I’ll get to fuck you later today.”

Lucca blinked, watching as Devon pulled into a parking lot. Lucca looked around, recognizing the local Reprogramming Center. This was where his mother was being held. Devon looked at him and gave him a predatory smile. Lucca ignored it, suddenly feeling energetic again.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is really short, so I'm going to do a double upload tonight!
Chapter 7

Lucca looked past the glass room at his mother. She was sitting in a chair, her arms wrapped around herself. She was staring at the door, obviously waiting for someone to enter. She probably thought it would be Devon. Lucca glanced over his shoulder where Devon was talking to a caretaker at the center.

“She’s seen him numerous times throughout the years and nothing sways her,” the caretaker was saying, glancing at Lucca.

“She hasn’t seen him in a while. And he’s about to turn eighteen. He’s embracing his role; maybe the reality of that will help her. I want to give this one last shot before we give up completely.”

The caretaker sighed and looked at Lucca again. Lucca knew the caretaker wasn’t stupid and knew that this was for his benefit than it was his mother. It was probably that, and not Devon’s argument, that convinced him to agree. Lucca’s heart melted when the caretaker nodded.

“She has to agree to accept the program. Otherwise, I’m putting my final stamp on this.”

Devon nodded and the caretaker handed him a set of keys before turning and leaving. Devon grinned at Lucca, walking over to him. Lucca gave a tight smile back, watching as Devon approached the door. Devon paused, his face turning serious.

“You want to save your mother?” he asked.

Lucca nodded. Of course he did. What sort of question was that?

“You have to convince her you’re happy. That you’re embracing your role entirely. That you want to be able to see her. Make her realize what this is doing to you. It’s the only shot we have at stopping this.”

Lucca hesitated, glancing at his mother through the glass window again.

“She’ll know I’m lying,” he said.

“Then convince her otherwise.”

Lucca wasn’t sure if he could do that. But as he watched his mother anxiously bit her lip, her knee shaking under the table she sat at, he decided to give it a shot. He wasn’t much of an actor, but if he could remember the alternative, maybe he’ll manage it. He nodded, and Devon, satisfied, unlocked the door. Lucca took a deep breath in, trying to school his face, and walked through the door when Devon opened it.

His mother glanced at him, then blinked when she realized who it was. Lucca heard the door shut behind him, and he glanced back, glad that Devon hadn’t insisted on coming in with him the way Monty monitored his past meetings with his mother. By the time he turned back around, his mother was on her feet, racing towards him.

“Lucca!” she cried, pulling him into a tight hug. “Oh my baby! Oh my god! I thought I’d never see you again!

Lucca hugged her back, reeling as he realized that his mother had gotten smaller. No, that wasn’t it. Lucca just grew. His mother had always been a towering figure over him. Even when they met
before, she usually stood at least a head over him. But now, Lucca was a couple of inches taller than her. A point emphasized when she finally pulled away, grasping Lucca’s face in her hands.

“Oh my god,” she said, looking him over. “I dreaded the day you would grow taller than me. How old are you now? Fifteen?”

Lucca swallowed the sob that threatened to burst from his chest. His mother knew exactly how old he was now. She just didn’t want to be the first to acknowledge it. Because doing so would acknowledge what was coming up. And that was why Lucca responded exactly the way he did.

“I’ll be eighteen in six months, Mama.”

His mother sighed, shaking her head. He could have just said “seventeen.” That would have been the kind thing to do. She glanced at the glass window, even though she couldn’t see the other side, and she walked back to the table to sit down.

“Monty didn’t want to come in this time?” she asked.

“I’m not here with Monty,” Lucca said, following her. “Your doctor asked me to come.”

“Did he? The young boy with the dark hair? I’m surprised he’s old enough to be a doctor. I assumed he was some apprentice.”

Lucca didn’t see the need to confirm her suspicions. Instead, he took in the sight of his mother. Her dark skin was just as deep as his memories, her dark eyes haunting. There were a few wrinkles under her eyes now, the only tell of her age.

Lucca realized, just then, that the RC had been considerate on holding off the lobotomy this long. His mother would likely have difficult pregnancies at this stage, and time was running out for her. In another ten years or so, she wouldn’t be able to have children at all. The nation would try to get as many children out of her as they could while they could. And they would somehow.

“Monty still plans to bid on you?” she asked, tearing Lucca from his thoughts.

Lucca nodded.

“That boy is trouble.”

Lucca sighed and shook his head.

“Mama, even if it’s not Monty, someone will bid on me and win. It’s the same result no matter what.”

His mother frowned, her eyes so overcome with grief that Lucca almost burst into tears just then. Fuck, this was harder than he thought it was going to be.

“It’s wrong,” she said, her voice low but full of rage. “It’s all wrong, baby.”

“I know,” Lucca said, matching her whisper. And also because if he tried speaking in earnest, he really would cry.

“I just wanted you to be happy. Not sent to the docks to be bided on like a fucking slave.”

“Mama, please,” Lucca said, glancing behind him. “I know. I know you wanted to protect me. But it’s okay. I’m getting along. Monty started looking for a house. His condo will be a bit too small once I start having children. And—”
“Stop it,” his mother snapped. “Is that why you’re here? To make me think you’re actually happy like this?”

“Mama, I’m a surrogate. This is as happy as I can be.”

“And you’re miserable, Lucca. You think I can’t see it? You look like you’re about to cry right now!”

“Because of you!” Lucca snapped back. He saw the hurt in his mother’s eyes and regretted it. But his mother was quiet; lost for words. He decided to take Devon’s advice and turn this on her. “Mama, I love you. I want to be able to see you and talk to you. But I can’t if you refuse this. Monty won’t let me see you after you get a lobotomy. He’ll think it’ll upset me. It could hurt whatever child I could be pregnant with. Mama, I’ll never see you again! Do you not want to see me? Is that it?”

His mother sat back in her seat, tears slowly spilling from her eyes. Lucca felt terrible. He went too far. He shouldn’t have said those things. Even if they were true. Even if a part of him thought his mother didn’t want to see him; was too hurt by the reminder of her mistake when she did. Or that she was so insistent on being a rebel that she’d choose that over him. He wanted her to choose him.

“Mama,” Lucca said, wiping away a few tears that had spilled, “I don’t want you to become some mindless broodmare.”

“I’d be a broodmare all the same, baby.”

“Mama, please,” the tears spilling freely now. “Please. Just give them what they want for me. Please, Mama. Please.”

And at that, Lucca saw the hesitation. The moment his mother realized that Lucca was serious. That he really just wanted her to stay in his life. That he missed her, loved her, and didn’t want to lose her. And then the next second, he saw her make a decision. He saw her instantly weigh her options and come to a conclusion. And when her jaw set, he knew he needed to prepare himself for the worst.

“I won’t consent to this, Lucca,” she said, her voice soft and apologetic. “I’m sorry, baby. I can’t.”

Lucca stood then, his mother jumping in surprise. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to do, so he just stood there, glaring at her. He heard the door open immediately, and felt arms tugging his shoulder.

“That’s enough, Lucca,” Devon said, firmly pulling him back. “You tried. Let’s go.”

Unsure what else he could do, Lucca let himself get pulled away. He couldn’t understand why she was like this. If she wanted him to be happy, then why was she doing something that made him so unhappy? Didn’t she understand how he thought about her every day? That he even prayed for her to just go along with whatever was wanted from her so he could see her again? That he cried about her and dreamed about her? Didn’t she fucking get how much it was killing him to think about losing her?

And in that moment, something clicked. The realization that, yet again, what he wanted didn’t matter. And just like he did with Monty, Lucca snapped. He abruptly pulled away from Devon, who didn’t expect it and lost his grip. He walked over to the table, slamming his hands down on it and leaning over.

“It was never about me,” he said, ignoring Devon’s calls to him. “This is about you right now. Just now, you choose your stupid conviction over me. Do you think anyone cares? They’re still going
to get what they want from you. I’m you’re fucking child and you don’t fucking care about what this is doing to me!”

“Lucca!” Devon said behind him, grabbing him around the waist and pulling him back. “Let’s go!”

“You’re killing me,” Lucca continued, fighting as best he could against Devon. “You’re fucking killing me and you don’t care! None of you fucking care! You didn’t hide me to protect me. You did it to protect yourself! I wasn’t even in the fucking system when they took me in. I didn’t have a birth certificate. Social security numbers! You hid me not because of what I was, but because you didn’t want them to know you even had a child! That’s why you didn’t let me go to school. You lied and said I was homeschooled so no one would suspect you were keeping me a secret!”

His mother violently flinched at that, and Lucca felt his heart break for what felt like the fiftieth time that day. Devon gave up on trying to get him out and instead ran to the door and hit a button. Lucca knew it wasn’t good, but he didn’t care. This was the last time he was going to see his mother and he wanted her to know exactly how he felt.

“Everything is about you!” he said, standing in the middle of the room, screaming at her. “You don’t care about me. You would do anything to see me if you did! I think about you so much that you haunt my dreams! I spend days worrying about you. But you don’t even think about me at all!”

“Lucca…” his mother started, shaking her head, tears pouring down her face.

“Don’t fucking lie to me! Don’t even try to stand there and pretend you care. You’ve always only been concerned about yourself! About you not getting found out. You not being forced to breed against your will. I’m literally waiting for someone to buy me so they can fucking impregnate me and all you’re worried about is yourself!”

His mother, still shaking her head, stood. Lucca took a step back, not wanting her near him.

“Monty was right,” Lucca said, not even talking to his mother anymore. “I can’t do this with you. I always thought that in the end, you’d choose me, but you can’t. You’re a selfish, selfish bitch.”

His mother took a step towards him, so visibly hurt. But Lucca didn’t care. Couldn’t care. It was her fault. All her fucking fault. There was shouting behind him and Lucca turned around just as a group of guards came into the room. Three seized his mother, immediately injecting a needle into her neck.

Before he could respond, two men were on him. Lucca panicked and tried to fight them, terrified. He wasn’t a patient here. Was he going to get in trouble? The men wrestled him to the ground, and Lucca couldn’t stop crying as he begged them to let him go.

“Shhh,” Devon said, kneeling in front of him. “I’m going to get you out of here, okay? But you have to calm down first.”

Lucca nodded, letting one guard restrain his arms. But when the other one grabbed his right arm, Lucca paused confused. Until he saw the syringe in Devon’s hand. With newfound panic, Lucca pushed helplessly against the guard behind him.

“Please, no!” he said, watching Devon line the shot up with a vein. “I’m sorry, Devon. Please, I’m sorry!”

“Shhhhh,” Devon repeated. “You’re going to be okay. This is just to help you relax.”

Devon administered the shot and Lucca glanced at his mother as a guard carried her sleeping body
out of the room. In his mind, Lucca thought that he never wanted to see her again. And he started crying all over again at the thought. Devon hushed him, and Lucca allowed himself to be wrapped in Devon’s arms as he cried on his shoulder.

The drug, whatever it was, started working, and Lucca’s thoughts became a muddy cloud as he drifted to sleep.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Again, please mind the warnings listed for this story: they really ring true for this chapter. Despite how rough it is, it does end on a bit of a bit of a high note. I promise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lucca had counted to a thousand twice as he stared at the grey ceiling above him. He’d woken up in a large bed in the middle of a small bedroom that looked like it was in the middle of being redecorated. Something Lucca only noticed because of the paint job; the walls were newly painted blue but the ceiling was dirty and still hasn’t been done. He wasn’t sure why, but it bothered him.

Lucca sighed, finally sitting up in the bed. He glanced at the window to the side, seeing trees and what looked like a neighboring house half an acre away. He wasn’t home, but Lucca couldn’t muster enough panic. He felt numb, his chest aching dully while his mind tried not to remember what happened before Devon knocked him out.

While he’d normally wonder if some crazy rapist has kidnapped him, rationale told Lucca that Devon had simply taken him away from the Reprogramming Center and brought him somewhere to sleep. Likely his house. Which would also explain why the room he was in wasn’t finished; most men Devon’s age were just getting their first homes and it would take a while for it to be fully and properly decorated.

Lucca heard the door unlocked, and watched mind-numbingly as Devon opened the door and walk in. Devon frowned at Lucca’s meek response and sat down on the bed by Lucca’s feet, handing him a glass of water. Lucca stared at the water, not registering why Devon was offering it.

“You need to drink something,” Devon said patiently when Lucca didn’t move. “That sedative I gave you dehydrates the crap out of you. Be a good boy now.”

Something about that last part tugged at Lucca’s chest. A small fire of rebellion? Irritation over the fact that he knew this scene was going to end with his obedience? Or maybe it was resignation. Whatever it was, Lucca took a shallow breath in and out before taking the glass. It wasn’t until he drank the entire cup that Devon nodded in satisfaction.

“How do you feel?”

Lucca looked at him incredulously, unable to censor himself. He felt like shit. What the fuck was Devon expecting?

“Poor thing,” Devon said, leaning forward and pushing a lock of hair from Lucca’s brow. “You look so tired. I almost feel bad for pushing you like this.”

Lucca blinked and realized what Devon meant. Of course. Their agreement. Devon had said it earlier; he was going to fuck Lucca. Lucca took a bigger breath in, trying to somehow prepare himself.
“I’m not a monster,” Devon said, seeming satisfied when Lucca didn’t argue. “I can hold this off for our next date. You look ex—”

“No,” Lucca cut him off, his voice cracking a bit. Lucca cleared his throat before trying again. “I’d rather just get it over with now.”

“Well, it was more for my benefit,” Devon said, standing. “You don’t look like you’ll be much fun.”

“It doesn’t matter when you do it; I have no intention of making this ‘fun’ for you.”

Devon tsked, but didn’t argue. Instead, he took off his shirt, letting it fall to the ground. Lucca distantly thought that under different circumstances, he might have found Devon attractive. Despite his thin frame, he had a noticeable six-pack and defined chest. Monty was a lot softer. Though thinking of Monty made Lucca’s chest feel tighter, so he immediately focused on what was happening.

“How much do you think you can participate?” Devon asked candidly as he undid his pants.

Lucca blinked and quickly took stock of his body. His limbs felt heavy and despite the glass of water, his mouth was still dry. He was supposed to participate; it was what his counselor had been going through with him lately. But Lucca didn’t think he could. Panic did start to creep up his stomach as he glanced at Devon standing just in his black boxer-briefs.

“Monty showed me how to—um, how to give head,” he said, looking away as he spoke. “I’m sorry. I’m supposed to be engaged, but—”

“Shhhh,” Devon said, crawling on the bed until he straddled Lucca’s legs. “I know, sweetheart. It’s fine. I don’t mind if you just lay there and take it. You’re okay.”

Lucca had no response to that. Devon leaned over him, forcing Lucca on his back. He felt weird lying there without anything to do. He let Devon give him chaste kisses on his lips as Devon worked the covers off Lucca and started fidgeting with his pants. Lucca took a second to center himself before reaching down and helping Devon work his pants off.

“Take your shirt off, baby,” Devon said as he sat up and tugged on Lucca’s underwear.

Lucca undid the buttons on his shirt, shrugging out of it as Devon grabbed hold of Lucca’s calves and spread his legs open. Lucca felt his face get hot as Devon took in the sight of him. He felt exposed and there was a slight chill that actually made him wish Devon would get back on top of him. Devon released one of Lucca’s legs and brought a finger to the slit underneath his soft dick.

“It’s quite the sight,” Devon mused, pushing a finger into the entrance and pushing roughly. Lucca bit his lip; it didn’t hurt but it was odd having someone put their fingers inside him like this. “It’s beautiful actually. And warm. What does Monty do to get you wet?”

Lucca breathed as Devon lazily finger fucked him, roughly inserting a second finger. He could already feel his cock twitch as Devon lightly stroked a spot inside him that always got him hard when Monty touched him. But those touches were fleeting. His body typically did its job and provide proper lubrication when he got fingered. So he didn’t understand Devon’s question.

“Monty doesn’t try to get you off?” Devon asked, falling forward so he was resting on one arm as he changed the angle of his fingers. Now his thrusts were deeper, and Lucca felt himself getting wetter in response.
“No,” he said as Devon’s fingering got a bit rougher. He tried to will his body to relax and accept it. That’s what his counselor told him to do. Though it was a lot harder than he thought it would be. “It’s—uhh—it’s not about my pleasure. Monty’s is what’s important.”

He felt silly saying it, but it was the truth. Monty never paid too much attention to Lucca. He was lucky if Monty let Lucca jerk off after their little trysts.

“That’s a surprise. I expected Monty to be the type to try to make this pleasant for you. I’m sure he’s told you sweet stories of how gentle he’ll be your first time. That he’ll make you feel good? No?”

Lucca realized just then that he really didn’t want to talk about what Monty told him he would do his first time because Monty wasn’t the one who would have it. So he bit his lip and laid his head back. Devon smirked a bit and pressed against that spot inside Lucca expertly. Shocked, Lucca jumped a bit and called out. Devon didn’t let Lucca recover before fucking him against that spot.

“I’m shocked. You’re just like a girl in this way, y’know. My Anya moans prettily like that when I finger her like this. But make no mistake, Lucca; I have no intention on making this easy for you.”

Lucca bit his lip so he would stop moaning. That didn’t make sense. He reached down between his legs, hoping to stop Devon’s hand so he could get a break. He just wanted this to be over so he could go home. If Devon had no intention of making this easy for him, then why was he pressing against a spot that felt so good?

As if reading his thoughts, Devon removed his fingers. Lucca gasped, grateful for the momentary relief. Devon watched him, licking his fingers. The animal look was back in his face, and Lucca found himself looking anywhere but at Devon in a pitiful attempt to hide from it. He heard Devon chuckle at that before grabbing the backs of his legs again.

“Hey,” he said, tugging on Lucca’s chin until Lucca was looking at him. “Don’t run from me. I want your eyes on me. Do you understand?”

Lucca frowned but nodded. Devon reached into the night stand by the bed and pulled out a condom. Devon slid out of his underwear and stroked his dick a few times. Lucca realized distantly that Devon was hard. From what? Just from fingering him? Devon was really getting off on this? Lucca also noticed that Devon was bigger than Monty too. More in girth than length, but noticeably so. He was also cut, his cock red and angry and—

Devon snapped his fingers and Lucca’s gaze went back to Devon’s face. Satisfied, Devon leaned forward, his dick pressing against Lucca’s opening.

“Don’t close your eyes,” Devon instructed as he pushed inside. “Look at me the entire time. Be a good boy, Lucca.”

Before Lucca could nod, Devon thrusted his hips forward. Lucca hadn’t been expecting it, which meant he was as relaxed as he would have been had Devon gone slowly. But that didn’t stop it from hurting. At the end of the day, Lucca wasn’t used to this and Devon had been rough enough that Lucca was sure something had torn. But when he tried to look down to check, Devon grabbed his chin roughly and pulled his attention back to Devon’s face.

“What did I tell you?” Devon said, thrusting his hips more until he was fully seated.

“I think something tore,” Lucca mumbled, panic finally setting in as the reality of what was happening hit him full throttle. Lucca tried to push Devon’s hips away, but that was a failed effort.
“Please. It hurts. I think I’m bleeding.”

“You’re fine,” Devon snapped, shaking Lucca’s head until Lucca looked back at him. “Every single surrogate bleeds their first time.”

Lucca was sure that wasn’t necessarily true, but he was too distracted by Devon’s sudden onslaught of rough thrusts to argue. He winced, struggling to keep his eyes on Devon as he was told. It was even harder when he realized that Devon wasn’t just getting off on Lucca’s pain; he was judging how roughly he was going to fuck him by Lucca’s expression. The second Lucca seemed to adjust to a certain pace or angle, Devon quickly changed something so Lucca was wincing and crying out in pain again.

And it hurt. The entire time. Lucca remembered his counselor saying it often didn’t hurt the entire time. That he would adjust and accommodate and it wouldn’t be that bad. But Devon was trying to hurt him. He said he wasn’t going to make it easy, but Lucca didn’t think that meant Devon would go out of his way to hurt him. Why?

Lucca’s questions were quickly interrupted by jabbing pain as Devon changed his angle again. Lucca gasped and asked him to slow down, but he knew it was in vain. Devon didn’t care. Devon wanted him to hurt. And Lucca was too tired to fight or pretend that it wasn’t that painful just to piss Devon off. Besides, Devon would just try harder to hurt him. And Lucca just wanted this horrible experience to be over. So if Devon got off on Lucca’s pain, Lucca would show him just how much pain he was in. And Devon ate it up.

But it wasn’t until Lucca started crying when Devon really lost it. Devon fell forward on his hands, fucking Lucca hard. Lucca begged him to stop, though didn’t try to push him off anymore. Devon watched Lucca intently, kissing Lucca to silence his pleas and even licking the tears off his cheek. Then, though not soon enough, Devon’s hips stilled and he closed his eyes as he came. There was a slight panic as Lucca worried about getting pregnant, but then remembered that Devon put a condom on.

Devon huffed over him, eyes closed as he caught his breath. Lucca glanced down between his legs, sure he’d see blood. But it wasn’t until Devon pulled out, needing to do so before he got too soft, that Lucca saw traces of it on Devon’s condom. He took a few shaky breaths, hoping he wouldn’t have to go to the infirmary when he got home. There was no way he could explain what happened without getting in trouble. He wasn’t at risk of a pregnancy, so as long as the blood subsided, he was fine. It would be his little secret.

Lucca was suddenly brought back to reality when Devon leaned down and kissed him. This time, it was a bit more insistent than the chaste ones from earlier. Lucca relaxed and accepted it, not in the mood to fight anymore.

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Lucca sat in the kitchen of the house, watching a young maid make gumbo in a pot. She was resolutely ignoring Lucca, and Lucca didn’t mind. She looked vaguely like his mother, in stature than in skin tone or even hair length. But his mother used to make gumbo a lot when he was a kid. Lucca’s chest ached as he thought of his mother, and he let himself feel the pain before decidedly moving his thoughts away from her.

Devon stood by the kitchen door, on his phone. Lucca still wasn’t sure why they hadn’t left yet. But he had been in a daze since Devon finally rolled off him, and he couldn’t be bothered to dwell
too much on what was happening. Devon promised to take him home, and Lucca was waiting patiently to be home.

“Shit,” Devon said suddenly as the sound of a car caught his attention from the outside.

Lucca watched the young maid look up in disapproval. Her gaze turned to Lucca and his grin at her initial response faded. This woman’s judging eyes were so different from his mother’s, and yet all he could do was compare them to her. And he was instantly angry at the maid for reminding him of his mother.

“And you sound guilty,” the woman who walked through the door said. Her eyes fell on Lucca immediately and she quirked an eyebrow. “Oh. Because you are. You brought home a stray?”

Lucca was immediately overwhelmed by how beautiful this woman was. Her skin was a rich mahogany, vibrant and smooth. Her eyes were almond shaped yet large, her brows in a graceful arch that made her look like she was scowling. Despite that, her full lips and hips spoke of a fertility she obviously didn’t have, but still added to the sex appeal she seemed to exuded. In another life, Lucca would have fallen in love with her immediately. Her hands reached up to her long locs and took them out of the intricate bun she had them in.

“He’s not a stray,” Devon said, though he laughed nervously as he said this. “We don’t have strays, honey. He’s a surrogate.”

The woman took a sharp intake of breath and she glared at Devon. Devon did look guilty then, and Lucca wondered if the woman was insulted. Surely Devon was smart enough to have the conversation about getting a surrogate with her. If not, it was a huge insult to a woman to have her husband bring one home suddenly.

“I hope you didn’t bid on him,” she said, her eyes on Lucca.

“Not yet, Anya, but—”

“You can’t anyway.”

“He looks sweet. But his coloring is off.”

Devon looked confused but Lucca saw the issue immediately. Not that he really cared if the woman didn’t like him; it made it easier for Monty to win his bid.

“What’s wrong with his coloring?” Devon asked.

Anya rolled her eyes and looked at Lucca when she spoke.

“He’s a doctor and doesn’t know simple genetics. These white boys, eh?”

Lucca smiled as she turned to Devon to explain.

“He’s too light. He has a child with you, the child will look as white as you. Our children would be his complexion. No one would believe I gave birth to a child lighter than him.”

“Anya—”
“I am done talking to you,” Anya said making an abortive motion with her hand.

As if by force, Devon’s mouth shut closed. He glared at Anya quietly, but didn’t speak. Lucca blinked. That was weird. No, not weird. Improper. A woman should never silence her husband like that. But it was odd that Devon let her.

Anya ignored Devon’s glares and sat down next to Lucca. Her face searched his, and Lucca wondered distantly if she could tell that Devon had fucked him. And if so, would she care? She took a deep breath in before speaking.

“Did he hurt you?”

Lucca blinked and immediately shook his head.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“He didn’t,” Lucca tried again. “I’m fine.”

“Did he hurt you?”

This time, she waved her hand when she asked it. The movement reminded Lucca distantly of the same motion she made when she interrupted Devon earlier. Though before Lucca could make sense of any of it and school his face as he repeated his answer, he heard himself tell Anya the truth.

“Yes.”

Lucca immediately put his hands over his mouth. No, that wasn’t right. That wasn’t what he meant to say. He glanced at Devon, who watched on silently and with a guarded look. Lucca turned back to Anya and shook his head.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said. “He really didn’t—I mean, it did hurt, but it’s not—”

“Hush, child. I’m not mad at you. He raped you. Is that it?”

Lucca had his response ready: surrogates cannot be raped. But that wasn’t what he said.

“Yes.”

“And it hurt when he raped you?”

“Yes.”

Lucca put his hands back over his mouth. Something was wrong. He wasn’t in control of what he was saying. He looked at the woman, searching. The sympathetic look on her face told him that, somehow, she was doing this. He wasn’t sure how, but she was. And he felt like he was going to cry.

“Please, stop,” he pleaded. “I can’t—”

“You’re not in trouble,” she said, reaching out and grabbing his hand. “What’s your name?”

“Lucca,” he answered immediately, resigning that he had no way to stop what was happening.

“Lucca, why did my fiancé bring you here?”
“I don’t know,” Lucca said honestly, glancing at Devon. “I guess to have sex with me.”

“To rape you?”

Lucca closed his eyes as he nodded. Why did she have to keep saying that word? Women are raped. Surrogates aren’t. It was dangerous for Lucca to think that he, on any level, didn’t deserve what happened to him.

“Why did he bring you here to do that?”

Lucca shrugged. “I don’t understand what you’re asking me.”

“I can’t imagine it being easy to get a surrogate alone outside of those centers they keep you at. So why did he go through all of that so he could hurt you?”

“We made a deal. He followed through on his part, so I had to do mine.”

“What was the deal?”

Lucca wanted so badly to stop answering her questions. But the responses spilled out of him before he could even think to stop. And it didn’t help that Anya was rubbing circles with her thumb on the back of his hand. It was comforting. Like he really could trust her.

“My mother is supposed to get a lobotomy and I wanted to see her before she did. Devon said he could make that happen if I had sex with him. And he did. So…”

Anya frowned, turning to Devon.

“You’re sick,” she snapped at him. “What we do is one thing. You don’t pull someone else into it.”

Devon surprised them both by responding in another language. Anya frowned before glancing at Lucca and responding in kind. Lucca tried to pinpoint the language. He didn’t recognize it at first, but it did have an air of familiarity. It wasn’t until he was sure he heard Monty’s name a few times that he realized what it was: it was French creole. Not really a language, but close to it in the Nation.

And it was illegal. The only reason Lucca had heard it was because of Josiah. When he first got to the center, he got a lot of attention because he was “rescued” from Faust City. Even though it was illegal to bring surrogates or women living in Faust City to the Nation, it wasn’t rare for it to happen.

Vic had told Lucca once that, apparently, the founding family of Faust City were originally from New Orleans, and used creole to communicate in a way most people from the Nation wouldn’t understand. While it wasn’t the official language of the city, most citizens at least could understand it. And Lucca had heard Josiah slip into it at times when he thought no one was listening. The only crack in his normally perfect persona.

“You shouldn’t be getting involved in shit like that,” Anya snapped in English. “You owe him.”

Devon hesitated before glancing at Lucca. He then gave Anya a coy look before speaking.

“Lucca, do you want to stay here?”

“No,” Lucca said immediately. Though the way Anya tensed, Lucca was sure he misinterpreted the question.
“I mean,” Devon said with a smirk, “do you want to stay here? In the Nation? Or do you want to leave?”

Leave where? Anywhere he’d go, he’d be extradited and brought back once he was caught. And he probably would be caught. He couldn’t even read. How was he going to evade the Nation’s influence?

Unless…

“To Faust City,” Devon finished when Lucca didn’t respond.

Lucca looked at him incredulously. It wasn’t until he looked at Anya, who was watching him seriously and carefully, that he realized that Devon was serious. He looked between them both, confused and sure he was falling for a trap.

“The Nation is my home,” he said dutifully.

“This isn’t a trick, Lucca,” Anya responded, grabbing his hand again. “I have connections in the city. If you wanted me to, I could get you out of this country and you could have refuge there.”

“Leave?” Lucca asked, sure this was some sick joke. “Like, what? Right now?”

“Not now. We don’t have anything ready. But we can easily set it up for you,” Devon replied.

“I don’t trust you,” Lucca admitted.

“That’s fair. But it is true. I would easily do it to make up for what I just did to you.”

Lucca shook his head. These two were insane.

“What would I even do there? I can’t read or write. I don’t know how to do anything.”

“There’s always something for someone,” Anya chimed in. “It wouldn’t be easy. But I know lots of people who would help you. They could teach you to read and write, and help you get decent work.”

Lucca realized then that she was serious. Devon was serious. They were both serious. They were trying to convince him to leave. Leave the only home he’s ever known. Leave and do what? What else could he do but be a whore in a city of sin? At least here, he could have Monty. Monty did love him. No matter what that might mean, he still had that.

And at least he knew what to expect with Monty. Faust City was an outlier that he knew nothing about. And Lucca had no desire to rush to find out. So after a moment of thought, he shook his head. Fatigue started to settle in again.

“No, thank you,” he said, staring at the table. “I just want to go home. Please.”

Anya abruptly got up, and Lucca jumped, afraid he had angered her. She walked over to a drawer, pulling out a small business card. She ran her fingers over it before bringing it over to Lucca. He looked at it, noting the pretty pink designs and what looked like a cake logo. He looked up at her confused.

“That’s my business card,” she said, sitting back down next to him. “I own a small bakery in town. But I changed the number; it’s not the store’s number. It’s my personal number. If and when you need help—and I mean anything at all Lucca—you call me. You can read those numbers, right?”
Lucca glanced at the card and nodded. He at least knew how to count. She took the card and put it in his jacket pocket.

“Don’t lose it. No matter what.”

Lucca nodded again and she finally gave a curt nod before turning to Devon.

“Take him straight home. No dilly-dawdling. And don’t you dare fucking touch him again. You hear me?”

“I had no intention of doing so,” Devon said with an eye roll.

“Don’t take that tone with me. I’m not done with you yet.”

Devon smirked. “Yes, ma’am.” He turned to Lucca, his face serious. “Let’s go, Lucca.”

Lucca stood and Anya wouldn’t let him leave without a goodbye hug and another promise to call her when he needed help. Once they got in the car and left, Lucca played with the card in his pocket. He thought of dropping it in the car and leaving it at that; he knew he’d never call Anya. Not to mention if the wrong person saw it, he could get in trouble.

But he just couldn’t bring himself to take his hold off it.

Chapter End Notes

Phew! Admittedly, I haven’t been editing the past uploads since I’ve read through them so many times over the years. I did reread through this one though, so hopefully I caught the rest of the little typos.

Surprisingly, I’m an adult who has to do things like go to conventions for work and get home so late that I didn’t have time to upload. So to make up for no upload yesterday, I’m doing a double upload tonight.

I will be uploading every day this weekend, as well, but after Sunday I will be doing uploads on a weekly basis. I’m close to finishing this story (kinda), and I will upload more frequently once I know the story is done and I have a chapter count. Until then, weekly uploads mean I won’t have to worry about running out of chapters to meet my deadlines.

Is that cheating?

I wanted to add a note about Faust City: this entire story actually started out in this city. Tbh, Faust City is the story I really want to write, but I found myself struggling, especially since so many characters are on the run from the Nation in it. So I had to write some stories to express just what a fucked up country the Nation is to explain why someone would voluntarily live in a city as wretched as Faust City. Lucca’s story is only one story I wanted to tell; I have at least two more that I will be posting soon as well.

That said, I also introduced a little magic in this chapter. It’s really more of a factor in the Faust City stories I have planned, as magic would be considered sacrilegious and grounds for a good ole fashioned witch burning in the Nation. Considering how I don’t
dive too much into this concept in the Nation series, it's more excusable that I'm introducing it here if you all know something else is on the horizon. Right?

Ha. Yeah, I'm a cheater.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

This is another rough chapter. You've been warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lucca was startled awake when the car turned off. He blinked and sat up, wondering when he fell asleep. He glanced out the window, expecting to see the tall building of the main office for the Center, but instead saw nothing but trees. His heart started to race as he took in the slowly setting sun and the small log cabin situated in the clearing Devon had pulled into.

“I just want to go home,” Lucca said as he looked at Devon.

Devon took a deep breath in and out. He glanced at Lucca before shrugging.

“I know. I know you’re tired. Let’s just get this over with.”

“But you already fucked me!” Lucca said, not pausing in his outburst when Devon flinched. “You said I could go home! What more do I have to do?”

Devon abruptly opened his door and got out of the car. Lucca jumped when it slammed shut, frozen as he watched Devon walk around to his side and open the door. A rush of chilly air hit Lucca hard. Lucca felt a chill go down his spine and shivered. Aside from that, he refused to move.

“Lucca, come on,” Devon said, leaning on the door in exasperation. “You’re not the only one who is tired and just wants this day over with.”

“Then just tell me why we’re here,” Lucca demanded, setting his jaw.

“You’ll see exactly why when you come inside.”

“I’m not going in there if I don’t know what’s going on.”

Devon just looked at Lucca, exhaustion heavy on his face. Lucca would feel bad if he wasn’t sure that Devon had set up something horrible for him in the cabin. Likely a gang rape; Lucca had heard about guys courting surrogates long enough to get them alone and inviting their friends for a taste. Lucca knew of at least three surrogates it happened to. Only one actually reported it as a rape. He disappeared for five months to a Reprogramming Center, and was bid off to one of his rapists a year later. The other two learned from that to keep their mouths shut. Which worked out for them both since neither one was bought by their rapists.

Then it hit Lucca how futile it all was. If there were a group of guys in the cabin, Devon could easily just get them to help get Lucca out of the car. And if he was resistant, then what? They’d probably beat him, and be extra rough with him just to prove a point. And afterwards, he’d have to keep silent so he could still have a shot with Monty. There would be no justice.

Lucca let out a long breath before sliding out of the car. Devon watched him carefully, closing the door behind him. Lucca glanced at the cabin, wondered how far he could get if he tried to run into the woods, decided against it, and then headed towards the wood door. Devon followed, passing
him so he could unlock the door. Lucca tried to will his heart to stop pounding and soothe his twisting stomach. For good measure, Devon grabbed Lucca’s wrist and pulled him inside.

Lucca blinked as he looked around. It was a small cabin; one floor with most of the opening dedicated to a quaint living room. The fire was going there, though the ceilings were littered with bright lights that seemed out of place. In the back was a door that Lucca suspected led to a kitchen since there was a dining table set up in front of it. And sitting at the table was Monty.

“You took a bit longer than I expected,” Monty said, his eyes on Lucca as he spoke.

It was Devon who responded, though.

“My fiancée came home early and stopped us for a second.”

Monty gave Lucca a sweet smile before turning his gaze to Devon. Monty didn’t say anything, but Devon shifted on his feet before adding, “She believes I’m taking him straight to the Center. So I can’t stay long, Montgomery.”

Monty nodded, once, before standing. Lucca realized, only then, how odd this was. Why was Monty here? It sounded like he was waiting for them. If so, why? How did he know they would stop here? Lucca also noticed then that Monty was wearing a light argyle sweater to go with the cabin look. Lucca looked around the cabin again.

“I never got the chance to bring you here before,” Monty said, smiling as he followed Lucca’s gaze. “My mother hates redecorating, so I’m sure it looks the same as it does in all the Christmas cards.”

Lucca wanted to be sick. He didn’t know what was going on, but he knew Monty enough to know that he was pissed. And that there was a reason he was brought to a cabin in the middle of the woods while the center believed Lucca was on a date with Devon. And at that moment, when Lucca realized he wasn’t going to escape that beating he feared with good behavior, he wished he fought more about leaving the car. He wish he had to be dragged bodily from it. That would have been slightly better than willingly walking into this.

“Fifteen minutes,” Monty said suddenly. Lucca realized belated that he was talking to Devon who was slowly inching towards the door. “Maybe ten if Lucca behaves.”

Devon gave a stiff nod before turning to the door. Lucca watched him go, and met Devon’s eyes as he hesitated briefly at the door. But whatever this was, Devon wanted no part in it. He shut the door behind him, and Lucca wondered if he would stand guard at the door or just wait in the car.

“You look so tired,” Monty said, walking over to Lucca. To his credit, Lucca didn’t move away at all. Though it was likely fear of how Monty would react that kept him still. “Did you have a long day?”

“I don’t want to play games, Monty,” Lucca said, too tired to even try to censor himself. “Please. I just want to go home. I don’t know what you know.”

“Why would it matter what I know?” Monty snapped, his eyes hardening and the smile fading off his lips. “You should be honest and upfront with me.”

Lucca shook his head.

“You’re going to be mad.”
“I’m already angry. If you can tell that, why would you try to withhold something from me?”

Lucca realized that Monty had a point there. But the fact was Lucca didn’t understand why this was happening. Did Devon tell Monty about their deal? When? Why? Did he tell Monty the whole truth, or did he spin it so Lucca looked like a whore using his body to get what he wanted?

*That is what happened though,* a traitorous voice said in Lucca’s head.

Lucca ignored it and took a deep breath in. Was there a way out of this?

“I’m sorry,” he started, letting the exhaustion and fear slip into his voice. “I really just wanted to see her.”

Monty took an audible breath in and out. But he didn’t speak.

“You were right,” Lucca continued, for what it was worth. “I shouldn’t have seen her. She upset me, and you were right to keep me from her. I’m sorry I didn’t listen to you. I’m sorry I disobeyed you.”

Monty shook his head, his earlier smile playing at the corners of his lips again.

“You are such an adorable idiot,” he said, his voice low and calm. “Disobeying me? You think that’s what I’m mad about? Lucca, I technically don’t own you, do I?”

Lucca’s heart skip. For years, Monty treated Lucca as though he had already won his bid. Lucca didn’t like that he was acknowledging that Monty didn’t have any right to command him.

“That’s probably what you told yourself when you made that deal with Devon, right? You have no loyalty to me; hell, I’m sure they teach you at the Center to keep your options open so that way you will likely get a bid soon after you become legal.”

Lucca shook his head. That wasn’t necessarily untrue: the Center made more money when there were bid wars on surrogates. If only one person places a bid on a surrogate, then they only get money from that first bid. But in a war, men would spend loads of money on a surrogate. Especially for the bragging rights. But Lucca didn’t want Devon to bid on him. That wasn’t what this was about.

“Monty, I just wanted to see her,” Lucca said, deciding to not even address Monty’s accusation. “He offered to let me see her. That’s all.”

“Really? You risked him winning your bid just to see your mommy?”

Lucca winced at that. So Monty knew the details of his deal with Devon. Okay. Lucca looked down at the ground, biting his lip so he looked apologetic. When he spoke, he chose his words carefully: if he didn’t play this right, he could lose Monty forever.

“I just really wanted to see her,” he said, faking a few sobs for affect. “You wouldn’t give me any updates on her or anything! I just missed her. I—Monty, I really didn’t think he could make it happen. And even then, I didn’t think he could stop it. I didn’t want him to have me.”

Monty shook his head, walking closer to Lucca until they were inches apart. Lucca tensed, very aware that Monty was going to strike him any second now. Lucca hated being hit, and he wasn’t looking forward to this at all. If he could just show Monty that he was sorry, maybe Monty would hold back a bit.
“If you didn’t want him to have you,” Monty said slowly, as if speaking to a child, “then you wouldn’t have made that deal with him.”

“I didn’t think that far, Monty. I swear! I just—”

“This is why I called you an idiot.”

Lucca came up short, taken aback. He had assumed that was an offhanded remark Monty said because he was mad. What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

“You don’t think about those things,” Monty continued when he saw that he’d stun Lucca into silence. “You don’t think about the repercussions of your actions. What if Devon did save your mother? What if he won your bid? What if he took you from me? What would you have done then?”

Lucca blinked at Monty, shaking his head.

“Exactly, Lucca! You have no idea! Because you don’t think. But it’s not your fault, honey. You try to fight what you are, but I had Devon do this so you could face this.”

“You had Devon do what?” Lucca snapped, now very confused. “You told him to let me see my mother?”

“I told him to make that deal with you.”

Everything went quiet. The fire was crackling, but Lucca couldn’t hear it. He saw Monty’s mouth continue to move, but he had no idea what was being said. He misunderstood, right? Monty didn’t just say he set this up. No. Monty wouldn’t do that to him. Monty loved him.

“I don’t understand,” Lucca said, keeping his voice light. He sounded dumb, he realized bitterly. But Monty apparently already thought he was. So why not play into it? “When Devon made the deal with me, you told him to do that?”

Monty blinked at Lucca.

“Yes. We talked about your mother after that day in the park. He told me then there was likely no way they could escape a lobotomy. That’s what doctors have been telling me for a while. That’s why I haven’t been taking you to see her. We got to talking about your relationship with her. About how she tainted you and made it hard for you to accept your role. After that, I came up with this idea—”

“Why?” Lucca snapped, vaguely aware that he had cut Monty off again. “What do you get out of this?”

“It’s not about me, sweetheart,” Monty said. “It’s about you. I wanted you to be faced with the reality of what you are.”

Lucca didn’t bother to keep the scowl off his face. Monty wasn’t making any sense. Sensing his confusion, Monty sighed and wrapped his arms around Lucca. Lucca didn’t fight; he was too tired. But his back was tense and he didn’t correct it.

“You struggle a lot to accept what you are. I know this. Your counselors see this. You pretend that you wouldn’t behave like a surrogate does in certain situations. But you did. You didn’t hesitate to trade sex for something you wanted. You didn’t think about the possible repercussions of your actions. You were reckless and promiscuous. You behaved exactly the way a surrogate would in
Lucca tried to take a step back, but Monty held him in place. Lucca didn’t want to hear this bullshit. He didn’t do what he did because he was a surrogate. He did it because he was desperate. Monty put him in that position. Anyone, no matter what they were, would have done the same thing.

“I know you don’t like to think of yourself like this,” Monty continued. “But it’s the reality. It’s not your fault, honey. It’s just what you are. That’s why there are rules to contain you. Because when left to your own devices, this is what you do. This is your nature.”

Lucca wrenched away from Monty at that, needing to put distance between them. He didn’t want to hear this. He knew it wasn’t true. But Monty genuinely believed it was. His conversation with Devon earlier came back, and Lucca felt sick.

“It’s not natural to trade sex for favors,” Monty continued, right on Lucca’s heels. “Lucca, if you were a woman, or even a real man, you wouldn’t have made a deal like that. You can’t blame circumstances or your situation; there are millions of people in your situation every day who don’t do that. You did it because what you are affects how you think. You don’t view sex the same way the rest of us do. It’s not important to you. That’s why you had no problems trading it.”

Lucca put his hands over his ears.

“I want to go home,” he said, feeling real tears threaten to spill.

“No, Lucca. Not until you admit that this is what you are.”

“Shut up!”

“Lucca!” Monty snapped, grabbing Lucca by the shoulders and turning him around “I can help you. But only if you just accept what you are. Surrogates are like this by nature. But you don’t have to be this way.”

Lucca dropped to the ground, wanting to get away from Monty somehow. He was sobbing now, disgusted and ashamed and confused and angry. He couldn’t make sense of all the emotions running through him. His mind was reeling and his stomach was roiling.

And at the very bottom of all this turmoil, there was a small bit of doubt. That maybe he’d been the one wrong this entire time. Maybe being a surrogate did make him like this. Maybe he was immoral by nature.

And that just made him cry harder. He didn’t want that to be true. His mother said it wasn’t. He believed her. But his mother had made him believe that he was the most important thing in her life. And he learned today that that wasn’t true. So she could be wrong about this too. Lucca looked up at Monty, watched him kneel in front of him, and tried to make one last desperate plea.

“I’m not a whore!” he said between sobs. “I’m sorry, Monty. I didn’t—I don’t want to be like this. Please, I’m not like this.”

Monty gave Lucca a look of deep pity and love. Lucca resented that Monty felt both towards him, but he was desperate for the love. So he clung to it and let Monty pull him into a deep hug.

“You don’t have to be like this, Lucca,” he said softly, running his fingers through Lucca’s curls. “But you can’t get past this until you admit what you are. You’re not immoral, Lucca, but by nature, you are a whore.”
Lucca flinched, but Monty held him steadfast. So Lucca just cried, his sobs racking through his entire body. He hated Monty for doing this to him. He hated himself for falling for such a stupid trap. He hated his mother for not making it worth the risk. And he hated the Nation for not finding out about him earlier. Maybe if he’d been taken from his mother earlier like he was supposed to be, this would be easier.

“I’m sorry,” Lucca tried again, when the tears subsided a bit. “I sorry that I’m a whore. I don’t want to be, Monty. I don’t want to be like this.”

“Good boy, Lucca,” Monty cooed, rubbing circles on Lucca’s back. “Say it again. Admit it again and we can start the healing.”

Lucca hesitated, hating himself again for admitting this.

“I’m a whore.”

Monty released his tight hold on Lucca and immediately leaned in for a kiss. Lucca closed his eyes, accepting it happily. He wanted to stay there forever in Monty’s arms, and forget this terrible day. Monty eventually pulled away and stood up. He kept his hands entwined with Lucca and pulled him up with him.

Lucca felt his head start to pound a little, and he realized suddenly how thirsty he was. Monty led him over to the sitting room and through a side door Lucca hadn’t noticed earlier. Through the door was a small room with a large bed in the center. There were animal skin rugs on the ground and a deer’s head mounted on the wall above the bed. The comforter had an elegant design that made Lucca think of royalty.

Lucca didn’t fight as Monty brought him to the bed and laid him down. He stared up at the ceiling—it was on a downward slope—as Monty walked away for a second. When he came back, he kissed Lucca again and kneeled by Lucca’s feet. He adjusted something in his hands, and when Lucca registered what it was, he sat up.

“Calm down,” Monty said, heading off the panic obviously rising through Lucca. “I said we can start healing. I have to start with punishing you for what you did.”

Lucca blinked at the folded belt in Monty’s hand. He took a deep breath in and out before nodding. Fine. Whatever. He should have known that he hadn’t staved off a beating. But at least now maybe Monty wouldn’t hurt him too badly.

“Afterwards, I’m going to fuck you, Lucca. Just my way of reclaiming you. Okay?”

Lucca nodded again. Like he had a right to say no in a situation like this. Monty reached forward and grabbed Lucca’s hand, intertwining their fingers.

“Devon used a condom, right?”

Lucca swallowed and nodded.

“I won’t.”

Lucca took deep breaths as he tried to calm himself. Monty watched him carefully. Lucca really did hate Monty in this moment. There wasn’t anything he could do. He couldn’t fight Monty. Not after admitting that he was a deviant. Not after fucking Devon earlier. Not as a surrogate. He couldn’t do anything but accept everything Monty wanted from him in this moment. And even though he knew he should at least force Monty to use protection, he knew he couldn’t.
“Okay,” Lucca finally said.

Monty smiled and kissed Lucca again before rising on his knees and lifting the belt. Lucca cried throughout the entire beating. Monty didn’t admonish him for it, and was even gentle when he fucked Lucca afterwards. That didn’t stop it from hurting, however; Lucca was still sore from how rough Devon was earlier, and the beating left him tense and unable to relax. But Monty was patient, praised Lucca for being so well behaved, and rewarded him with kisses that Lucca could get lost in.

When it was all said and done, Lucca felt oddly calm. Monty helped him dress, and walked him to the car. Monty talked the entire time, telling Lucca that he decided to marry Chelsea next month, in a small church wedding with just their families. Lucca managed to act expectantly happy for the news, and even manage to say aloud that he wish he could go. It would be improper, however, and Monty promised that he’d freeze Lucca a piece of cake for the night they get to bring him home.

Devon was in the car, waiting patiently. Devon had to be the one to return Lucca, so Lucca slid into the passenger seat of his car. Monty reminded Lucca that he was ovulating that week and should pay attention to if he got his period in the upcoming weeks. Lucca nodded, praying he wouldn’t have to go to the infirmary and explain why he needed a pregnancy test, and let Monty kiss him again before Devon finally pulled off. Lucca even waved at Monty as they pulled out of the clearing and back to the road.

“How do you feel?” Devon asked as they sped down the empty road.

“Fine,” Lucca said, and it didn’t feel like an entire lie.

Devon glanced at him before speaking again.

“Look, I’m sorr—”

“Don’t be,” Lucca said, keeping his eyes glued to the road in front of them. “You were right. Monty really does believe this. He wouldn’t let me leave until I admitted I was a whore.”

Devon bristled at that and gave Lucca a wary glance.

“You know that’s not true, right?”

“I fucked you so you would take me to see my mother. You tell me.”

“Lucca—”

“I actually feel better like this. Knowing where I stand with him. Whether I’m a whore or not by nature isn’t important. He believes I am. I won’t make a mistake like this with him again.”

Devon didn’t answer, and drove the rest of the way to the center without another word. Lucca quietly thanked him. He reached into his jacket pocket and touched Anya’s card. A wave of rebellion hit him, and Lucca leaned against the door and closed his eyes. He admonished himself for letting Monty get to him. But Lucca knew the truth, and he’d never let that go.

Chapter End Notes

I'm honestly still not sure exactly what "truth" Lucca is clinging to.
“I’m leaving.”

Lucca blinked, turning in his chair at his desk. He hadn’t heard Vic come in, but there he was, sitting on his bed with a solemn look on his face. His hair had gotten shaggier, and he’d lost a bit of weight too. Both things Lucca only noticed in that very moment. When was the last time he actually paid attention to Vic?

Then the words hit Lucca like ice.

“When?” Lucca finally managed, his own voice distant.

“Tuesday.”

That meant nothing to Lucca; he didn’t even know what day it was.

“Next week,” Vic added when Lucca didn’t respond. He hesitated before continuing. “I don’t know if you’ll be back by then, but—”

“Back from where?” Lucca asked. “Where am I going?”

Vic blinked. Twice. Three times.

“To Pennsylvania. To look at the house he bought.”

Lucca frowned. He glanced back at his desk. He’d been staring at it for a while, not registering what he was supposed to be looking out. Now he saw it; the pictures from Monty and Chelsea’s wedding. That’d been a few weeks ago, right? Or a month? How long would it take for them to get the pictures back to send some to Lucca?

“How long have you known?” Lucca asked, flinching immediately at the accusatory tone in his voice. He hadn’t meant for it to sound like that. He hadn’t even meant to ask it.

Vic also flinched, looking at the ground instead of at Lucca.

“A week.” A pause. “Or so.”

A riot swelled in Lucca’s chest, hot and angry. Why was he angry? At Vic for leaving? For not telling him sooner? Would it have mattered if he had? Lucca wasn’t sure how many days or weeks or even months had passed after his blow up with Monty.

Lucca swallowed a chuckle. Blow up. Right. That’s what he had to call it. What else could he call the entire fuckery that was those few minutes in the cabin? Lucca stood up, not sure what to do. That swell in his chest was throbbing, begging for release. Maybe he was angry at himself for shutting down like this.

“I didn’t mean that,” Lucca finally said, not turning around. He took a few deep breaths in before asking what he really wanted to know. “Why so soon? Why do you have to leave now?”

Vic didn’t respond, and the silence between them stretched too long. Lucca swallowed. This was
wrong. Vic shouldn’t be this quiet. They’d been roommate for years. For almost a full fucking
decade. Vic didn’t hesitate with Lucca. He never did.

“Carlos,” Vic said, his voice cautious, “put his bid in last week. And it’s not like there was anyone
to contend with. So…”

Lucca’s head whipped around, watching Vic bite his lip. No. That wasn’t it. There was something
Vic wasn’t saying. He didn’t behave like this; not when it was just the two of them. He wasn’t
quiet and shy and subdued. Vic was acting different. No; he was different.

He’s changed.

It hit Lucca like a punch. How was he just now seeing it? Where the fuck had he been all this time
to not see how Vic was changing? He was such a shitty friend. He’d known Vic way too long to let
this happen.

“Vic,” Lucca said, turning around completely. “Vic, what happened?”

Vic shrugged, picking at his nails with his teeth. He’s nervous, Lucca noticed. Scared. Anxious.
Another riot grew, though this one less angry. Lucca walked over to Vic’s bed, sitting down next to
him. As soon as he did, a tear slipped down Vic’s cheek. He bent over, taking deep breaths to still
the sobs that obviously wanted to rack through his body. Lucca watched, somehow already
knowing before Vic even said it.

“I was late,” he whined, his voice muffled by his hands. “I was late!”

Lucca felt the fog he’d been in creep back. He fought to not let it take him away from this moment;
to stay present. He couldn’t go numb. Not now. It wouldn’t be fair to Vic. It took Vic a week—or
so—to work up his nerve to finally tell Lucca this much. Lucca would not numb himself off in this
moment.

“I didn’t even know,” Vic cried. “I’m always late, Lucca. You know this! But they knew that too.
That my cycle isn’t exactly like everyone else’s. I didn’t know they knew that, Lucca. They let me
go a whole month before calling me in.”

Vic started to cry in earnest, his shoulders shaking. Lucca rubbed small circles in the center of his
back, quiet. Vic didn’t need to explain further. If a surrogate was late—because of course the center
kept track of their cycles—then the surrogate had to take a pregnancy test.

And deal with the shit to follow if it came back positive.

Lucca had been regular since Monty’s blow up. He didn’t even know Vic had to worry.

“It’s not fair,” Vic moaned, wiping his face after he calmed down a bit. “My counselor told him it
was better for him to move me in soon so no one questions the timeline.”

Lucca’s heart skipped. “You’re pregnant.”

Vic started again, blubbering now. Lucca returned to rubbing his back. This felt like a dream.
Lucca was sure after what happened with Monty, he would end up pregnant before his birthday.
That he’d be the one quickly being moved out the center and into Monty’s home to avoid a
possible scandal. The riot raged in Lucca again, wishing he could do something.

“When?” Lucca asked.
Lucca didn’t explain what he meant, but Vic knew exactly what he was asking. He shrugged his answer before answering between sobs.

“I don’t know. It was sometime after you started acting funny.” Vic sat up, looking up at Lucca and meeting his eyes.

Lucca was sure he hadn’t looked at Vic in a while, but if he had, maybe he would have seen the moment the pain in them matched the pain and hate Lucca had been quelling inside him. Maybe Vic would have seen as soon as it happened that Lucca knew that pain as well. Maybe it wouldn’t have taken this long—whichever long it was—for them to realize they had this in common now.

“Is that why?” Vic asked, rather unnecessarily. “Did Monty hurt you too? Is that why you stopped talking to me?”

Lucca nodded, swallowing a sob of his own.

“Why?” Vic asked. Another unnecessary question. “I was always so good around Carlos. I never did anything to make him even scold me. I was so good. Why? It’s not fair, Lucca. I—” A sob cut him off, triggering another bout of tears.

Lucca pulled Vic into a hug, letting him cry on his shoulder. Nothing Lucca said could make this right. So he didn’t speak. Hot blooded anger roiled and raged through him. He wanted to rebel, somehow; make Carlos and Monty and any man who’d ever hurt a surrogate pay for this. He wanted to kill. He wanted to destroy.

But in the end, all he could do was hold Vic while he cried, waiting for this spell of sadness to pass. There was nothing Vic or Lucca or anyone of them could do. And when that realization hit, Lucca couldn’t suppress the tears he’d been so determined not to cry during his period of brain fog. This, Lucca realized, was really what it meant to be a surrogate. It meant being helpless.

Victor was right: it wasn’t fair.

Chapter End Notes

I almost forgot to do this upload even though I was home all day. Smh.

While I was trying to do a final proofread of the chapters I will soon be uploading, I noticed that considering how I wrote these chapters, I should upload the next two together. Only because chapter 12 finally ends on a bit of a happier note, and I didn't want things to be too depressing while we wait a week for the uploads.

So tomorrow (Sunday) will have two chapters posted. I'll likely do one earlier in the morning and another one in the afternoon. Or maybe I'll stop being dumb and post them both at once; nothing is stopping me.

Also, if anyone is curious, I'm currently on chapter 28. I didn't mean for this to be this long, tbqh, but things sort of got a bit hectic. I did a few things to buy time, then realized there really wasn't a need for it, but I liked how it turned out? This is nothing that would ever get published, and I know AO3 readers will read HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS of words of a good story (as I've done so myself >>), so I'm hoping no one minds how long this is gonna end up getting. I'm hoping to cap this at 40 chapters,
but we'll see. ;_;
Chapter 11

“There we go. Perfect.”

Lucca kept his eyes on the bed he was sitting on, his face hot with embarrassment. Chelsea finally sat back from her spot next to him, finished with the headband she was trying to secure in his hair. She wrapped it so that the ties sat on top of his head; like bunny ears, she claimed. She smiled, looking proud of herself.

“You look adorable,” she said. “I knew you would. Hold on, where’s my camera?”

Lucca tensed as he watched Chelsea hop off the bed to grab her bag sitting on top of the empty dresser. As more and more time went by, Lucca was finding Chelsea to be unbearable. He turned his attention to the room, surprised by how big it was. Granted, all the rooms in the house were huge; the entire house was huge. It was more of a mansion, three stories tall with twelve rooms—not including the three servant bedrooms on the ground floor, five bathrooms, a sitting room and a living room, with a huge kitchen, dinning room, and an entertainment room.

On the four-hour ride to the house, Monty explained that his research had gotten him a bit of attention to qualify for a house like this. Especially after getting married and looking to start a family with a surrogate. All Chelsea was concerned about was having her own room, and the work that would go into decorating. It would be a huge project, she happily mused, and Monty was giving her free reign.

They were spending the weekend at the house, Lucca realized, despite it not being “finished” by Chelsea’s standards. For example, all that was in Lucca’s room was the large, queen sized bed underneath the large window he was told didn’t open “for obvious reasons,” and the long vintage wood dresser by the door. There was a walk-in closet cattycorner to it, and still more space than Lucca would ever need in the room.

“I can’t wait to see the children you and Monty make,” Chelsea mused as she dug through her bag. “I hope their hair isn’t as curly as yours, but if it’s as thick and dark, they’ll be perfect. Oh, and Monty’s lovely eyes. And your cheeks! Honestly, one of the major reasons I agreed to this was because of how good looking you two are: no point in doing all this if I get a bunch of ugly children out of it.”

Lucca took deep breaths to school a neutral expression on his face. This was what was expected from him. There was no point getting angry at her. Even if he did think everything she just said was disgusting. But could he blame her? That was all anyone ever thought surrogates for good for; producing good looking and healthy children.

“There we go,” Chelsea said, pulling out a polaroid camera and turning back around. “Give me a smile, Lucca.”

Lucca flinched, immediately turning his gaze back to the bed. He was really over entertaining Chelsea.

“Oh, come now,” she scoffed, taking the camera out from her case. “I need to get a few good shots of you in the room so I can plan how we’ll decorate it.”

“Isn’t it fine how it is?” Lucca muttered, refusing to look up. No one came into a surrogate’s room aside from when the man of the house needed to put a baby in him. Who cared how it looked?
“There will be plenty of times we may entertain couples that will bring their surrogates and children. Your room will be where we’ll put them, and we want the surrogates going home thinking you live the plush life of royalty. You’re not some common house slave, Lucca. We’ve come a long way from those days.”

Lucca didn’t respond, sure she only made that reference because of his own mixed race. And even if she didn’t, how could she say that without any sense of irony? He wasn’t a slave even though he was literally counting down the days until he turned eighteen because that’s when Monty could legally put in his bid? Ridiculous.

The rage that swelled in Lucca’s chest lately rumbled, begging for release. He wasn’t sure how long he could hold himself back. Something in him was demanding his rebellion; and Lucca knew rationally he’d be an idiot to give in. Still, he couldn’t help but imagine, just for a few seconds, how wonderful it would be to cuss Chelsea out right then and there.

The door opened, and Lucca was relieved to see Monty walk in. He had a tense smile he was sure Chelsea didn’t clock, and was holding his tablet at his hip. He looked at the two of them in the room before settling his gaze on Lucca.

“How do you like it? Much bigger than the room you have to share at the center, right?”

Lucca nodded, deciding it was safest to just agree with the second sentence instead of actually answering the first. Chelsea, however, immediately rounded on Monty to call out the lie.

“I don’t think he likes it,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s tense in here and won’t even let me take his picture.”

Monty paused, looking at Lucca, before a sheepish grin spilled on his lips.

“Hon, he might be a bit embarrassed with that headband you put on him.”

“Why? He looks adorable with it on!”

“I don’t disagree, but he’s not a little kid, Chels. And you know he’s already shy.”

Chelsea gave Lucca a wary look before turning back to Monty.

“I always assumed he was faking it. Surrogates are known to play coy to get what they want.”

Another riot surged through Lucca before he forced it back down to the pit of his stomach. Chelsea was really testing him.

“Yes,” Monty agreed, “but I’ve known Lucca for a very long time. Even as a child he was this way.”

“Hmmmm. I still need a few pictures so I can plan what to do with his room.”

Monty nodded, walking over to Lucca. Lucca watched him like a hawk, unsure where this was going. Monty gave Lucca sympathetic smile before placing hand on the small of Lucca’s back and pushing.

“Sit up a bit, Lucca,” he ordered. “And lift your head up. Just like that.”

Lucca let Monty guide his body into a more attentive position. He kept his eyes on Monty even as he stepped back and nodded his approval at the pose.
“There,” he said. “Don’t make him smile. This is more natural, don’t you think?”

Chelsea didn’t look completely convinced but did nod her head in agreement. She snapped a few pictures with the polaroid, taking the prints and shaking them as she looked around the room.

“I was thinking maybe a summer theme,” Chelsea said. “Yellow and brown for the walls, with sunflowers by the bed, next to the window. Or is that too childish? I want it to be something the children will be comfortable in since he’ll have them while they’re nursing.”

“I thought you were going to do that for the first child’s room? Or will all the rooms have a similar theme?”

Chelsea paused, looking out the window while she thought. Her lips pursed together and she shook her head.

“I need paper,” she said, grabbing her bag. “I need to brainstorm this. I’ll be by the pool when lunch is ready. Please don’t disturb me until then.”

Monty chuckled and agreed as she left, muttering to herself about color meanings. Monty shut the door behind her, and when he turned to Lucca, the room suddenly got a lot smaller. Lucca realized just then that he hadn’t been alone like this with Monty since his blow up. Lucca tried to keep his face calm as Monty walked over and sat next to him on the bed.

“She’s very energetic,” he said, his voice almost apologetic. “I figured giving her this project would keep her out of trying to dictate our child making endeavors. That should help you relax a bit as you adjust once you move in.”

Lucca nodded, looking at the brown carpet on the floor. He hoped Chelsea would change that. She probably would no matter what the theme. Monty placed a hand on the small of Lucca’s back again, and Lucca straightened his spine again.

“We need to talk, Lucca,” Monty said, his voice low.

Lucca’s heart started racing, even as he nodded. “Okay.”

“I was reading a report from your check up this quarter,” Monty said, showing Lucca the report on his tablet. Lucca wondered if Monty did this just so Lucca would have to remind Monty that he couldn’t understand it. Did Monty like lording this over Lucca? “Do you want to tell me something I might be upset about before I point it out?”

Lucca glanced up at Monty then back at the report. He barely paid attention to his check ups at this point. It was typically the same physical tests and bloodwork, making sure everything was in working order. He did remember his physician saying something about adjusting his vitamins again, because he was lower in iron than usual. Oh, and something about another psychiatric appointment to possibly adjust his medication because he’d—

Oh.

“I lost weight,” Lucca said, glancing at Monty. He didn’t look too mad. But, granted, Monty never did. “But it was only five pounds, Monty. And—”

“Seven.”

“What?”
Monty took a deep breath in and out. “It was seven pounds you lost. And it doesn’t matter what it was; weight loss is still weight loss, Lucca. And that’s one.”

“One what?” Lucca asked, feeling like he couldn’t keep up. So Monty was mad at him?

“I’m starting a new rule. Every time you lie, or say something inappropriate or uncouth, I’ll starting counting. When I get to three, you’re not allowed to speak again until I tell you. Understand?”

Lucca blinked, his body going cold. Where was this coming from? When did he ever speak out of turn? And what did he say to have Monty already start counting?

“I asked you a question, Lucca,” Monty said, interrupting his thoughts. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Lucca said; not that there was anything he could do to contest it. “But, what did I say to earn the one?”

“You tried to lie about how much weight you lost so it wouldn’t seem that bad.”

“I didn’t mean to lie, Monty.” Why did he even have to argue about this? “I just didn’t remember the exact number. I knew it was around five, but I didn’t—” Lucca cut himself off, looking at the bored stare Monty was giving him. He didn’t care. Lucca sighed. “I wasn’t trying to lie, Monty. I really wasn’t.”

Monty let the excuse hang between them, the silence suffocating. Lucca scowled at the brown carpet, hating it because that was easier than turning that hate towards Monty. God, he couldn’t do that. He wouldn’t survive this if he came to hate Monty.

“You’ve always struggled to maintain your weight,” Monty said, scrolling through the report on his tablet. “And you’re already on the low end of what is an acceptable weight for your height and weight.”

“Because it’s so high,” Lucca whined, hating that he was whining but doing it anyway. What did it matter when Monty was already treating him like a child? “Nothing I do brings my weight up to where they want it!”

“I’m sure skipping meals doesn’t help. You’ve been practically absent every breakfast and most lunches over the last month. You’ve apparently always had a bad habit of skipping meals on Friday, which they let slide because you were always at your target when you weighed in. You’ve even skipped a few classes. Your counselor thinks you’re depressed.”

Lucca stood up, surprising Monty with the sudden movement. He looked at Monty, fear freezing his chest while rage burned and churned his stomach. He felt sick. But showing that would only make Monty believe his counselor is right. And he couldn’t let Monty think that.

“I’m not depressed,” Lucca said, trying to put a small smile on his face. It couldn’t be too wide; Monty would catch the lie immediately. “It’s not that, Monty.”

“It’s something, Lucca, because it’s been going on for almost two months now.”

Lucca blinked. “What?”

“You’re behavior. Skipping classes, you’re distant in your counseling sessions; you’ve even been standoffish towards me lately. If it’s not depression, what could it possibly be?”
For a brief moment, the rage took over Lucca’s body. His fingers jerked, desperate to form fists and pound them at Monty. His face felt so hot that he worried about passing out. His leg muscles twitched, wanting so badly to run towards Monty. And in that moment, Lucca imagined it. He imagined hurling his body at Monty, surprising him as he punched and scratched and hurt Monty. It wouldn’t be enough—nothing would be enough for Lucca—but he wanted to hurt him enough for Monty to understand the pain Monty put Lucca through.

After the moment passed, Lucca decided on another plan. He sat back down, his body turned towards Monty. Monty was silent. Apprehensive. But quiet. And that was all Lucca needed. For now, at least.

“It was hard,” Lucca started, choosing his words carefully. “I know that you had to do it, Monty. That thing with Devon—and afterwards in the cabin. I know why you did it and you taught me a very important lesson; I understand that Monty. I really, really do. But it was still hard. All of it. It was just—well, it was a lot. The whole day was just very difficult. That’s all.”

“You spent two months acting up all because of a ‘very difficult’ day?” Monty asked, incredulously.

Tears pressed against Lucca’s eyes, and he made sure Monty could see him blinking them away. No, it wasn’t just a very difficult fucking day. It was the worst day of his life; even worse than the day he was taken from his mother almost ten years ago. He was in pain from his mother’s betrayal, from Devon, and then facing Monty’s betrayal. He was in pain because there was no reporting what happened, no way to express to anyone who’d sympathize just how deep his mother hurt him. And there was no way to express just how little he trusted anyone now.

Monty revealed just how shitty of an ally he could be. And Lucca had to face just how fucking alone he was.

“I can’t tell anyone,” Lucca continued, tears in his voice. God, he hated this. “I can’t tell my counselor about it or I’ll get in trouble. And you—” Lucca cut himself off. If he came off accusatory, Monty would start counting again. “It wouldn’t be fair to cry to you about my mother because you tried to keep me from her and I didn’t listen. But it still hurt, Monty! And all I can do is feel it while I can’t do anything about it. And—”

Lucca shut his eyes, willing the tears to stop. Monty wouldn’t care about them. He wouldn’t go easier on Lucca because of them. Just like that night; he didn’t go easier on Lucca just because he was upset and hurt and crying. Fuck; this was all a waste of time.

“I’m not depressed,” Lucca finished when he couldn’t think of anything else to say. “I’m not.”

Lucca felt Monty touch the side of his face, wiping away a tear that Lucca hadn’t realized had fallen. He opened his eyes, more spilling. To his credit, Monty did look conflicted. He was really buying this; granted, Lucca was really selling it.

“Why are you so determined to deny it’s depression?” Monty asked. “If we name it, we can fix it.”

“Because then you’ll send me to be reprogramed,” Lucca answered honestly, his voice quiet and hoarse. “I don’t need that, Monty. It’s not that bad.”

“Then what do you need, Lucca? If you had a choice, right now, tell me what you honestly think would help you.”

Lucca blinked. That was a good question. Ideally, Lucca needed freedom. A way to escape all of
this. He needed to be in charge of what he ate and where he went. Who he would interact with. Who he’d let touch him. He needed power to be in control of his own life. To not be just another surrogate whose entire mission in life was to provide the Nation children. But that was too much to ask for. And he’d lose Monty immediately if he tried that. So he bit his lip, and thought about what he needed that he could probably get away with.

“I don’t want to be abandoned anymore,” he answered, half surprised by his answer.

“Lucca, no one is abandoning you.”

“You are,” Lucca snapped, deciding to risk the accusation. “If you send me away, it’s because you don’t think I’m good enough. You’re leaving me.”

“Lucca—”

“Mama left me. And Vic is leaving me.”

“Lucca, Victor has to go be with his new family. We all knew one day he’d have to.”

“And now you want to leave,” Lucca continued as if Monty hadn’t interrupted. “I really am trying, Monty. I felt like I wasn’t good enough, Monty. I wasn’t good enough for Mama to choose me, and now I’m not good enough for you. And I know I can do this, Monty. I know I can…”

Lucca let his voice trail off, unsure what else he could say. He hated that there was a level truth to his words. What was so wrong with him that his own mother wouldn’t even choose him? And now Monty was acting like two months of depression was worth sending him to a reprogramming camp? He knew that’s where Monty wanted to go with this whole conversation. Monty worked for them: he believed in the camps’ success.

But Lucca knew that place would crush him. Even more than Monty’s betrayal did. Even more than his mother’s betrayal.

Monty was quiet for a while, and so Lucca just stared at the space between them on the bed. A few more tears fell, and he wiped them away. God, this whole thing was a mess. He couldn’t even keep up with what was honest and what was lies to play on Monty’s sympathies. And, at this point, Lucca wondered if it was even necessary to keep track of it all. He heard Monty take a deep breath in and out, and tensed as he awaited the verdict.

“Okay,” Monty said, sounding a bit defeated. Lucca still didn’t relax. “Let’s shelve the reprogramming thing. For now,” he emphasized when Lucca finally released the breath he didn’t know he was holding in. “Let’s just focus on some goals. I don’t want you skipping any of your meals this month. I’ll email your counselor and suggest monitoring your caloric intake for the next month. Get you in the habit of eating more. And I better not hear about you skipping a single meeting with your counselor, nor any of your classes. Even if you’re sick; report to the infirmary and get a signed note if you’re that bad. Okay?”

Lucca nodded, still not looking up. Not until he was sure it was safe.

“Your physician and counselor already wanted to do another check in in a month instead of waiting three more months. We need to see gains, Lucca. We want you back in your target. So, yes, that means Resource with your meals. Understood?”

Lucca scrunched his nose up, but nodded. He hated the chalky, glorified protein drinks they forced surrogates whose weights were too low to drink. When Lucca hit a few growth spurts and didn’t
gain enough weight to hit his targets, he was forced to drink them. But if drinking those were what stood between him and a reprogramming center, Lucca would drink as many as Monty wanted.

“Okay. So we’ll try that, reassess in a month, and take it from there. We feel better now? Done crying?”

Lucca forced himself not to roll his eyes, and nodded. “Yes.”

“See? Was it really worth getting all upset over?”

The riot Lucca spent all day fighting sputtered a bit. If Lucca hadn’t gotten upset and behaved the way sensitive surrogates were supposed to, Monty wouldn’t have heard him. Monty would have forced his way through; he wouldn’t have heard Lucca at all. And that riot hated that. Hated that Lucca had to show how helpless he was just for Monty to consider how he might feel.

And even then, Monty didn’t know the whole story. He didn’t know the hate Lucca had to spend so much time keeping in check. He didn’t know that Lucca had to convince himself not to hate Monty. He really couldn’t handle any of this if he came to hate Monty. And Monty couldn’t know the secret fury that burned inside Lucca; he’d be finished if Monty ever found out.

And needing to convey that—just how little bad feelings were between them—Lucca bit his lip and looked up coyly at Monty before answering.

“No. But I’m still upset.”

“Why?”

“Because you made me cry.” A pout.

Monty chuckled, reaching forward and pulling Lucca’s lip free from his teeth’s grasp. Lucca started to pull away, and wasn’t at all surprised when Monty gently guided his chin back towards him and leaned in for a kiss. Lucca wanted to shove Monty away, but he knew he couldn’t. He’d ask for this. He wanted to show Monty that he could move past that night at the cabin. He needed Monty to know how good Lucca could be.

And so when Monty’s kiss intensified, Lucca relaxed into it. And when Monty readjusted them so that Lucca was lying back against the pillows, Lucca helped Monty take their clothes off. And when Monty finally had them both prepared, Lucca spread his legs nice and wide to let Monty know what a good boy he could be.
Lucca didn’t see a car around, but that didn’t mean that they beat Carlos to the center. Lucca was supposed to go home Monday morning, but Monty decided last minute that he didn’t want Lucca out of his bed until Tuesday. Monty knew Vic was leaving on Tuesday; knew Lucca wanted to see Vic before he left. And he did this anyway.

Lucca sat in the front seat of the car, waiting patiently for Monty to get out and walk around to let him out. If Lucca tried to get out on his own, Monty would admonish him. And after all the work Lucca put in to showing Monty he could be the ideal surrogate, he didn’t want to do something to give Monty the wrong idea.

“I already called your counselor, so you have a pass for your lessons today,” Monty said as he helped Lucca out of the car. “But make sure you’re signing in at lunch and dinner today. And go to all of your classes tomorrow.”

“Yes, Monty,” Lucca said obediently, watching Monty walk to the trunk of the car to pull out his bag.

Lucca reached for it, but Monty immediately shouldered it and headed towards the tall building. Lucca quickly followed, anxiety tearing at his stomach. Monty was taking his sweet time, and Lucca had to wonder if he was doing all of this on purpose.

“Welcome back, Lucca,” one of the women at the front desk greeted them. “You got a bit of a tan over the holiday weekend?”

Lucca blinked, not even sure how to answer that. “A little,” he finally answered before he was bordering on being rude. “Maybe.”

“He’s so sweet,” the woman said to Monty, as if Lucca was a dog that just did an adorable trick. “He’s always so calm after you drop him off.”

“Is he normally not calm?” Monty asked, flashing the woman his set of pearly whites.

Lucca tensed, watching the woman intently. Monty, despite his best intentions, was always in his doctor mode whenever anyone talked about Lucca. He was always assessing, analyzing, and diagnosing. He prayed the woman didn’t say anything stupid.

“Maybe calm was the wrong word,” the woman said, looking contemplative. “More relaxed. They usually are; I think being in this center just makes them so tense. It’s always good when they can go outside and get a peek of what they have to look forward to.”

“Hmmmm,” Monty replied, signing Lucca back in. “I’m going to drop him off at his room.”

“Of course. Stay safe!”

Lucca followed Monty in silence as they headed over to the elevators. His anxiety was pulsing, fearful of what would await him at his room. He might not be able to hold back his hatred for Monty if he ended up missing Vic. But he could only wait as they made their way up the few floors to Lucca’s floor.
“I agree with her,” Monty began as they got off the elevator. “These centers are a tad archaic. I could understand the need after the war when laws were new, and it was difficult to get everyone on board. But surrogates would be much happier if they could have a bit more freedom. And these classes are rather unnecessary. Being lectured to like children. It’s not easy to learn how to accept your roles in this environment. What do you think, Lucca?”

Lucca shrugged. He didn’t rightfully care. He just wanted to see if Vic was still around. He wanted to see Vic.

Monty suddenly stopped in the hallway, and Lucca had to abruptly take a step back to not run into him. Monty frowned down at him, taking his copy of Lucca’s keycard out of his pocket.

“I know you must have some ideas, Lucca. My team is looking for new ways in surrogate rearing to minimize the cases of depression and anxiety we see. Don’t you want to help your fellow surrogates?”

Lucca huffed, just a bit, glancing just past Monty to the door to his room. He just wanted to open it and see if Vic was there. Why was Monty doing all of this?

“I…” he started, his voice trailing off. He wasn’t sure what to say. “I don’t like the centers.”

“How not?”

Now? He was doing this now?

“I don’t know. They’re, um, kinda stuffy?”

“They can just open a window, Lucca.”

Okay. “Not stuffy. Um, I don’t know, Monty. They’re orderly.”

“Orderly?” Monty repeated, narrowing his eyes and tilting his head at Lucca.

Lucca shrugged. Monty seemed to consider that before nodding.

“Clinical,” he concluded. And even Lucca had to admit that sounded more on the mark. “Stuffy and orderly; you mean they’re very clinical. Like being in a hospital of sorts.”

That was actually exactly what Lucca was trying to say. So he nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Interesting,” Monty mused as he turned around, closing the gap to Lucca’s room. He used the keycard to unlock the door, and went in first.

Lucca followed him in, his heart dropping at the emptiness of it. Vic’s things were gone; the boxes he’d been packing over the last few days missing. His desk was clear; not even a goodbye note on top. Not that Lucca would be able to read it anyway, but Vic must have thought Lucca would find someone to read it to him. Or maybe he had to rush in the end, and didn’t have time to write a note.

Monty placed Lucca’s bag on his bed, but Lucca walked over to Vic’s stripped bed and sat down. He was too late. He’d missed Vic. Vic was gone and Lucca hadn’t even gotten a chance to say goodbye. Why did it have to be like this? It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair.

Lucca looked up at Monty, who was casually and calmly unpacking Lucca’s bag. Lucca hesitated, only for a second, before letting the hate inside him grow. Just a little. Enough for him to blame
Monty. He just had to keep Lucca longer than necessary. There was no reason he couldn’t bring Lucca back on Monday. It wasn’t even like they did it that many times to warrant it. Only twice in the morning and once again after lunch. There was plenty of time after that for Monty to bring Lucca back.

Lucca heard the lock outside his door beep, and he stood up, wondering who was coming in. Not many people had a key to his door, aside from administration. And if it was someone that high up, he didn’t want to get in trouble for getting too emotional over his roommate’s departure. So Lucca schooled his face into something neutral, just in time to watch Vic walk in with a basket filled to the brim with snacks and fruit and yarn.

“Oh,” he said, looking between Lucca and Monty a few times before putting the basket on his desk. “Hey. I assumed you wouldn’t be back until—”

Vic didn’t get a chance to finish before Lucca rushed and hugged him. He held on tight, sure he was likely choking Vic and not caring. He thought he’d never see him again, and here he was. Lucca closed his eyes, determined not to cry. He’d made it. He didn’t miss him; he’d fucking made it.

“Lucca, I’m leaving now.”

Lucca tensed, forcing himself away from Vic. Vic tried—though failed—to keep a smile off his face. He turned to the basket on his desk, going through it as Lucca followed Monty outside to the hallway. It was empty still, though Lucca could hear a couple of boys walking up past his floor to their rooms, their laughs echoing through the stairway and into the hallway.

“Are you done pouting now?” Monty asked, the smile on his lips patronizing.

“I wasn’t pouting,” Lucca lied.

“No, I guess you did a very good job of holding back until you got in your room.”

Lucca didn’t have a response to that, so he just looked at the floor.

“I’ll miss Carlos,” Monty continued, conversationally. “The integration program for the Puerto Rican surrogates hidden on that island was a huge success thanks to him.”

Lucca blinked before looking up at Monty. “You know him?”

“Hmm? Yes. The conflicts in Central and South America has him in high demand, however. Once the new migrants were settled, he had to be whisked off to the borders in Texas. It might take him a couple more days before he’s ready to move Victor down there to join him.”

Lucca nodded, suddenly understanding. Monty knew this entire time that Vic wasn’t leaving. Not yet. Lucca tried not to feel annoyance at Monty keeping that information to himself all this time. If he’d known, he could have told Lucca so he didn’t feel so anxious.

But then again, Lucca didn’t know why he expected anything from Monty. This was all a game; a test of some kind.

“Thank you,” Lucca said anyway, because he knew that’s what Monty was looking for.

“You really did do a good job, Lucca,” Monty continued. “Not a single crack until we were in the room. And even then you still kept it together while I was there. I’m proud of you.”
Lucca still didn’t have a response. Or, rather, all the responses he thought of would just get him punished. So he stayed quiet until Monty spared him, leaning forward for a brief, chaste kiss.

“I’ll see you this weekend,” he said. “My parents can’t wait to see you.”

Lucca nodded, smiling at Monty and watching him head to the elevator. He waved goodbye once Monty got in, and didn’t move until the doors shut. He turned around, using his keycard to get into his room. Vic was still at his desk, looking at a packet of what looked like nuts.

“I thought I missed you,” Lucca said, hugging him again.

“I didn’t expect you until after dinner.” Vic said, laughing as he tried to pry Lucca’s arm from around his neck. “One of Carlos’ assistances came to get my things to send there, but he said my flight got delayed until tomorrow night. I was so relieved; I really thought I was gonna miss you when you didn’t come home last night.”

“Monty’s an asshole,” Lucca gave him, looking at the basket. “Where did all this come from?”

“Derek. You just missed it; he organized a bit of a going away party. He said initially he would just give me the basket with letters from the guys when I left, but when I told him I wasn’t leaving until tomorrow, well, you know how he is.”

Lucca nodded. Derek was sentimental and dramatic; a going away party to send Vic—or anyone really—off was his style to a T.

“I won’t be able to take all these snacks on the plane,” Victor said, looking at the basket and turning to Lucca with a mischievous look on his face. “Wanna skip lunch and just gorge on these? There’s a lot of cakes and other junk food we really shouldn’t be eating in here.”

Lucca thought about his conversation with Monty over the weekend, and how he’d promised to not skip anymore meals and be the model surrogate. Then he remembered Monty’s stunt just now, and let the riot he’d been quelling all weekend surge. He smiled, sitting on Vic’s bed and reaching for a bag of candy that even Derek shouldn’t have been able to get his hands on.

“Fuck, yes.”

Chapter End Notes

And that ends the post dump! I will be setting Sunday as the official update day. I will also start posting the companion stories today, but those will have tentative updates since I haven't spent as much time on them as I have this story. Lucca is the only surrogate featured, so we'll get an outlook on how the Nation impacts other groups of people as well. Hope you all enjoy and have a wonderful week!
Lucca picked at his food, still full from lunch. He hated how much he had to eat these days, and the Resource drinks weren’t helping. His eyes gravitated to the cup of it he grabbed, the nutritionist smiling in approval after accessing Lucca’s choice for the night.

“Are you feeling sick?” Derek asked for the third time after seeing Lucca’s untouched plate.

Lucca shook his head, glancing at him. Ever since Vic left, Derek had practically been glued to Lucca’s hip. Which was difficult considering how they had very different, and often conflicting, schedules. It was normal for Lucca to only see Derek at meals and whenever he dragged them to prayers or devotionals. So constantly seeing Derek in between his lessons and during all his leisure time was grating.

“Did Monty put you on a new diet?” Josiah asked, his roommate, Leslie, pausing in his own meal at the word. It was a poor word choice considering Leslie himself had been placed in a strict diet after starving himself to near death last year.

Derek, seeing the reaction, pushed a dark loc behind his ear and frowned.

“There wouldn’t be anything wrong with that if it were the case,” he said, almost indignantly. “We all need help maintaining our health. It’d be a disaster if we had to manage that ourselves, wouldn’t it?”

Josiah blinked, once, at Derek before turning to Lucca. “I didn’t mean any offense by that,” he said, his voice and face appearing genuine. “I was honestly curious. I’m sorry. I just know you don’t like Resource and you don’t go for it unless you’re told to.”

Lucca just nodded, missing Vic. Derek hanging out with him brought Josiah, which also brought Leslie since he needed Josiah to speak for him. It was a party Lucca didn’t want, and yet was now subjected to daily. At least when Vic was around, it was easy for it to be just the two of them: Derek couldn’t stand Vic, and the feeling was mutual.

“You’ve been rather quiet,” Derek noted after Lucca finally started in on his meal. “You were always talkative around Victor.”

“Vic was his roommate,” Josiah responded, surprising Lucca. “Leslie speaks to me too when no one else is around.”

Lucca watched as Leslie paused in his meal again, this time turning an incredulous look at Josiah. As if he didn’t want his secret out that he wasn’t a mute. Not that it was an actual secret. Josiah caught the look and shrugged.

“You know what I mean. Our relationships with our roommates are different.”

Derek frowned. Since becoming a peer leader, and since his last roommate killed himself when they were thirteen, Derek got the luxury of not having to share a room.

“Roommates don’t exist to keep secrets,” he said, glancing at Leslie before continuing. “They’re there to inspire and encourage each other. There’s no reason Lucca, or anyone, cannot be
themselves around anyone.”

“Maybe Lucca doesn’t like us much. It’s not like he likes me.”

Lucca froze, wondering where this was coming from. Josiah wasn’t wrong. Still, he didn’t know why Josiah was insisting on arguing this point. Normally, he’d bend to anything Derek said, as if Derek’s word was law. But to contradict him? Vic would have loved to see that.

“Why wouldn’t he like you?” Derek asked, looking between them. “You two have known each other for so long. We’ve been in the same group for years.”

“I fake it too well.”

Lucca felt his entire body halt; even his heartbeat seemed to stop for a moment. Leslie also went rigid, his dark eyes widening as he looked at Josiah. Josiah, for his part, watched Derek intensely. Watched Derek process what Josiah said, and watching his frustration and annoyance with it.

“Fake it? Fake what?”

“All of it. Pretending to be such a happy little surrogate. Doing everything I’m told like I enjoy it. Believing this is all right; all God’s will. The only reason I never fought is because I’m too afraid of what would happen to me if I did. I would have offed myself like Reggie did if I didn’t want to do to Les what he did to you.”

Derek’s face went hard, and he stood up. He looked at Josiah like he was a piranha, or a dead corpse brought to life. Maybe it was the mention of Reggie, maybe it was the fact that this was completely out of pocket for Josiah, but something in Derek snapped.

“And what,” he said, his voice low so as not to attract more attention than his suddenly standing up did, “pray tell, did Reggie do to me?”

“He made you afraid,” Josiah said, calm as a cucumber.

“Afraid of what?”

“Of questioning them. Questioning this. Reggie asked a lot of questions, didn’t he? Because when he actually sat to think about it, none of it made sense. None of it was right. And it drove him crazy having to pretend. And him killing himself made you afraid to drive yourself crazy. It’s easier to just believe it. Be a good boy and go along with the program. It’s not like I blame you, Derek. You were the one to find his body; you were just trying to save yourself.”

“I could report you,” Derek said, his body shaking. “I should report this.”

“Four hundred thousand dollars,” Josiah answered, calmly.

“What?”

“That’s how much I’m worth. Didn’t quite break that record, but it sure was close. Four hundred thousand dollars. And I should be happy, right? I was so good that I had five men fighting over me. And what did it get me? The same fate no matter who won out. Report me, Derek. I’ll be out of this place by the end of the month anyway. There’s nothing more I can already lose.”

Derek took a few deep breaths before shaking his head and sitting back down. Lucca watched him warily, his mind reeling from everything he just saw. Just where the hell did that come from? Leslie pushed his food away, obviously too upset to continue. He’d get a note on his report for that.
Lucca grabbed his cup of Resource and began to gulp it down. When he’d finished it, he started in his food. It wasn’t until then that Derek quietly began finishing his own food.

“Why did you have to do that?” Leslie asked Josiah quietly, shocking Lucca. How many surprises was he going to get today? “You didn’t have to be so mean.”

Josiah shrugged, then sighed. “I wasn’t trying to be mean. I just—” Josiah cut himself off, looking at Lucca. He hesitated before saying, “I liked Vic. I didn’t like you either. But I liked Vic. I liked him because he was brave enough to fight. He was the only one out of any of us to really fight. Even when he came out of that Reprogramming center, he still had that fight. I always admired that about him.

“You were a coward. You never fought; you’d talk shit with Vic when you thought no one was listening. But you did everything you were supposed to do. You’re a coward; just like me. And you aren’t even a good enough actor to fake it. That’s why I always disliked you.”

Lucca swallowed, holding Josiah’s stare. Well, since they were being honest…

“You made it look so easy,” Lucca said. “I hated how easy you made it look. I told myself you had to believe it in order to buy into it so readily. And so I hated you for buying into this. But really it was because you were good at faking it.”

Josiah nodded, as if he already knew that. Maybe he did.

“It wasn’t. All my good behavior and my rapist still won my fucking bid.”

Derek bristled at that. “Surrogates can’t be raped.”

“He raped me,” Josiah continued as if Derek hadn’t spoken, “and I didn’t say a thing and pretended it didn’t happen because I wasn’t going to end up like Hayden. And he still put a bid on me, and he still won. What did all my acting get me? Absolutely fucking nothing.”

“You can’t misbehave because of that.” Derek sounded tired; like he didn’t even fully believe what he was saying. “You have a duty. A purpose.”

“He’ll get everything he wants from me,” Josiah snapped. “But if this is how it ends up, I’m at least through pretending.”

Derek huffed, shaking his head. He turned to his meal, silent for the rest of the dinner time. Leslie attracted the attention of a chaperone, who came over to ask why he wasn’t eating. At that, Lucca finished his meal, watching Leslie follow his lead until the chaperone was satisfied and walked away. Josiah stared at his own empty plate, hate burning in them.

Lucca thought of Vic, thought of Monty, and Devin, and his mother. He thought of the house in Pennsylvania, the six children he was expected to have, and of Chelsea’s demands. He thought of Josiah’s admission just now, and of that night at the cabin. He always thought Vic was the only one who truly understood Lucca’s hatred.

But in this moment, watching Derek and Josiah sulk while Leslie forced the rest of his meal down his throat, he realized that they all were the same. Fuck, every surrogate in the room—on the fucking planet—were all the same. Every last one hated this; no one, not even Derek, really bought this bullshit.

And for the first time since Vic left, Lucca didn’t feel alone anymore.
Chapter End Notes

It's kinda weird Vic being gone, but I'm glad Lucca isn't alone.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I changed the name of the story. I've made some decisions about where I want to go with this story, and I think Lucca's story is the only flashback I'm giving. I've lingered on this story long enough; it's time to move on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This isn’t fair.”

“No, Jo, it’s not. But can you, like, just let go of Les now?”

Lucca rolled his eyes as he watched Derek try to pry Josiah off Leslie. He’d been holding Leslie in a tight hug for almost an hour; ever since a chaperone informed them that Leslie’s new family would be due to pick him up soon. They’d spent the morning in their room, helping Leslie finish packing up his things, and making sure he didn’t use the break in his routine to skip eating. Leslie, for what it was worth, had been quiet and obedient, eating without complaint when offered food, and seemingly taking in the last-minute wisdom Derek wished to impart on him.

This current scene, however, seemed to startle Leslie; everyone knew he and Josiah were close, but no one predicted Josiah’s full-blown meltdown over Les leaving. In fact, Vic had predicted that Leslie would likely make a dramatic last-ditch attempt at suicide when the time came for him to leave. It was Josiah that Lucca expected to freak out when his family came from him, and as he watched Josiah cry and complain over and over that it wasn’t fair, he wondered if he’d be right about that.

“What if his family comes in and sees this?” Derek scolded, looking at Lucca. “Can you help? He’s hysterical!”

“I’m not hysterical!” Josiah snapped, his voice raising an octave that absolutely sounded like hysteria. “Everything about this is wrong. He’s not even in his target weight yet! How will he manage his weight if he’s not here?”

“That’s for his family to worry about. As long as he does what they say, he’ll be fine! And he’ll gain weight once he’s pregnant!”

Lucca watched Leslie’s spine straighten at that, and noticed Josiah’s arm tighten around Leslie’s shoulders just a bit. Understanding dawned on him; he and Vic had spent a lot of time after Leslie’s stunt wondering if he was starving himself so he wouldn’t be able to carry, or if he was really trying to kill himself that way. Turns out it was the former. Another bet Lucca had won.

“What am I supposed to do?” Josiah whined, burying his head in Leslie’s shoulder. “You can’t go. I need you, Les. Please don’t go.”

More tears. Leslie looked conflicted, and he awkwardly patted Josiah’s back while glancing warily at Derek for direction. Derek merely huffed, obviously not moved by the scene. Feeling that this was going on a bit too long, Lucca kicked himself off the windowsill he’d been leaning against, glancing out the window to the front gates to see if he saw anyone enter the campus. Seeing
nothing, he walked over to the food basket Derek prepared for Leslie, and pulled out a slightly spotted banana and half of a chicken salad sandwich.

He brought the food over to Leslie and Josiah, pushing on Josiah’s shoulder until he looked up at him.

“It’s been a while since Leslie ate,” Lucca told Josiah. “Let’s let him eat something before his family gets here.”

Leslie frowned at that, obviously not happy to be forced to eat again. But it did the trick: Josiah wiped his tears, pulling back from Leslie as Lucca handed him the food. Leslie gave him a tight smile in return, sitting down on the bed to eat. Derek scolded Josiah a bit, gentler this time, and gave him tissues to blow his nose.

They were quiet for a moment. They heard the door to the stairwell open, and tensed as they heard footsteps. Lucca didn’t see any cars pull up; he’d quietly taken the post by the window so he could warn them once Leslie’s family came. Most people used to front entrance that he could see at the window, but there were other entrances to the Center. They easily could have come that way.

“Group four will stay on this floor,” an administrative voice said as the footsteps made their way past their door. “This floor doesn’t have fire escapes in the rooms, but you can see the one down here by the elevator. Also, there is another set of toilets down the other hallway. There are a couple of showers there, but we advise you not to use them. There’s a fire alarm right outside the door and if steam hits it, it sets it off and everyone has to evacuate. And you don’t want to be the one stuck outside in the cold in your robe in the middle of winter because you couldn’t wait for one of these showers to open up.”

There were a couple of nervous giggles; the sort that they had been hearing all too often over the past couple of weeks. Nervous giggles from young boys just on the cusp of puberty; most of them probably hadn’t even started bleeding yet. From what Lucca had gathered from things Monty said in passing, the war in central America led to the “rescue” of over two thousand surrogates from Mexico. Small groups of them were being sent to centers across the country; and theirs was no exception. On top of that, the local daycare, where surrogates stayed until they were old enough to start focusing on their futures as baby making machines, had a large group of graduates recently.

Meaning their center was getting flooded with young surrogates who seemed mesmerized by the boys Lucca’s age getting ready to leave. They watched Lucca and his peers like hawks, and Lucca’s counselor even encouraged Lucca to make sure he was always setting a good example. Lucca was rather disgusted by the whole thing; while none of the children were really younger than Lucca was when he was taken from his mother and brought to the center, they felt like they were. Somehow, they seemed too young to be subjected to all of this.

“None of this is fair,” Josiah muttered, sitting down.

They were quiet again, listening to the pitter patter of the young surrogates being led back to the stairwell and up the stairs to the next floor. Lucca went back to the window, noticing another tour group by the gates. An administrator was gesturing towards their building, and pointing off to one of the education buildings. The gates opened, and the administrator quickly guided the young children back as a shiny, black car slowly made its way through.

Lucca glanced at Leslie as he finished off his food, saving the banana for last. Leslie looked up, catching his eye, and he stood. Lucca stepped to the side as they watched the driver get out, opening the back door for a man and woman. The man was in a nice, trim suit, talking to the woman while another man, dressed in a black suit, got out of the passenger seat. The three
convened for a moment before glancing up at their building and making their way to the front door.

“They’re here,” Leslie said, his voice so quiet that Lucca was sure he was the only one who heard.

But he wasn’t. Before Leslie could turn around, Josiah was up and by his side, grabbing his hand and not letting go. Lucca watched him, seeing for a brief second a fire that Lucca immediately recognized. It was the same fire he’d spent all month fighting; the fire that roared every time he saw a younger and younger face being brought to the center. The fire that burned every time someone in his peer group was taken away. The fire he knew was too dangerous to have.

And in that moment, Lucca wondered if Josiah would let go of Leslie’s hand when the time came. If Josiah considered running and taking Leslie with him. He wondered if Leslie would go, and somehow knew for certain that he would. He’d been right so far with his predictions; why not go three-for-three?

But they just stood there, holding hands, watching each other and communicating something that Lucca and Derek couldn’t hear. Lucca thought to what Josiah had said that day at dinner; how Leslie apparently talked to him often when it was just them. Lucca wondered if this was what Josiah meant; if this was the way they spoke to each other when they were alone. It sure felt like it.

They heard the keycard unlock the door, and they all turned to the door. Derek reached forward, grabbing Lucca’s arm and pulling him to the side as the door open. It seemed unnecessary to Lucca until he watched the trio walk in. The husband and wife were obvious; up close, they had that mature look of being in their early thirties. He was pale with dark features, his hair short and coifed and a hat in his hand. She was the light sable color that spoke to a mixed race, her eyebrows thick yet groomed.

The third man in the black suit, however, was obviously some sort of muscle. He was taller than the couple, and immediately steeled a look at Josiah holding Leslie’s hand by the window. Lucca tensed, realizing then why Derek pulled him to the side. Lucca looked at Leslie, whose gaze was resolutely on his two modest bags on his bed.

Leslie wasn’t likely to fight, he thought. Right? Maybe. But Josiah was a potential problem.

“Oh, how sweet,” the woman said, breaking the tense moment of silence in the room as she looked around. Her smile was almost infectious. Almost. “Did you boys come here to see Leslie off?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Derek immediately responded, his hand on Lucca’s arm tightening just a bit. “I hope you don’t mind the intrusion.”

“Of course not! I hear they keep you boys in groups when you come here. You must be close. How could anyone blame you?”

“Is this for the road?” her husband asked, smiling at the basket. “It is a bit of a drive for us. How thoughtful. I can’t believe we didn’t think of it.”

Lucca tensed as the man grabbed the basket, looking through the contents. Derek had been smarter with this one than the one he made Vic; there was nothing in it they wouldn’t be allowed. Though that was more because he wanted to be sure Leslie was eating well.

“Jake, do you mind grabbing the bags and taking them to the car?” the woman asked the man in the black suit, gesturing to the bags on Leslie’s bed. “We shouldn’t be too long.”

The man glanced at the bags and gave one final—and hard—look to Leslie and Josiah before doing as he was told. It was only once he was out of the room that the woman walked closer to Leslie,
holding out her hand towards him.

“Are you ready to go, love?”

Leslie nodded, taking one step forwards. He stopped, however, when he realized that Josiah wasn’t letting go. Leslie froze, fear in his eyes as he looked at where Josiah held onto him. The woman saw it too, and without missing a beat, clapped her hands together.

“Oh wait!” she said, reaching into her purse on her shoulder. “Of course, you four will miss each other dearly. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a memento? Here we go!”

She pulled out a dslr camera, brandishing it proudly. She smiled back at her husband before waving Derek and Lucca over. There was a moment of confusion before Derek moved, joining Josiah and Leslie at the window. Lucca soon followed.

“Come over here; right in front of this window is perfect. The lighting will look wonderful there. Just like that! Oh, you boys look so precious,” she gushed as she brought the camera up in front of her. Despite the fact that there was obviously a display screen on the back of the camera, she looked at them through the viewfinder. “Okay, everyone smile! Yes, Leslie, you too, love. I know you’re shy, but give something for your friends to remember. There you go! On three, say ‘fruit basket.’ One, two, three!”

The woman snapped the picture, and Lucca stepped aside quickly, feeling odd. The woman looked at the picture in the screen, showing her husband. He nodded his approval, and she handed him the camera.

“Can you go ask the girls downstairs to print out four copies of these. I saw they had a printer behind their desk.”

The man grabbed the camera with a chuckle, obviously not fooled by the woman’s convenient excuse to get him out of the room. “Of course, Roxy. Let’s hope they know how to use it.”

Roxy laughed, obviously at some joke none of the boys understood. As soon as the door closed behind him, her smile faded, just a bit, and she turned to Leslie and Josiah. She walked over to them, grabbing the hands they had linked together.

“You’re his roommate?” she asked Josiah, though it didn’t sound like a question.

Josiah tensed, nodding. She looked up at him—Josiah stood almost a head taller than her—and nodded in understanding.

“I figured. I feel bad, you know. I don’t know him as well as you, but I have learned a bit about Leslie over these past few months. And I know he’s very gentle, and sensitive. And I know he needs a bit of help taking care of himself. You had to do that all this time, right?”

Josiah didn’t answer, watching her tensely. Lucca didn’t blame him; he wouldn’t trust that line of questioning either. It was borderline dangerous.

“It’s not fair,” Roxy continued, looking down. “It’s not fair for me to just take him after how hard you had to work to take care of him. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I’m hurting you in doing this.”

Josiah opened his mouth, as if to say something, and immediately closed it. He glanced at Leslie, shaking his head.

“It’s not that,” he muttered, seeming to be at a loss for words. “It’s not—I mean, he…”
“You’re scared,” Roxy said, nodding. “I’m scared too, you know. I can’t tell my husband this, but I am. I’m an only child and I’ve never even had a pet. And here I am taking on another human being to care for, and all so he can give me more little humans to take care of! I’m afraid I’ll fail. I don’t want to fail my children. I don’t want to fail Les.”

Josiah looked away. Lucca glanced at the door and then at Derek, silently asking if they should leave. Derek caught it and shook his head, minutely. Lucca got the message; moving would disrupt this moment. And that would be a grave sin.

“Will you help me a bit?” the woman asked Josiah when he didn’t respond. “It’s hard, because I haven’t learned how to speak with Leslie as well as you have. What do I need to know so I can take care of him?”

Josiah took a deep breath in and out, shaking his head. He was really trying not to cry. Everyone could see. So Lucca was surprised when he started talking.

“He’s allergic to strawberries,” he said, the fact random and new. Lucca sure didn’t know that.

The woman’s eyes widened, and she glanced at Leslie before turning back to Josiah.

“Really? Is it all berries?”

“I don’t know; I’ve never seen him eat them. But he does like cherries. A lot. He’s fine with those.”

“What else? What else do I need to know?”

Josiah really started crying then. Roxy placed her other hand over where she’d grabbed Josiah and Leslie’s hands interlocked. Josiah kept going.

“He hates thunder; he hates most loud noises. But he really hates thunder. And dogs. He can be near small ones as long as they don’t come too close, but he really gets scared around big dogs. But he likes cats. And goats. His family used to have a farm; they bred goats and he loved the goats. And he gets cold easily, but he’ll never complain.

“And it’s the same with talking. He does talk! He just—it’s just with all of this. It’s hard to be honest, and he doesn’t know how to fake it and lie. He just isn’t good at it. So he won’t lie. He really is terrible at it. But that’s why he won’t talk. He doesn’t want to get in trouble, and he doesn’t want to get in trouble for lying.”

Leslie brought his other hand up to his face, wiping away tears. Josiah saw them, and it made him cry even harder. Roxy watched them both, patient. Lucca couldn’t help but think that it sure was taking her husband a long time to get a few copies of a picture printed.

“It’s why he stopped eating way back. We’re all like that; it’s hard to be so out of control of everything. And he’s really afraid. He’s afraid of…” Josiah’s voice trailed off, and he glanced at Leslie, and again at the woman. Whatever it was, it was obviously dangerous.

“Please tell me,” Roxy said, wiping tears of her own. “I want to understand him so I can take care of him. Please. If he won’t, how will I help?”

“Please,” Leslie said, his quiet voice speaking louder than Lucca’s ever heard it. He wiped his eyes, turning his gaze to Josiah. “Please, don’t. You can’t.”

And Lucca could see the conflict in Josiah. And Lucca realized then how this was going to end.
Roxy was smart; she knew she needed to build trust. Not just with Josiah, but with Leslie. It was always hard to know what sort of people the family that bids on them will be. Lucca assumed most were like Monty and Chelsea, expecting submission and obedience without question. But Roxy was truly different; she wasn’t going to lash out at Leslie. Not about whatever big secret he and Josiah were hiding. And if she can prove that, Leslie will know he can trust her.

And that’s what she genuinely wanted; for Leslie to trust her.

“He’s afraid to get pregnant,” Josiah said, the reveal making Derek flinch. “We can’t say that here; you have to understand that! He could never say that. And it’s not like he can’t do it. He can! I know he can. And it’s not like he has a choice. But it’s scary. He’s scared of his body changing and of making a mistake and hurting the baby and giving birth. He’s afraid of the pain and I know he can do this. He just needs, I don’t know, he needs…”

“Support,” Roxy finished for him. “I get it, honey. It’s okay. I understand. And thank you. I promise you that I’ll take good care of him, okay? As long as I’m around, he’s going to be okay.”

Josiah wiped his face and nodded. The lock to the door beeped open, and the door opened again. Roxy’s husband walked inside, looking at the scene and shaking his head.

“If I’d known you’d make them cry, I wouldn’t have left you alone with them,” he said, handing her the copies of the photo.

“They’re good tears,” she said, and Lucca had to wonder just how true that was. “Besides, these boys have known each other for a very long time. It was only fair to give them a moment together. Ah, here you are, boys.”

Lucca took the picture when Roxy offered it, looking at it. It was, surprisingly, a good picture. They didn’t look miserable, and the way the sun reflected off the camera’s lens gave a nice glow around them that made them look almost ethereal. Lucca watched Josiah take the picture from her. He looked at it, and pulled Leslie into one last hug.

“Be good,” he said, his voice low, but still loud enough to be heard. “You’re gonna be fine.”

Leslie nodded, hugging Josiah back. “You too,” his voice lower and harder to hear. “I’ll miss you.”

Josiah nodded, seemed to hug Leslie tighter, and finally let go. Lucca heard Derek let out a breath when he did. This time, when Roxy held out her hand, Leslie took it and let her guide him towards the door. Her husband held the door open for them. Roxy paused at the door, looking back at the three boys standing stock still in the room one last time.

“Thank you,” she said, to all of them, but her eyes fell on Josiah again after a quick sweep. “Thank you for taking care of him for us until now. Thank you.”

And with that, they were gone. The door shut behind them, and Josiah burst into tears. Derek was at his side immediately, leading him to his bed to sit down. Josiah dropped his copy of the picture on the floor. Lucca quickly picked it up, putting it on Josiah’s desk. Josiah cried into Derek’s shoulder, the sobs racking his entire body.

“Is it stupid” Josiah asked between sobs, “that I’m glad he left first? What would he have done if I left before he did?”

“No,” Lucca said, thinking of Vic suddenly. Somehow, he couldn’t imagine Vic still stuck at the center without Lucca. Lucca walked over to the window, watching the man in the black suit talk the driver as they waited. “It’s not stupid.”
Josiah’s sobs overtook him again, and Lucca watched as Leslie approached the car with Roxy and her husband. There were a few words exchanged, and the man in the black suit got into his seat in the passenger side. The husband got inside first, and Leslie was next. He paused, looking up at the building before getting in. Roxy was last, also pausing and looking up at the building.

There was something in her face as she looked at the center, something Lucca had no way of discerning from where he was. He imagined it was disgust, at how wretched this whole process was. Or maybe she was sad that such a cold, grey building was what Leslie called home for so many years. Or maybe she was just disgusted by the idea of even getting a surrogate. Maybe her entire act just now had been just that: an act. Maybe she really would resent Leslie for being able to do something she couldn’t.

Whatever it was didn’t matter. She got inside the car, the driver shutting the door after her. In seconds, the driver was at the wheel, and guiding the car off the campus. Lucca watched it all the way through the gate, and down the road it had turned with Josiah’s grieving sobs echoing around him.

Chapter End Notes

A few notes about where I'll be going with this story.

For starters, I changed the name. I hope it doesn't confuse anyone who was following this story, but I decided that Lucca's story is going to be the only "backstory" I flesh out like this. I still have a long ways to go with this story before he ends up where I need him to be for the story I really want to write. And, at this point, I'm so excited to start that one that there's no way I'll have the energy or patience to put it on hold while I write the other stories I had planned/started.

I mentioned this in the notes of another chapter, but this started out as a story about Faust City. Faust City is, essentially, the Hong Kong to the Nation's China. If that makes sense. It's self governed, though, of course, has to maintain friendly relations with the Nation for survival. Faust City, as such, is known as a city of sin where crime thrives. While most people in the Nation are allowed to migrate or even immigrate to Faust City, fertile women and surrogates do not have that option. While surrogates and fertile women born in Faust City cannot be forced back to the Nation, technically, any that escape the Nation to Faust City are to be extradited. Faust City, however, is not always so cooperative/often conveniently can never find the escapees to send them back to the Nation.

The story I was initially writing, then, was about two people who escaped the Nation, Lucca included, and someone who was born in Faust City, and how their stories connected. I've decided to revamp the story to something more coherent; so Lucca won't even be a main character in this story. Either way, this story always existed as something for me to spend time on when I hit writer's block with main/major writing projects.

As such, I'm condensing everything. Thus why it's no longer listed as part of a series. And thus why I changed the name since this is, essentially, going to be a one-shot sort of story instead of one part of an interconnected story.
Again, I apologize for any confusion, and hope you can move on.

Also, I had a rough week, so double upload this weekend! The next chapter will be posted on Sunday as planned.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Lucca and Derek have a heart to heart.

Lucca watched Josiah through his window get into the small car the tall man who won his bid came in. It was obvious from the flashiness of the car that he was a man of wealth, though Josiah had revealed the previous night that he was a politician. As such, Josiah was bound for Virginia, in a suburban community not far from the beach. He seemed a bit happy to be close to the beach.

“Your birthday is in a few weeks, right?” Derek asked, sitting down on Vic’s bed.

Technically it was Derek’s bed now. They were the last two from their group, and it didn’t make sense for them to take up two separate rooms. Derek was supposed to move in soon after Leslie had left, but he wisely convinced his counselor to let him hold off until Josiah was gone. Derek planned on moving his few belongings in after lunch.

“Two weeks,” Lucca said, watching the car drive off. Lucca couldn’t help but give Josiah credit; he’d been very obedient towards the end. Just like Lucca was used to him.

“I wonder if you’ll leave before me,” Derek mused, laying on the bed and looking up at the ceiling. “I honestly hope not. I’m ready to leave.”

“They’re diplomats?” Lucca asked, remembering their conversation from last night.

It was only three of them, so Josiah’s going away party was a tad dull. Especially since, until recently, Lucca never went out of his way to talk to either Josiah or Derek. It was awkward at first with Josiah still mourning Leslie’s departure weeks ago and Derek having just heard his visa was approved and all was set for him to fly to…

“Where are you going again?” Lucca asked.

“Spain.”

“Do you speak any Spanish?”

“No.”

Lucca hummed, turning his gaze back to the window. It would be even more awkward now that it was just him and Derek. At least if Derek wanted to keep up this sulking routine. Lucca watched another sleek, black car pull into the gates. He didn’t think anything of it until he realized that the man getting out of the car was Monty. He straightened, watching Monty swing around to passenger side and let Chelsea out.

Fuck. It was Friday. He’d forgotten that he was going to the house for the weekend. Chelsea had apparently been going decorating crazy and said she needed him in his room so she could finish it. And he wasn’t even packed; Monty would have something to say about that.

“I’m pregnant.”
Lucca jerked towards Derek, his heart pumping. He needed to pack, quickly, but there was no way he could with what Derek just said. He hesitated, glanced back outside, watching Monty point at buildings as he spoke to Chelsea. That’s right; this would be her first time at the center. Lucca turned back to Derek and bit his lip.

“How do you know?” he asked. He’d been with Derek a lot over the last few days; he didn’t remember Derek going to the infirmary. “Did they give you a pregnancy test?”

“Not yet,” Derek said, staring at the ceiling. “They will tomorrow.”

If a surrogate was late, the infirmary always forced them to take a test to see if pregnancy was the cause. A precaution to make sure no one tried to hide a pregnancy: that would be dangerous. When boys tried to circumvent this by tracking their cycles and asking for their napkins every month whether they bled or not, the center forced them to have to get confirmation that they were bleeding from their physician. As if the quarterly checkups weren’t invasive enough.

“Then you don’t really know,” Lucca said, trying to cheer him up. He really didn’t have time for this. “You’ve been stressed with everyone leaving and stuff recently. I’m sure you’re not—”

“I’m late,” Derek said, as though Lucca hadn’t spoken. “I’m never late. Since my cycle started, I’ve never once been late. Not a single fucking day. No matter what.”

Lucca sighed. “Was it your family? I mean, the one who—”

“I’m lucky there, I guess. Imagine if it was someone else’s child.”

“Derek—”

“Remember when Josiah said he was raped?” Derek continued. Lucca realized distantly that Derek wasn’t listening to him; he just wanted to talk. So he didn’t answer. “I never thought that that’s what was happening. Maybe it’s different because I’ve only had Richard. The very first mixer where I met him, he found a way to get me alone and he had his way with me. I never thought that he was wrong for it. I knew we weren’t supposed to. But if he wanted to, what else could I do but submit?”

Lucca went to his side of the room, finding his weekend bag under his bed. He started to pack his clothes, making sure there were plenty of sweaters; winter was trying to settle in and it was cold at the house at nights. Derek didn’t pay him any mind, talking as though Lucca hadn’t moved.

“The last time he was in town at the end of the summer, he took me to his summer house and he had me there. And I was sure I would get pregnant then. I only panicked because my bid had only just gone through, but my visa wasn’t approved yet. And earlier this month, when he came to see me, I knew it would happen this time. But when they told me yesterday that my visa was went through, I realized that it didn’t really matter, right?”

“Are you afraid?” Lucca asked as he found his toothbrush with his toiletries. He thought about Leslie, and his secret fear. Did Lucca fear getting pregnant? He hadn’t given it much thought. “Of getting pregnant, I mean.”

“I don’t know,” Derek said, sitting up now. “I mean, we’ve all known we didn’t have a choice. It’s just, I don’t know, weird. That it’s actually happening.”

Lucca found the last of his things, zipped up his bag, and sat down on his bed. Derek watched him, looking at his bag.
“I can’t relate to what Josiah said,” Derek continued, his eyes rising to meet Lucca’s. “I don’t remember much about what happened with Reggie, honestly. I don’t know if things changed there. But, I don’t know, Lucca, it’s just easier this way. Wouldn’t it just kill me if I thought of Richard as my rapist?”

“Maybe,” Lucca mused. He looked at the door, wondering what was taking Monty and Chelsea so long. “I don’t know, Derek.”

“It seems unnecessary. I’ve known all this time what would be expected of me. And I don’t mind it. Richard and his family are nice. I’m scared about going to another country, where I don’t even know the language. And I’ve never been on a plane, so I’m scared about that. But I’m not scared of having this baby. I’m supposed to do this. I was made to do this. Why should I feel scared?”

Lucca watched as Derek looked down at his stomach. He touched it, lightly, as if trying to understand that there was something in there. Was there? Lucca never did pay attention during the gestation information lessons.

Still, Lucca thought that Derek had a point. Wasn’t he just driving himself crazy with his quiet rage and riots at Monty? Monty would have his way either way; what did Lucca get out of wanting to fight? Wouldn’t it just be easier to accept everything? Derek didn’t look scared.

Derek chuckled, suddenly. He leaned back on the bed and nodded towards Lucca’s overnight bag.

“Did you forget you were going away with Monty this weekend?”

Lucca couldn’t help but smile a bit. “Yes,” he said with a nod. “I saw him pull up, just now.”

Derek shook his head, and Lucca couldn’t help but laugh with him.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca had spent all day wanting nothing more than to sleep. He sat on the roof of Monty’s family’s beach house, his sweater doing nothing against the biting chill of the winter night. Down the cliffside, he watched the waxing moon—just days from being full—pull and tug the waves gently. It was almost midnight, and he still wouldn’t be able to sleep then. It had been Chelsea’s idea for them all to stay up until midnight, so they could wish Lucca a happy birthday as soon as it hit.

Lucca remembered the first time he’d been to the beach house, just months before Monty found out his secret. Monty’s family had invited Lucca and his mother to vacation there for a week during the summer. Lucca spent the entire week running on the beach with Monty, learning how to swim against the currents against his mother’s wishes. At nights, they lit small fireworks and tried to catch lightening bugs in jars. Lucca’s mother woke him up early numerous days to watch the rising sun.

Lucca always loved the beach because of that memory. And despite it being too cold to go swimming or walk in the sand barefoot, he had to admit that he was happy to spend his birthday watching the waves. Lucca hoped Monty would take them to the beach often this summer. Lucca’s brain started doing math, wondering how far along he’d be then if he got pregnant right away. Seven months if they went in June. Was that too far along to be able to walk in the sand?

A sound from the attic window caught Lucca’s attention. The window opened, and he saw Monty’s head peak out. He looked around, smiling when he saw Lucca sitting there. Lucca tensed, not ready yet to give up this moment of solitude; it had taken a lot to get away from Chelsea and Monty’s mother. But there was nothing he could do as Monty gracefully climbed onto the roof and settled next to him.

“I had a feeling you’d be here,” he said, unfolding a blanket he’d brought. “We used to come up here as kids to hide from the adults. You remember?”

Lucca nodded, turning his gaze back to the ocean. Monty wrapped the blanket around Lucca. Monty sat back, leaning on forearms, his attention pulled towards the sky than the beach.

“I love it out here,” he said. “Especially this time of the year where there aren’t any tourists and the boardwalk is closed. It’s quiet and dark. You can actually see the stars.”

Lucca couldn’t help but be curious and look up. Sure enough, the sky was ablaze with little white specks. Lucca had never seen so many stars at once; few places were dark enough for it. The moon next to them was quite the sight. Even Monty could be right about something, it seemed.

“What time is it?” Lucca asked, breaking the silence between them.

“Still have about twenty minutes,” Monty answered. He didn’t tear his gaze from the sky. “Let’s stay out here for a bit, though. As long as we’re inside before midnight, Mom and Chelsea won’t be mad.”

Lucca didn’t have any complaints about that, so he spent the next few minutes splitting his attention from the sky above him and the rushing ocean in front of him. This was one of those
moments Lucca wished he could freeze. It was the last few moments before his life would change forever. And in that brief moment, everything seemed right in the world. A calm before the storm, Lucca knew, and it was that calm he wanted to hold onto for as long as possible.

Apparently, it wasn’t going to be that long. Not even ten minutes could have passed before Monty was moving again. He pulled out a set of folded papers from his back pocket. The movement caught Lucca’s attention, and he watched suspiciously as Monty unfolded the papers and brandished them to him.

“I forgot to show you I got these,” he said, laying them on Lucca’s lap.

Lucca stared at the papers, seeing that they were from the center. The letterhead and stamps at the bottom were recognizable, but that was it. Lucca looked up at Monty, hating the expecting look in his face. He had to have been doing this on purpose.

“What does it say?” he asked, finally.

“Well, the center has been very agreeable with us all this time. They knew I intended to put a bid on you quickly, and offered to bypass the wait time. All I had to do was write a check, and they approved your bid.”

Lucca blinked. Normally, there was a month minimum wait time before a bid could be approved. Just in case someone might come along and want to bid on a surrogate that doesn’t have too many suitors. For them to bypass that wait time was almost unheard of. The only times that typically happened was during cases where things weren’t by-the-book, and indiscretion was necessary.

Like with boys who reported their rapists.

Though Lucca knew that wasn’t the case, he still couldn’t understand why the center would allow this. It was almost like they knew Monty’s feelings for Lucca were deeper than they should be. But if they knew that, they should put a stop to it; not expedite the process.

Something was off about this.

“Technically,” Monty continued when Lucca didn’t respond, “I’m not allowed to bid on you until you’re eighteen.” Monty reached over Lucca’s shoulder and pointed to the date. “So they approved it, but it doesn’t go into effect until tomorrow. Or, rather, in a few minutes.”

Lucca nodded, suddenly feeling very defeated. He wasn’t sure why. He knew Monty would place a bid right away. And it wasn’t like Lucca was hoping to put a bid on him during the wait time. But still; it would have given him time. Time to reconcile being legal and being owned. Now, he didn’t have that time. The second midnight hit, he’d be Monty’s.

And he realized, in that moment, that he didn’t want that. He didn’t want to be Monty’s. He didn’t want any of this; never had. It wasn’t new, but he let himself feel it in that moment. Feel how wrong it all was. He was a human; not some dog being adopted from a shelter. And yet this was how he was being treated. Bought and sold to the highest bidder so he could be fucked and give birth to babies he doesn’t even want to have. Nothing about this was right. Nothing about this was fair.

A part of Lucca was furious that Monty couldn’t even give Lucca the leisure of a fucking month wait time. But what Lucca really allowed himself to feel, for just one moment, was the intense hatred for Monty that had been building for years now. From the moment Monty found out his secret and immediately told. All because Lucca as a surrogate was his in. They could never be
together as two boys. As men.

But Lucca wasn’t a man. And Monty jumped on that opportunity without a care of how it would impact Lucca. He didn’t care about tearing Lucca away from his mother, sending her off to be lobotomized. He didn’t care about Lucca spending the last decade under lock and key, waiting patiently to be bought like cattle. He didn’t care if Lucca wanted his kisses, Monty’s dick in his mouth, or even Monty’s touch. He didn’t care if Lucca wanted to be his surrogate.

All he wanted was to possess Lucca. To own him. To claim him. Lucca be damned.

Lucca let himself feel all of that. He swam in it, watching the waves in front of him and imagining the entire ocean as his hatred for Monty. He envisioned a giant tidal wave—a tsunami—destroying the house and dragging them into its depths. He let his hatred roar, and took a deep breath in. He basked in the hatred, holding his breath as he felt the hatred move throughout his body.

Then, he let his breath out. And let the hatred out. It was all a waste. Nothing could come from that hatred. All it would do was destroy him. And Monty loved him too much to let anything destroy him. All Lucca’s hatred would do, in reality, is put him on the same path as his mother. Devin was right: Monty wouldn’t hesitate to get an elective lobotomy for him. Lucca wasn’t going to be stupid. And he wasn’t going to create more pain for himself.

“Lucca?” Monty asked, after a moment of no response.

Lucca turned to Monty, knowing exactly what he needed to do.

“So this is it?” he asked, his voice quiet. Monty leaned closer, struggling to hear him. “So once it’s my birthday, it’s done?”

“Yeah,” Monty said, his voice matching Lucca’s tone. As if afraid to ruin the moment.

“And you won’t take it back?”

That did it. Pity and the slightest regret flashed through Monty’s face. God, he was really buying this mess.

“No, Lucca. I would never take it back. I love you.”

Lucca’s heart skipped. He couldn’t help it. Yes, Monty really did believe this was love. Lucca wasn’t quite as naïve. Or stupid. He wasn’t sure which one yet. So he just smiled and nodded, looking back at the paper he couldn’t read. Monty wrapped an arm around him, pulling him into a hug. The hug quickly turned into a kiss, and Lucca kept his spine relaxed through it.

Sooner than Lucca had expected, Monty pulled away, sighing.

“We should get in too. I’m sure Mom and Chelsea want to do a countdown.”

Lucca nodded, handing Monty back the paper and folding up the blanket around him. He followed Monty to the window, pausing to get one last look at the ocean. The moon tugged the waves away; and his anger as well. Monty went inside first, helping Lucca down unnecessarily. They left the attic, neat and clean minus a few boxes that looked like that hadn’t been touched in decades.

By the time they got down to the living room, Chelsea and Lucca’s mother looked anxious. Lucca’s father was sitting at an armchair, watching a war movie playing on the tv above the fire place.
“There you are!” Chelsea said as they came down the stairs. “We are t-minus ninety seconds.”

“Sorry,” Monty said, giving Chelsea a quick kiss on the cheek. “Lucca was feeling sentimental.”

It took everything in Lucca not to roll his eyes.

“I told you he wouldn’t be late,” Monty’s mother said, grabbing Lucca’s hand and pulling him closer to her. “Chelsea, didn’t you leave something in the kitchen?”

“Right!” Chelsea exclaimed, running off to the kitchen.

Monty’s mother laughed, pulling Lucca into a hug. “God, I still remember you as a child. You seem too young to start having them yourself.”

Lucca couldn’t help but tense at that.

“They wait too long to start them as it is,” Monty’s father said, muting the tv and turning to join their group. “No point in waiting long after they start bleeding.”

“Dad,” Monty said with an eyeroll.

“We’re t-minus ten!” Chelsea called from the kitchen, “Nine! Eight!”

The rest of the Graysons joined in. At five, Chelsea finally emerged from the kitchen with a round, homemade cake with chocolate icing. Lucca smiled as she steadily carried it towards them. There were a bunch of lit candles on the cake. Likely eighteen. Happy Birthday Lucca was written in white icing. It was sweet.

Lucca hated chocolate.

“Three! Two! One! Happy Birthday!”

“Make a wish and if you blow them all out in one breath, it’ll come true!” Chelsea said.

Lucca thought Chelsea was just a little too into this. But he did his part, looking around shyly as he pretended to think of a wish. It was obvious what he should wish for; fertility. Lots of healthy and happy children. To be able to easily deliver the six the doctors want from him, and even more.

If Lucca had held on to the hate, he would have wished for the opposite. Out of spite.

But in the end, there was nothing for him to wish for. His worst nightmares would stay away as long as he behaved. And he wasn’t naïve enough to wish for something impossible. So he thought of the stars and the ocean and watching it on the roof alone, and he decided to wish for that. It was simple enough. Right?

And when Lucca finally blew on the candles, he blew them all out easily. His new family clapped.

Chapter End Notes

I got four hours of sleep last night. My work schedule is changing to a legit 9-5, and with the weather changing as well, I'm hoping I can knock this story out by the end of April. Once it's completed, I'll update more frequently. But I'm currently at 36
chapters and I'm expecting at least 15 more to have to come. -tooltip

It's my own fault; this story wasn't supposed to be this long winded lol.

Either way, to celebrate my new schedule, I'll post another chapter this week. Maybe not today though...

I need sleep...
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

It's Lucca's birthday!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca didn’t realize until it was night that Monty hadn’t touched him in a while. The midnight celebrations only went on for about an hour before everyone retired to their beds. Monty walked Lucca to his room and kissed him before joining Chelsea in Monty’s childhood room in the house.

The next day, they let Lucca sleep in, which he greatly appreciated when Chelsea finally pushed him awake for brunch at ten-thirty. The Graysons took them all to an ice rink in town that was full of families. Lucca spent most of the time with a small group of surrogates who had no interest in skating. Two because they were pregnant, and one who had never tried it and had no desire to. One boy with dark skin and hair in long locs convinced Lucca to give it a try. He knew how to skate and had taught the children he gave birth to.

Lucca entertained him for about twenty minutes, letting him guide him on the ice and help him gain balance. The surrogate didn’t want to give up his lessons, but one of his children wandered over to him to retie her laces, and Lucca managed to slip away. Monty caught him quickly afterwards and wanted to skate with him. Chelsea, however, took a rather hard spill at that moment, and the Graysons quickly decided to pack it up before someone really got hurt.

They went out to a family restaurant for an early dinner, complete with the staff brandishing a cake halfway through and singing Happy Birthday to Lucca. This one was strawberry shortcake; Lucca’s favorite. That surprised him until Monty asked him halfway through his slice if he liked it. Lucca realized that the decision to make a chocolate cake last night was likely Chelsea; eager though ignorant on anything dealing with Lucca’s likes and dislikes. Hell, she probably prescribed to the idea that a surrogate should be happy he gets anything and be grateful for what he does get.

Monty, on the other hand, knew Lucca well.

Once they were home, they retired to the den for a movie; a romance about a fertile woman rescued from New Orleans and married off to a senator. She spends the first half bitter at her new life and rebellious, but soon learns that she enjoys submitting to her husband. By the end, when she returns to the city as a missionary hoping to convince young girls to migrate to the Nation, Lucca was ready to gauge his eyes out.

Thankfully, the Graysons was tuckered out after that, and said their goodnights. Lucca yawned as he watched Monty talk to Chelsea at the stairs before she went up alone. He didn’t think anything of it when Monty grabbed his hand and lead him upstairs to Lucca’s room. Just as he’d done the night before.

What pulled him out of his stupor, however, was when Monty followed him in and shut the door behind them. It wasn’t until Monty locked the door that Lucca fully realized what was about to happen.
He’d been enjoying his break from this.

“We should let Chelsea redecorate,” Monty said conversationally as he walked over to Lucca’s bed and sat down. “This room is too bland for it to be yours.”

It was a guest room, thus why it wasn’t done up. But Lucca didn’t point that out. Instead, he ignored his twisting stomach and sat down next to Monty. No point in holding this off. Monty responded by leaning into him, placing a hand on the bed behind Lucca.

“Did you enjoy your birthday?” Monty asked, crossing his body to place his other hand on Lucca’s thigh.

Lucca forced himself to remain relaxed. That was what his counselor told him in their recent “family prep” sessions. Don’t tense up; be relaxed. Lucca turned his body towards Monty some, allowing his legs to naturally separate a bit. He needed to do that too: be open. Welcoming. Never resistant.

“Yes,” he answered, watching Monty’s hand slide up his thigh. Relax. Embrace it. It wasn’t like it was his first—or even second—time with Monty, but he still couldn’t shake his counselor’s tips. “I’ve never ice skated before.”

“I really wanted to teach you myself,” Monty whispered in Lucca’s ear. His hand lightly slid up Lucca’s groin, making him shiver. He stopped when he reached the button on Lucca’s pants. “I hate having to keep that distance in public. Having to worry people think my behavior towards you is unnatural.”

Lucca just nodded. Monty’s hand easily undid his button and pulled the zipper down. He started tugging on the pants, pushing them down. Lucca maneuvered himself so it was easier for Monty to undress him. In seconds, the pants were on the floor. Monty jerked Lucca’s dick for a quick moment before sliding his hand up to Lucca’s shirt.

“You’re so quiet,” Monty commented, kissing Lucca on the neck. Lucca sighed; this part wasn’t too bad. “Are you nervous?”

Lucca shrugged, raising his arms while Monty worked his shirt off. Monty hadn’t even moved to undress himself.

“Maybe,” Lucca said as Monty tossed the shirt on the floor with Lucca’s pants. “Just a little?”

“The first time will be the hardest, but didn’t I always say I’d be gentle?”

Lucca lurched back, his stomach roiling. Monty paused, giving Lucca a weird look. A confused look. Lucca felt his heart racing and couldn’t even think of what to do to calm it. This wasn’t his first time; Monty knew that. He even punished and fucked Lucca for it. What game was he playing at?

“What’s wrong?” Monty asked, scooting closer and wrapping an arm around Lucca’s waist. “Are you really that scared?”

Lucca blinked at Monty a few times, his concern almost believable. An act. And it was when Monty raised his eyebrow, every so slightly, that Lucca realized what he was missing. It was an act. Because Lucca had messed up their first time. His own first time. So this was Monty’s way of redoing it. Wiping the slate clean. And he was waiting for Lucca to take it.
Lucca didn’t want to play along. Not really. But he wasn’t an idiot. So he took a deep breath in and out and shook his head.

“T’m fine,” he said, his voice low and cautious.

Monty nodded, waiting. It led to an awkward pause, as Lucca had no idea what he was supposed to be doing. He was almost grateful when Monty broke the pause, leaning forward and locking Lucca in another kiss. Lucca forced his body to relax. He was doing a good job of it. Even as Monty’s hands fell to Lucca’s hip, moving to inch his underwear off, Lucca stayed relaxed.

Monty kissed down Lucca’s neck, freeing Lucca from all his clothes as he did so. Lucca bit his lip as he responded to the exposure, his body hot. He hated this part; how his body would react whether he was into it or not. It didn’t help that Monty had wrapped his hand around Lucca’s dick, giving it a few pumps. Lucca gasped as he hardened a bit, and then again when Monty bit him on the side of the neck.

Knowing he would respond to it and actually being in the moment were two different things. Lucca wasn’t enjoying this. He wanted to push Monty away, get dressed, and run. Where, he wasn’t sure. But somewhere he wouldn’t have to do this. Monty let go of Lucca’s dick, instead using his hands to push and maneuver Lucca back on the bed.

Once Monty had Lucca settled on the bed, laying against the pillows, Monty paused to sit up and look at him. Lucca thought that he should probably consider himself lucky that Monty wanted him docile and receptive in this moment. He wasn’t sure what he would do if Monty tried to force Lucca to really participate. Not now; not when they’re pretending this was their first time together.

“Stop thinking,” Monty said, reaching forwarded and rubbing a finger against Lucca’s forehead. Lucca didn’t know he was scrunching it, but he focused on relaxing his face at Monty’s command. “We can take it slow; go easy. You’re going to be okay.”

Lucca nodded dumbly because he had no idea how he was supposed to respond to that. Then something his counselor had told him recently made him bit his lip and raise himself on his forearms. Since they were acting…

“Not slow,” he tried, shaking his head immediately. That wasn’t what he meant. “I mean, my counselor said it’s easier if you, um, force it a bit.”

Monty blinked at Lucca, tilting his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“He said because if you try to go too slow—I mean, if you hit resistance, then it’s best to use a bit of force.”

“Do you plan to resist me, Lucca?”

Lucca shook his head immediately, not missing the warning in Monty’s voice. God, this was mortifying. Maybe he should have kept his mouth shut. He wasn’t good at acting. Especially since his real goal was to have Monty finish as quickly as possible.

“No, Monty. Of course not. But he said there’s always a bit—a—I mean, it—” Lucca frowned, trying to think of how to say this. There really was no delicate way to put it, was there? “He said virginities don’t yield easily. Going too slow just…” Lucca couldn’t finish.

Monty chuckled, reaching down and tangling his fingers in Lucca’s curls. He leaned down and kissed Lucca on the cheek, staying there as his other hand worked on freeing himself from his own pants.
“Did your counselor tell you that so you don’t do something stupid like asking your first time to be gentle?”

Lucca shrugged. Monty chuckled again, freeing himself and pumping himself to full hardness. Lucca looked; watching as Monty grew, his foreskin being pushed further and further back. It didn’t look angry the way Devon’s did; nor was it as thick. Since it wasn’t actually his first time, Lucca thought that this would probably be easier than the last few times. Especially if Monty wanted to play the nice guy.

He was pulled from his thoughts when two fingers penetrated him roughly. Lucca whined, immediately reaching down stop it. Monty leaned down, kissing Lucca hard. Monty’s dick was pressed against Lucca’s, and Monty thrusted a bit to create some friction. Fuck. Lucca remembered to stop fighting, and relaxed, hating the way he felt himself get wet where Monty was fingering him.

He hated how his body just responded. Hated how good it felt to feel Monty pressed against him. Hated how nice it felt to have Monty’s fingers inside him. All of this was wrong and his body was just loving it. Why couldn’t his body just resist? Why did it have to make this so much easier for Monty? Why did he have to lie here and remind himself over and over that it was a physiological reaction that he had no control over?

“Do you like that, Lucca?” Monty whispered when he finally took a break from the kiss. He added another finger inside Lucca, drawing out a tiny whimper. “You’re so wet. So ready for me to fuck you.”

Lucca nodded, focusing on his breathing and the sight of their bodies connecting and moving together. Monty pushed his fingers in and left them there, and Lucca really started panting. It didn’t hurt; it actually felt nice being stretched open like this. His dick twitched and his felt his pussy tremble a bit. Fuck. Fuck. He just wanted this over. He couldn’t stand doing nothing while his body enjoyed this.

“Yeah,” Monty continued, nipping a bit at Lucca’s chest. “Yeah, I felt that. Was that for me, Lucca?”

Lucca hated Monty so much in that moment. But he nodded dutifully, and played his role. “Yeah,” he said with a moan. His voice was full of a lust that Lucca didn’t want to feel. “All you. Please, Monty. Please.”

Monty was taking too long. Lucca knew that would get a reaction. Sure enough, Monty gave Lucca one last hard kiss before settling back to line himself up. Lucca spread his legs further, panting as he watched. Monty, surprisingly, was efficient. The last time few times they were together, Monty was still angry and showed it. It always hurt.

So he was a bit surprised how easily Monty slipped his head inside. It was still tight; it had been a while after all. His body tensed, and Lucca willed himself to relax. Monty gave Lucca a few seconds, and as soon as he felt Lucca relax a bit, he started moving.

Monty wasn’t as gentle as he promised, but Lucca didn’t feel it was necessary. It wasn’t his first time, and they both knew Monty was going to have to press past the resistance. But once he was past it, it was seconds before Lucca was full of his dick. Monty paused, take a few breaths. He kissed Lucca again, and Lucca responded by wrapping his arms around Monty’s neck.

Monty stayed there as he gave a few practice thrusts, somehow pushing even deeper into Lucca.
Lucca watched Monty, mesmerized most by Monty’s lips. They were parted, slightly, and Monty kept licking them. Lucca wondered, distantly, if Monty was nervous in this moment. He’d waited a long time to have Lucca like this. Even if it wasn’t real, was it worth it?

Was all of it worth it for just this one moment?

Lucca wanted to ask. He opened his mouth, starting to, before shaking himself out of it. No, that would ruin this. And if Lucca ruined this moment for Monty, he was the only one who was going to pay for it. Monty had paused again, buried deep inside Lucca. His eyes were closed. Lucca hoped he was asking himself in that moment if all of this was worth it.

“Monty,” Lucca said after enough time had passed. He was done with all of this; he wanted Monty to finish and get off him and get out of the room. “Please. Are you going to fuck me?”

“Yeah,” Monty muttered, opening his eyes. He looked at Lucca for a second, searching for something. “Do you want me to fuck you, Lucca?”

Lucca nodded. “Yes. You feel good when you fuck me, right?”

Lucca really hated playing this game.

“How about you, Lucca? Do you feel good?”

That was a trap. Lucca wasn’t falling for it. He looked to the side, at the door. It was so far away.

“It’s tight,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “You’re kind of big and it’s tight. But I do want you to *fuck* me, Monty. *Please*.”

Lucca passed that test with flying colors. Without much preamble, Monty pulled back and shoved himself back inside. His thrusts were hard and quick, setting a fast pace. Lucca just laid there and tried to breathe. Monty was on top of him, pushing his thighs back for leverage. This drove Monty in deeper, and Lucca stopped feeling only pain.

Whatever Monty was doing, he was brushing something that felt good. Lucca let out an involuntary moan when Monty hit him at an odd angle. Monty responded to that, pushing again and again at that angle. Lucca couldn’t handle this. Letting Monty fuck him was one thing; he wouldn’t lie there and enjoy it. He brought his hand down to Monty’s hip, putting just the slightest bit of resistance there. Not enough to actually stop Monty, but enough for him to notice it.

“Monty, please,” Lucca whined, moving his hips in a useless attempt to get away. Monty’s thrusts didn’t stop for a second. “Wait! I—ah—I need a minute.”

“You were begging me to fuck you a second ago, Lucca,” Monty said, not slowing down. He pushed Lucca’s hand away and grabbed Lucca’s thighs. Lucca yelped as Monty pulled him closer, fucking him even harder. It was fine; the position didn’t have Monty pressing against that spot over and over again. “No fighting, Lucca. Lay there and take my dick like a good boy.”

Lucca felt rage but nodded his consent instead. He got the result he needed. He relaxed against the bed, patiently waiting while Lucca fucked him harder and harder. He couldn’t help but notice how quickly Monty had forgotten his promise to be gentle. Lucca didn’t buy it anyway, but there was something validating about it turning out like this. Monty was no better than Devon or any other man who wanted this from Lucca; despite what Monty thought. Lucca couldn’t help but smile a bit at that.

Monty started to pick up the pace, and the franticness of it told Lucca he was close. Monty pressed
closer to Lucca, watching Lucca closely. Lucca licked his lips, pretending he couldn’t wait to have Monty come inside him. Monty smiled, pushing some hair off of Lucca’s forehead.

“The timing for your birthday and everything is perfect,” Monty said between breaths.

Lucca just nodded, not knowing what that meant. Did he mean because most doctors were only on-call during the holiday season, which was why Monty had so much free time? Or maybe because Monty’s father was also off; he rarely was this time of the year.

Monty leaned down, placing his head next to Lucca’s as he gave those last few final thrusts. “Yes,” Monty moaned, pushing in for the last one. “Isn’t it lucky you’re ovulating the same day as your birthday?”

Lucca gasped, his voice drowned out by Monty groaning in his ear as he came. Lucca immediately reached his hands to Monty’s hips, wanting him out. Fuck, he should have suspected that. It had been a couple of weeks since his last cycle. And he honestly should have been tracking that; most surrogates did. Lucca was the only who didn’t since he figured everyone else was taking care of it. Fuck, Lucca cursed to himself. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He didn’t want this. Not yet. Fuck, Monty didn’t even give him a couple of months of being legal to adjust to all of this? He wasn’t even moved into the house and yet Monty was already trying to knock him up? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Lucca struggled to catch his breath as Monty rested for a bit on top of him. He wasn’t going to be able to fake an appropriate reaction once Monty recovered. It was going to be all over his face how freaked out he was. Lucca squeezed Monty’s hips, wishing he could do something. Anything. But even if he had known he was ovulating, there was nothing he could do to stop Monty in the end.

Suddenly, without meaning to, Lucca burst into tears. Monty was immediately moving, lifting himself up and running his fingers through Lucca’s hair soothingly. Lucca covered his face, so angry and upset and helpless that he was embarrassed. For one second, he thought he had something on Monty; a secret that Monty wasn’t the great guy he thought he was.

And Monty immediately took that away; he didn’t even know he did. In the end, Lucca had no control over anything. Monty could decide anything for his life, and there was nothing Lucca could do about it. He thought he had coped with this, but Lucca realized in that moment that he really did not want to be pregnant. And it didn’t matter; he already could be now.

“You’re okay,” Monty shushed, kissing Lucca’s forehead when Lucca refused to move his hands for him to kiss anywhere else. “I know it’s a lot, Lucca. Your first time was going to be a lot.”

Lucca cried harder. Of course that’s what Monty thought the issue was. That he was just emotional after being fucked for the first time. Lucca had an urge to lash out against Monty; hit him and kick until he was out and off him. But Monty stayed where he was, his dick still hard and inside Lucca. Lucca felt stuck between his decision to not hate Monty for his own sanity and the hatred he couldn’t quell.

There was no way out of any of this.

“Here, Lucca,” Monty said, finally pulling out. How the hell was he still hard? “Turn around, baby. On your hands and knees.”

Lucca didn’t move, just cried. Monty allowed it for a full minute before he leaned down and began to adjust Lucca. Lucca went—unwillingly: his hands came down from his face to catch himself as Monty flipped him. Was Monty always that strong? He’d done that a bit too easily for Lucca’s
taste. With tears on his face, he looked over his shoulder as Monty grabbed his waist and tried to pull him back on his dick. Lucca tried to pull away, but Monty held him firm.

“Hey,” he scolded gently. “I know it’s a lot, Lucca, but we have to get used to this, right?”

Lucca started sobbing again, nodding his head. What a stupid way to end his birthday. Monty leaned over him, kissing his shoulder. Lucca didn’t fight when he felt Monty poking and prodding again, and he offered no resistance once Monty easily slid inside him. He hated every second of it, but since Monty was being nice enough to let him cry, Lucca was going to take full advantage of it.

“I know,” Monty said, pushing himself up so he could get a better grip on Lucca’s hips. “I know, baby. I know. It’s all so much for you. But I’m still hard, and I really want to try to get you nice and pregnant by the end of the night, okay?”

Lucca nodded.

Chapter End Notes

I first want to say that I hate having to work for a living. My job has been so insufferable the last two weeks that I would totally quit if I could afford to. And because of work kicking my ass, I never gave you guys the upload during the week that I promised. So I decided to post this today, and then tomorrow will be two chapters!

I was already going to do my normal post tomorrow with this chapter being a bonus, but as I read through the next chapter, I realized that it would be nice to upload the next two together. I suck when it comes to cliffhangers. When there's two chapters of events that happen back to back, I just want to post them so I don't leave you guys hanging. I know most people like letting readers wait, but not me. I'd rather spoil my readers.

Also, Monty is such an ass...

I have a graduation party to get to, so I'll see everyone tomorrow!
Chapter 18

Lucca didn’t think about making a basket for Derek. Derek was the sentimental one who cared about that stuff; Lucca just made sure to show up at the send offs. Besides, Lucca had no idea how Derek was getting the contraband he sneaked into the baskets he made for everyone else in their group who left already.

Lucca thought about this as he watched Derek stand by the window in their room. The door was propped open, so a security officer dressed in black could easily carry Derek’s bags and boxes out of the room. It wasn’t a lot, but more than what Lucca would have to pack. The security officer, Derek had explained, was sent ahead of Derek’s family, who would show up within the next hour. Derek was biting his nails, staring out the window and waiting.

Lucca sat on his bed, watching the man in black grab the last two boxes. He took the door stopper as he left; a subtle message that he wouldn’t be back and the two were safe again. Lucca didn’t even realize how tense the man’s presence had made him until he was gone.

“Are you that scared of flying?” Lucca asked conversationally, hoping it would pull Derek away from the window. He was making Lucca nervous.

Derek shrugged his response, not turning from the window. “A bit, I guess. We don’t leave the country until tomorrow morning, though.”

“So you’re going to spend all night silently freaking out?”

Derek turned to Lucca then, a smiling growing on his lips.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you flown on a plan before?”

“No.”

“Then you can’t talk,” Derek declared, walking away from the window and sitting on his now stripped bed. “You’d probably shit yourself too.”

Lucca thought about that and nodded his agreement. “Probably.”

Derek chuckled, looking at the ground between them. Since Josiah’s departure, they had a lot of silent moments. They never had a relationship before, and now circumstance made each other their only ally. It was awkward, to the say the least, but still bittersweet. Lucca thought he didn’t care about Derek leaving, but there was something sobering about it actually happening. About him being the only one left.

“I was more nervous about you,” Derek said suddenly, breaking the silence.

Lucca looked up. “Me? Why?”

“Because you almost skipped dinner all week if I hadn’t forced you to go with me. And I know
you’re supposed to be gaining weight, but you’ve been refusing the Resource. And you got really quiet after your birthday; I mean, you were never talkative around me, but it’s just been different lately. And it was easy to hide before when you have a group of boys to give the illusion of being social, Lucca, but they’re going to see you’re depressed if you keep going like this.”

Lucca blinked, debating whether to take offense to Derek’s words or not. He leaned back, placing his hands behind him and looked evenly at Derek.

“Do you ever worry about yourself?” he asked simply.

Derek didn’t respond; he didn’t seem to have a response to that. Lucca realized in that moment that Derek was trying to pick a fight. It wasn’t completely out of character for him; until recently, Derek seemed to love being the bane of Lucca’s existence. But that was before they were forced to be comrades in arms. Derek opened his mouth to speak, but Lucca decided to beach him to the punch.

“I guess that’s why you were the group leader,” Lucca said casually, refusing to get mad. “You always cared more about what we were doing than what was going on with you.”

“That’s because—”

“You were so perfect you didn’t need someone looking out for you?” Lucca finished.

“No, Lucca. God, I—”

“Liked the power. Liked being in charge. Being a leader. Having a slight sliver of control.”

Derek stopped, and seemed to consider this. He frowned, tilting his head.

“Maybe,” he admitted, much to Lucca’s shock. He shook his head and looked up at Lucca, his face contemplative. “Richard’s wife is very doting. She loves to cook and take care of people. Whenever I’m around her, she almost babies me. It’s kind of a lot.”

Now it was Lucca’s turn to look contemplative. “You were the one to look out for us; it meant no one was looking over you. You liked that.”

Derek nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I guess that’s it. I guess I’m not used to that. Being a peer leader meant I wasn’t as scrutinized. As long as I did what I was supposed to, that was good enough. And I never saw the point in fighting, so it worked out in my favor. I guess maybe things will change when the baby comes, and she has that to play with instead. But I don’t know. I guess that’s also why all I can do is worry about you right now.”

Lucca nodded, though Derek had turned his gaze back to the window and didn’t see it. Lucca let the silence settle between them. It was less awkward this time. Derek stood, returning to the window. He sighed, shaking his head.

“I hate waiting,” he said. “I just want to get all of this over with.”

Lucca didn’t have a response to that. Derek leaned against the windowsill, keeping an eye out but turning his attention back to Lucca.

“It’s only two weeks,” Derek reminded Lucca.

Lucca kept his face steady as he nodded.
“Like, I know you’ll be fine, hopefully, but you’re such a fucking wildcard, Lucca.”

Lucca wanted to smile, but held it back. Derek wasn’t trying to be funny; he was serious. And Lucca knew Derek needed this last moment of being the peer group leader. So Lucca kept quiet and waited.

“Can you just promise you’ll show up at every meal? And drink that nasty Resource? And gain weight? And be good? And don’t spend all your time in here; go out and do something, okay? And listen to Monty, Lucca. And talk to your counselor. And maybe even some of the guys in the other groups still around? And, seriously, stop trying to skip meals. Please?”

Lucca frowned at Derek, narrowing his eyes in a slight glare.

“If I say yes, will you shut up and leave me alone?”

“Yes.”

“Will you actually believe me and stop worrying?”

“No. Probably not.”

Lucca sighed. “I’ll agree to eat. And I’ll try to gain weight. I’m serious! Stop looking at me like that. And I’ll talk to my counselor. But that’s all I’m promising.”

“What about Monty?”

Lucca looked away at that, thinking. After a beat, he shrugged.

“Monty won’t give me a choice regarding that. It’s already done.”

Derek let out a long sigh. “Fine. I’ll take it. Thank you, Lucca.”

Lucca nodded, standing to meet Derek at the window. Just as he looked at the gates, he saw a dark blue car with diplomatic tags pull up. Derek tensed, watching as a tall man with dark hair got out.

Derek gasped suddenly, rushing over to the closet on his side. Lucca thought it would be empty, so he was surprised when Derek suddenly pulled out a basket the size of the ones he’d given to everyone else.

“I almost forgot about this,” he said, rushing over to Lucca’s closet. He threw open the door, finding a space to hide it. “Don’t let anyone see that. But don’t look at it until after I’m gone, okay?”

“Why?” Lucca asked, walking over as Derek closed the door. “What’s in it?”

“Just the typical stuff. But, keep it hidden. Even from Monty. If he might find it, get rid of everything in it, okay?”

Lucca was nervous now. While the baskets were known to have snacks and candies that surrogates shouldn’t have, there was nothing ever in them that would warrant real discretion. Sure, they’d get scolded if they’d been caught, but nothing so serious that they would need to dump the evidence in fear of being found out. Just what was in there?

“And it’s just two weeks, Lucca,” Derek said again, walking over to his side of the room, visibly trying to calm himself. “Two weeks and Monty takes you home. You just gotta tough out two weeks alone, okay?”
Lucca nodded, confused as all hell. Derek nodded, just as the key to their room beeped. The door opened, and the tall man walked in, glancing tensely at the two of them. As if suspicious. He didn’t walk in too far; his hand was still holding the door open behind him.

“Boys,” he said, his voice easily portraying a southern accent. He nodded at Lucca, his eyes giving Lucca a slow glance up and down that immediately spoke to the man’s attraction to Lucca. Lucca tensed. “I hope you’re both doing well on this fine evening.”

Lucca nodded politely. Derek spoke.

“We’re fine, Richard,” he said, a pleasant smile on his face. “How are you?”

“Tired,” he said, his eyes snapping to Derek. “I’d like to get back to the hotel as quickly as possible so I can get some sleep before our flight tomorrow.”

Derek dutifully nodded. “Of course. I’m ready. Clark already grabbed all my things.”

“Then let’s go.”

Derek turned to Lucca, giving a small, apologetic smile.

“Goodbye, Lucca,” he said, already walking to the door. “Good luck, okay?”

Lucca nodded, then remembered his words. “Yeah, you too.”

Derek just smiled, leaving the room easily. Richard walked to the doorframe, pausing to give Lucca another look. Lucca tried to keep his face relaxed and pleasant, as if he didn’t mind being gawked at. The man finally gave Lucca a curt nod before leaving and letting the door shut behind him.

Lucca sighed, waiting until he heard them leave the floor to the stairs before turning to his closet and pulling out the basket. Derek was technically gone, so there shouldn’t be a problem with him looking at it. Lucca sat on his bed, looking through the snacks and candies. There was a slice of strawberry shortcake wrapped in plastic; it looked fresh. How the hell did Derek manage to get his hands on this?

Lucca smiled, wondering just what had Derek so spooked. His hand hit the bottom as he tried to dig further down and frowned. He shouldn’t have hit the bottom that quickly; the basket was pretty deep. Lucca took the strawberry shortcake out, placing it on his desk, before dumping the basket completely. On top of the food fell a few notebooks and two small books.

Lucca frowned; everyone knew he couldn’t read. What was the point in Derek giving him these things? He grabbed one book, recognizing the golden letters on it as a copy of the Bible. Lucca rolled his eyes, tossing it to the side. As if the Center didn’t already provide him with one. The second one was small and red, full of a bunch of words that Lucca couldn’t read. Lucca sighed, looking at the notebooks in case Derek drew something on them.

The one on the bottom had five letters on them; the letters Lucca recognized as his own name. Curious, he opened it and saw that there were pictures. On the first page was a picture of an apple; it seemed cut out of a magazine or something. Lucca tilted his head to the side, looking at the letter above it. A. Below it were five letters: A-P-P-L-E.

Lucca turned the page, seeing a picture of a sleeping, black bear. The letter B stood above it, and then B-E-A-R was below it. Lucca flipped through a few more pages before realizing what he was looking at. He snapped the notebook closed, standing and grabbing everything in the basket and
putting it under Derek’s bed. He turned to his desk, grabbing his keycard, before rushing out of the
door and down the hall.

He didn’t have time to wait for the elevator; Derek might already be gone. So Lucca took off,
almost tripping down the stairs twice before making his way to the main floor. It was dusk, right
before the dinner rush, and there were only a few young kids wandering around as they enjoyed
their free time. Two boys quickly moved out of his way as Lucca ran towards the front doors.

Lucca looked out the doors, and saw that Derek and Richard had just left the building; they were
barely at the car. Lucca went into overdrive, his heart racing as he glanced at the check-in station.
One of the women who manned it looked at him, concern and worry on her face.

“Lucca? What’s wrong? You know running isn’t—Lucca, wait! No! Lucca!”

Lucca ran right past her, out the doors. Stupid; he knew seconds would pass and guards would be
right there to take him back. He’d have to explain this to his counselor; to the administrators, and to
Monty. But in this moment, Lucca didn’t care. There was no way he was letting Derek leave like
this.

“Derek!”

Derek snapped around, his eyes growing wide as Lucca rounded on him. Richard noticed—too
slowly—what was happening, not having time to grab Derek and pull him back. Just as well;
Lucca reached him first, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him into a tight hug.

“Lucca, what are you doing?” Derek asked, obviously taken by surprise. “You’re going to get in
trouble!”

“I know,” Lucca said, keeping his voice low so only Derek could hear him. “I’m sorry, but I had to
tell you thank you before you left.”

“What?”

“The basket.”

Derek didn’t respond, a hard sigh relaxing his shoulders before he returned Lucca’s hug. They only
held that for a full second before Lucca heard footsteps coming behind him.

“Calm down,” Lucca heard Richard say to whoever was coming up. “He just wanted to say bye to
his roommate. He’s not going anywhere.”

“You need to let go before you get in even more trouble,” Derek whispered, patting Lucca’s back.
“C’mon, I have to go.”

“I know,” Lucca said, lingering just one more second before letting go and taking a step back. “I’m
sorry. But I’m serious. Thank you. So much. I can never repay you.”

Derek nodded, a smile growing despite his best efforts. He nodded behind Lucca.

“Behave, and you will.”

Lucca glanced over his shoulder, almost surprised by the response he’d created. There were five
guards, one holding a loaded syringe and another holding restraints; two receptionists with walkie-
talkies raised to their lips; and three more faculty members in suits making their way from the
building. Oh, yeah: Lucca was in serious trouble.
“I will,” Lucca said to Derek, turning back to him. “I promise. Thank you, Derek.”

Derek nodded. “Now go back before they think you’re really trying to escape.”

Lucca wanted to cry then, something overwhelming him in that moment. He wasn’t sure what it was, so he pushed it down and thanked Derek one more time before taking a few steps back. Derek waved as Richard guided him into the car, giving Lucca a suspicious look before following him in the car.

Lucca turned, knowing that the guards wouldn’t move in until after the car was off grounds; it was a bad looking seeing guards swarm a surrogate. Lucca was surprised to see his counselor was one of the faculty who had walked up. He shook his head at Lucca, walking up to him calmly.

“T’m sorry,” Lucca immediately said, the magnitude of what he did just hitting him. His counselor pulled a light out of his pocket and flashed it in Lucca’s eyes. To see if he was high, Lucca realized distantly. He tried again. “I really am. I just had to say bye before he left. I didn’t mean to scare anyone. I’m really, really sorry.”

His counselor sighed. “Let’s bed this and talk about it in the morning.”

Lucca tensed when he saw the guard with the syringe walk forward and pass it to Lucca’s counselor. Fuck. Lucca really hated being sedated.

“Can I walk back?” Lucca asked.

“No, Lucca. I think it’ll be best if you just do what we tell you and stop fighting.”

Lucca quickly nodded. “I’m not fighting. Honest. I just didn’t want to miss dinner. I’m not supposed to be skipping meals.”

Lucca’s counselor gave him an incredulous look. Lucca swallowed, holding out his arm. His counselor paused for a few seconds before moving to administer the shot. It wasn’t until everything went blurry that Lucca worried how Monty would react to this when he heard about this.

Chapter End Notes

And then there was one...
Monty, it had turned out, would be furious.

Lucca sat in front of his counselor’s desk—in the office he used for quick sessions or meetings; not the one he used to pick brains in—trying hard not to look at Monty. Which was fine; Monty was resolutely not looking him as well. And that was how Lucca knew how angry he was. From the moment he’d entered the room, Monty’s focus had been on the counselor. On top of that, he was leaning back and away in his chair, his hand covering his mouth as he listened to the counselor ramble on and on about how much of a frenzy Lucca had caused.

Monty didn’t speak for a while, nodding as the counselor went on about concerns he had about Lucca’s ability to adjust to his new life and, essentially, be obedient. Lucca had watched Monty intensely from the corner of his eye, and had caught the flex in muscle when his counselor brought that up. When the counselor was finished, Monty didn’t respond at first. His counselor seemed to let him stew in the silence for a bit, likely believing Monty needed time to process everything. And probably to drive Lucca nuts.

When Monty moved his hand from his mouth, Lucca tensed. He knew he probably wasn’t going to like whatever Monty was about to say.

“You know,” Monty started, his voice carefully controlled, “I’m rather concerned that something like this happened. Why was Lucca even able to take a single step out the doors without being stopped?”

Lucca blinked, turning his head towards Monty before catching himself. So Monty was on his side? No, that wasn’t quite right.

“It’s not like the doors are guarded,” the counselor said, as if that was the most ridiculous thing.

“They’re not?” Monty snapped, his eyebrows raising. “So anyone can come in and out? Some rapist or murderer could get away with hurting someone before you idiots manage to get someone to handle it?”

Lucca flinched at the word “idiots.” Yeah, Monty was pissed.

“Excuse me?” the counselor said. If Lucca wasn’t aware that he was going to be on the receiving end of Monty’s anger eventually, he would have laughed at the baffled look on his counselor’s face.

“I was always under the assumption that these centers were highly guarded,” Monty lamented, turning to face Lucca now. Lucca kept his eyes on the ground. Monty’s words were for the counselor, but his eyes bore into Lucca. “How did Lucca manage to get outside the doors for as long as he was before the cavalry arrived? He shouldn’t have even managed to get one foot on those steps before he was stopped.”

“The attendants responded quickly, and—”

“There’s only attendants by the doors? I rarely saw guards near them, but I always assumed they were close and ready to jump into action. I guess that was my fault though. It’s amazing something
hasn’t happened before now. Not even just with Lucca, but with any of the surrogates.”

“Montgomery, I assure you that the Centers are the safest place for a surrogate to be. This scenario rarely—”

“Never. It should never happen. Lucca, look at me.”

Lucca tensed, but turned his head towards Monty. God, he was mad. He looked calm and relaxed, but Lucca could almost taste the anger radiating from him.

“You’re coming home with me tomorrow. Do you understand?”

Lucca simply blinked at Monty because, honestly, he didn’t. Monty allowed it for three full seconds before speaking again.

“I asked you a question, Lucca. I expect an answer.”

Lucca glanced at his counselor, who looked just as flabbergasted as Lucca felt.

“Lucca, why are you looking at him?” Monty snapped. “I asked you a question. Is this the sort of behavior I can expect from you?”

Lucca quickly shook his head, forcing himself not to look at his counselor again. It was obvious there was nothing he could do to help Lucca.


Monty shook his head. “No, Lucca, I’m bringing you home tomorrow. You’ll need to pack tonight; I’ll come get you after service. Do you understand now?”

Lucca nodded, then looked back at his counselor. An emergency meeting on a Saturday had been dramatic enough. Monty was supposed to be at a conference this weekend; that was why Lucca had assumed it wouldn’t be until Monday that he found out about his incident the day before. But Monty had cancelled his plans and flew back immediately for this meeting. And now he was taking Lucca home?

The part of Lucca that would be excited to finally be leaving the Center was pushed aside from the part of Lucca that wasn’t ready for this. He thought he had a bit of time to prepare. He wasn’t ready to live with Monty full time. He wasn’t ready to really begin trying to get pregnant. He wasn’t ready for any of this.

“Now, Monty, this isn’t necessary,” the counselor tried again. “A sudden change like this could make the transition difficult for Lucca. He needs—”

“He needs to be somewhere where I know he’ll be safe,” Monty interrupted again. “His bid has long been processed. There is no reason to hold this off, especially since I no longer trust this Center to watch over him. I’m just as qualified to help him with his transition as you are, Doctor.”

The counselor raised his eyebrows again. Lucca frowned, a little annoyed his counselor didn’t challenge Monty on that. Sure, Monty was a qualified doctor himself, but he didn’t have the years of experience that Lucca knew his counselor had. But the counselor didn’t fight it; acceptance quickly spread through his face. Lucca saw the exact moment that his counselor decided to let it go. Let Lucca go.
“I am sorry you feel that way,” his counselor said, writing something down in his notepad. “We, of course, would never stop you from doing what you think is best for your new family. The only other issue I must touch on is discipline. Even with him leaving, considering the nature of what Lucca has done, it’s important to make sure that this behavior will be corrected.”

“I will see to Lucca’s punishment once we’re done here,” Monty promised. “Do you need to see the bruises?”

Lucca flinched at that, though his counselor didn’t even blink.

“No, Montgomery, that won’t be necessary. We trust you to handle it.”

“Thank you, Doctor. If you’ll excuse us?”

The counselor simply nodded and gestured for them to leave. Monty stood, and Lucca quickly followed, not wanting to trigger Monty’s anger by dawdling. As soon as they were out the door, Monty firmly grabbed Lucca by the elbow and led him to the stairs towards Lucca’s room. It was the lunch hour, so most of his peers were in the cafeteria. Anyone else was likely hiding from administration, and therefore wouldn’t be privy to Lucca’s walk of shame.

Once Monty had Lucca inside his room, he turned on Lucca. His expression was calm, which had the effect of surprising Lucca while also reminding him of that day in the cabin. Despite all the noise his counselor and the administration were making regarding his stunt, Lucca hadn’t regretted what he’d done. But standing in his room alone with Monty, familiar to the calm façade Monty wore when he was furious, made Lucca admonish himself for running after Derek.

Monty didn’t speak, just watched Lucca. Lucca hated it, fidgeting as he kept his eyes resolutely on the ground. He wasn’t sure what Monty wanted. An explanation? An apology? Did he even want Lucca to speak? When Monty got quiet, it makes it impossible for Lucca to read him and try to respond accordingly. And he knew that was the very reason why Monty was doing it; to make Lucca sweat.

“So,” Monty started when the silence had gone on too long, “what did you need to say to Derek so badly that you went chasing after him like a lunatic?”

Lucca swallowed, quickly searching for a lie. Leave it to Monty to ask a question that none of the administration had. They were angry with what he did; they didn’t give a fuck why he’d done it. But Monty wasn’t like them, so of course he’d ask that.

“I needed to say goodbye,” Lucca said, his voice quiet. It was an obvious lie.

Fuck.

“He’s been your roommate for all this time and you didn’t get a chance to say goodbye?”

Lucca took a deep breath in and out. He hated having to act. He hated having to come up with convincing lies. But it wasn’t like Lucca could tell Monty what Derek had done for him.

“He was,” Lucca started, eyes still on the ground. “But it wasn’t like we were close. So when he left, it was weird. I didn’t say anything, and he didn’t either.”

“You weren’t close but you chased him down to say goodbye.”

That one wasn’t a question. Lucca closed his eyes before glancing up at Monty. His face was still pointedly neutral. Lucca shook his head, looking down and hoping his face looked embarrassed
and admonished enough.

“It felt wrong. After he left, it felt wrong. I said bye to everyone else, but I didn’t give him a proper send off and it felt wrong. He’s the last one from my group and we weren’t close, but it still felt wrong to not say bye. He—” Lucca cut himself off for effect, shaking his head as if he was really struggling to articulate himself. “I don’t know, Monty, but I just needed to tell him before he left.”

Monty didn’t respond, and Lucca didn’t want to risk being caught in his lie to look up to check how Monty was processing his words. Lucca bit his lip, letting his breath get just a bit heavier to convey fear; if he were lying, he wouldn’t be so anxious over Monty believing him. He’d believe his lie worked. At least that’s how he hoped Monty would interpret it.

“It was stupid,” Monty finally said. “What you did was extremely stupid.”

“I’m an idiot,” Lucca whispered, loud enough for Monty to hear, but not enough to convey that it was an easy thing to say. It wasn’t easy. He didn’t want to say it. But he knew Monty would love it. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Monty. I don’t mean to be. I really don’t mean to be an idiot. I just—”

“Don’t think.”

Lucca closed his eyes and nodded. He wanted to be angry at Monty for falling for his act; for believing that Lucca was truly an idiot. Anger, however, wasn’t going to help him. He needed to play on Monty’s sympathies if he wanted to minimize whatever beating was about to happen. Lucca knew there was no escaping the pain, but he didn’t want Monty to be furious when he did it. He was angry that time in the cabin, and Lucca just didn’t want a repeat of that.

“I’m not completely angry at you,” Monty said with a sigh, grabbing Lucca’s hand and pulling him into a hug. Lucca melted into it, pretending to be comforted by it. “Surrogates are very emotional naturally. And at this stage where you have your peers leaving and you yourself have to prepare to start your new life; it’s a lot of change happening very quickly. They don’t do much to aid that transition, but at the very least, you’d think they’d have some systems of how the pickups go to prevent shit like this from happening. It’s deplorable.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucca repeated into Monty’s chest, tightening his arms around Monty’s back.

Monty didn’t respond, just hugged Lucca back for a few long moments of quiet bliss. But the moment did eventually end, and Monty gently untangled them both. He tapped Lucca’s chin until Lucca looked up at him; Monty’s eyes were soft and sympathetic. Heavy with pity; he was still going to punish Lucca, but it wasn’t going to be out of anger.

Good.

“I still have to discipline you, Lucca,” he started.

Lucca nodded vigorously. “I know. I didn’t expect you not to. I—”

“Shhhh,” Monty said, guiding Lucca over to his bed. Lucca sat down, watching as Monty took off his belt and joined him on the bed. “I know, Lucca. Going easy on you isn’t doing you any favors, but this isn’t so much a punishment as it is a reminder. What you did was dangerous on many levels. I know it’s easy to not think about the ramifications of your actions, but you do have to take responsibility for them. No matter what your emotional state is. Okay?”

Lucca blinked before catching himself and nodding.

“Since I don’t have to prove that you were beaten sufficiently, we’ll let it be a light spanking. Just
this once. Okay?”

Lucca nodded. Yeah, sure. Why not?

“Good. Now how old are we now, Lucca?”

Lucca paused again, not fully grasping what Monty meant. Then understanding hit him, and he felt his face heat up with embarrassment.

“Eighteen,” Lucca mumbled.

“Should I round up or down?”

Lucca didn’t know why Monty was asking him. Was he trying to be nice? Would he just get mad if Lucca chose to round down?

“Up.”

“Good. Twenty lashes. Over my knee; let’s try to make this quick.”

Lucca hesitated, long enough for Monty to grab his hand and guide Lucca over his knee. Despite his darker complexion, he knew his face was probably beat red. Lucca could only think of one time his mother had spanked him. He didn’t even remember what he had done, just that his mother had apologized soon after, and swore to never do it again. Even then, spankings were still something done on children; not an eighteen-year-old.

“You don’t have to count them or anything,” Monty said once Lucca was settled over his lap. Lucca gripped the bedsheets with anxiety. “Just keep your hands above your waist, and don’t fight me. Okay?”

“Ohkay,” Lucca said, feeling as small as his voice sounded.

The first lash caught Lucca by surprise. And the second came quickly after. They weren’t particularly painful; it was obvious Monty wasn’t planning to hurt Lucca excessively. By the time the seventh lash landed, Lucca felt sore simply because he was being hit in the same spot over and over. By the tenth, Lucca couldn’t help but wriggle. Monty simply placed a firm hand on Lucca’s back and continued.

The thirteenth lash brought tears to Lucca’s eyes, and he was crying out by the fifteenth. On the last one, Lucca couldn’t hold back a sob, though he managed to keep the tears at bay. Monty stopped, letting Lucca lie on him for a few moments while he caught his breath. Once Lucca felt a bit calmer, Monty helped Lucca up. It felt sore to sit on his bed, but not painfully so.

“Feel better now?” Monty asked.

It was a stupid question. Of course Lucca didn’t feel better after being spanked. But he knew that wasn’t what Monty wanted to hear. So he nodded his head and decide to continue his act a bit longer just to make Monty happier.

“Thank you, Monty.”

“For what, honey?”

“For taking the time to discipline me. I know you were supposed to go away. I’m sorry I ruined your plans.”
Lucca saw the way Monty melted at his words and pretended he didn’t feel any hatred towards Monty. He *would* fall for something so disgusting.

“My family is more important than any conference,” Monty said, kissing Lucca on his forehead. “Speaking of which, you need to start packing. I still want you to go to service tomorrow morning. Do you need me to stay and help?”

Lucca thought of the books and notebooks Derek had given him, hidden in Derek’s closet.

“No,” Lucca said, shaking his head. “I’ll be fine on my own. I don’t want you to waste any more of your time.”

“Lucca, you’re not—”

“I know. I won’t need help, though, Monty. I can be good for you.”

Monty sighed, lifting a hand to get tangled in Lucca’s curls.

“Alright,” Monty said, kissing Lucca on the lips this time. “Don’t skip dinner. I think your service gets out before mine will, so be ready by lunch tomorrow. Okay?”

Lucca nodded, feeling relieved when Monty detangled his fingers from Lucca’s hair.

“Okay. I love you. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Lucca smiled, following Monty to the door to say goodbye. After another quick kiss, Lucca let the door shut and turned to face his room. He stared out the window, the sun high in the midday. Lucca had plenty of time to pack; he didn’t have much stuff as it was. But knowing that he was leaving meant no more reports. So there was nothing preventing him from pushing off packing until later in the day. And if he skipped dinner as a result, he just didn’t give a fuck.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter isn’t something to wait a week for imo, so I’m going to post it sometime this week. The latest will be Wednesday, no matter what, though it will hopefully be tomorrow.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Ch-ch-ch-changes~

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca wrapped his coat around him as he stared out the spacious backyard. The inground pool was covered with tarp, shut down for the winter. But past that was a large space of green grass, a tennis court off to the side, and dense rows of trees separating their property from the neighbors’. If Lucca hadn’t seen the equally large house on the equally large property next to them on the drive to the house, he wouldn’t have believed there were any neighbors. The trees were thick that there was no way he could see the other house from the yard.

Though Lucca knew that was the point; a play at privacy. Land large enough to have a small farm on it. The type of homes that led to ideal childhoods full of fun and laughter. Those who were capable of starting families always managed to get large properties; the Nation wouldn’t accept any less. Lucca took a deep breath in, letting the cold air trigger a chill that went down his spine.

“Jesus Christ, Lucca, what are you doing?”

Lucca looked up from his seat on the patio deck, watching Chelsea slide the door open. She was only wearing a long skirt with a light sweater, and so she simply waved her hand out the door instead of stepping outside. Lucca watched her for a second, standing before he could be considered being rude.

“Get in here! What the hell is wrong with you? Why do I always find you outside when you disappear?”

Lucca walked inside the door, the den decorated in holly and stars for Christmas. Chelsea shut the door, locking it as though that would be enough to keep Lucca inside. He watched her, taking off his coat and hanging it next to Monty’s by the door. Chelsea turned towards Lucca, crossing her arms over her chest with a huff.

“Are you trying to catch the flu? Is that your goal?”

Lucca shook his head, his eyes drifting off to the glass doors at the scene outside. It was sunny, despite the cold, and the air was still. It was a perfect early winter day with no biting wind or dreary clouds to ruin it.

“No,” Lucca answered when the look on Chelsea’s face made him realize the question wasn’t rhetorical. “It's just nice being outside.”

“I’m sure. Still, you need to stay inside unless someone is with you.”

Lucca felt a surge in anger; he’d only been at the house for a few days, and already Chelsea’s bossiness was wearing thin. Lucca wasn’t sure if she wanted to remind him that she was still the lady of the house—despite their unconventional arrangement—or if she was just a control freak.
Either way, Lucca was already over it.

“Monty said I could go outside whenever I want,” Lucca said as Chelsea headed towards the brief stairs to the main floor.

“I don’t care what Monty told you,” Chelsea snapped, stopping at the top of the stairs while Lucca followed her. She didn’t continue until Lucca was standing next to her. “Monty isn’t here during the day, at which point in time I’m responsible for you. And I want to know where you are at all times; I shouldn’t have to drive myself and the help into a frenzy looking for you because you decided to go off outside.”

Lucca forced himself not to glare. God, she really was insufferable. And he still wasn’t sure how to work Chelsea. She wasn’t at all like Monty; she didn’t think he was stupid or naïve. In fact, Lucca had even overheard her pointing out a time where Lucca did play into Monty’s sympathies to get out of having to do his daily workouts. Monty had brushed it off, but it bothered Lucca how easily Chelsea saw through him.

Because of that, he found himself constantly at odds with her; she wasn’t willing to give him an inch, which just made Lucca resent her. Lucca was debating whether to bring up their tension to Monty. But as Chelsea had just pointed out, he spent most of the days alone with her. Lucca wasn’t sure he wanted to deal with Chelsea’s ire if Monty addressed her on her attitude towards Lucca.

Which meant Lucca was on his own.

“Can I go outside if I ask first?” Lucca asked, deciding on a different approach.

Chelsea scowled at Lucca so long that he was sure she wasn’t going to answer. She sighed, placing her hands on her hips with a shake of her head.

“If I say ‘yes,’ then of course. But I’m warning you now, it’s likely going to be rare. The flu is supposed to be bad this year, and we can’t have you getting sick while you’re trying to get pregnant. Understand?”

Lucca nodded obediently. “Okay,” he said. Then added for extra measure, “Thank you.”

Lucca turned to head towards the second set of stairs that led to the second floor. Much to his chagrin, Chelsea stopped him again.

“Where are you going?” she snapped, stopping Lucca in his tracks. “It’s lunch time. In the dining room. Now.”

Lucca rolled his eyes before fixing his face and turning to follow Chelsea to the dining room. Lucca, of course, wasn’t hungry. He’d purposely pretended to sleep well into the morning, hoping to get away with skipping breakfast with Chelsea. Instead, she insisted on brunch, and that had only been a couple of hours ago. And he still had to deal with starting his morning with Chelsea criticizing everything he was, or wasn’t, eating, and giving her opinions on what Lucca needed to do to better his chances of getting pregnant quickly.

Because of that, Lucca knew Chelsea wouldn’t be forgiving and let him get away with eating less than he normally would at lunch because of his late breakfast. So Lucca didn’t bother complaining as they entered the dining room. Belinda was setting out sandwiches, salads, and fruit, while Arielle, one of the new maids Monty had hired to help maintain the house, set out a pitcher of sweet iced tea.

Chelsea suddenly turned on her heel at the door, blocking Lucca from entering. She lowered her
voice so only Lucca could hear her, fixing another scowl at him.

“This is going to be an adjustment, and I understand that,” she started, her voice rather sympathetic considering the slight glare on her face. “But I’m going to make one thing clear: I don’t care how Monty feels about you and what little fantasies he’s placed in your head. This thing between you two cannot exist unless I play along. And when all is said and done, I am the lady of this household. And you are to remember that and treat me as such. Understood?”

Lucca bit his tongue, his heart racing. He nodded despite his disapproval and waited until Chelsea was satisfied. A small smirk climbed her face, and she gave a curt nod.

“Good. Now that we’ve settled that, let’s eat. And don’t touch that tea; too much sugar will make it difficult for you to catch.”

At that, Chelsea turned on her heel again, addressing the pitcher of tea to Arielle, who apologized before filling one of the empty cups with tea and then taking the pitcher back to the kitchen. Chelsea sat down in front of the setting with the tea and gestured for Lucca to join her.

Lucca hesitated, wishing he could just turn and stomp off to his room and sulk. Or go pointedly outside just to spite her. But Lucca wasn’t a child anymore, and he knew Monty would side with Chelsea if he did something so immature. So he moved to sit across from her, politely thanking Arielle when she returned to fill his own glass with water, and stared at the smorgasbord of food in front of him. He could feel Chelsea’s eyes on him, waiting for him to start before moving herself.

Lucca grabbed a few sandwiches and loaded them onto his plate before reaching for an apple he immediately bit into. At that, Chelsea finally focused on her own plate, loading it with salad and fruit.

“I think we should set the tree up this weekend,” she said conversationally, taking a bite of her food and looking thoughtful while she chewed. “Of course, we want to do a real one in the family room, but I was thinking of getting a few plastic ones for the den and for your room. Would you like a Christmas tree in your room, Lucca?”

Lucca swallowed and nodded, holding back a frown. Chelsea glowed with approval.

“I think it would be a nice habit to get into for the children since they will spend time there while you’re nursing. And this time next year, we should have a bundle of joy to celebrate Christmas with, right?”

Lucca nodded again, feeling sick.

Chapter End Notes

In retrospect, this isn't that bad of a chapter, lol. I think I lowkey want to post a lot of chapters ASAP so it'll light a fire under my ass and force me to finish this story asap. Can you believe this is only halfway through all of the chapters I've written?

I must finish asap lol.

See you all on Saturday!
Chapter Notes

I didn't realize it until this weekend that on my last update, I said "see you Saturday" even though I've designated Sundays as my upload day. Hope that didn't confuse or disappoint anyone when there wasn't an upload yesterday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christmas had come and gone without incident. Chelsea’s family flew in from Georgia: her mother, father, and two older sisters. Lucca had never met them, but they were nice enough. Chelsea’s father didn’t interact much with Lucca; something Lucca was starting to realize was common for older men. The whole surrogate bit seemed to make them uncomfortable. Chelsea’s mother was nice, as was Chelsea’s oldest sister, Lucy. They doted over Lucca, forcing him to make caramels and Christmas cookies with them on Christmas Eve.

The middle sister, Elizabeth, was quiet the week they stayed. Chelsea and her mother tried to include her in activities with the family, but she preferred watching filmed recordings of ballets. Chelsea’s father was happy to oblige; they had bought quite a few with them.

Monty would later reveal to Lucca that Elizabeth danced as a child but was forced to stop when she was found fertile at 14. When her body started to change after she stopped training, she tried to starve herself to ward off puberty. She was sent to be reprogrammed after that. At nineteen, she was married off to a local boy in the area whose family were old military officials. The boy was also in the military, and often had to travel for his work. As such, it took three years before she finally got pregnant. And she miscarried soon after. This happened three more times over the next few years before her husband found that she was purposely causing the miscarriages.

Monty claimed the husband put her on lockdown, that she was not allowed out of someone’s company when he wasn’t home. When she got pregnant again, she made it to the second trimester. One day, she slipped her attendants and ran away. Even made it to Faust City, where she was able to get an abortion. She was eventually “rescued,” but her husband was done with her. He divorced her, and she was sent back home with her family. Her father immediately had her lobotomized, and were looking for a suiter to take her in.

Lucca hadn’t asked how that effort was going: the latter events had apparently been recent. It would be hard to marry off a lobotomized woman, but there were plenty of men who wouldn’t mind. Really, it was the fact that she was a divorcée that would really get in the way of her remarrying. But she was still young, and fertile despite everything. Lucca was sure her parents would find someone soon.

Monty’s parents came over on Christmas day. The women spent the day in the kitchen, pretending to help the cooks with dinner. The men stayed in the sitting room, talking politics and wars. Lucca had spent most of the day in his room, watching the light snow fall until Chelsea decided she wanted him in the kitchen so all the women could fawn over him.

It would be two more days before Chelsea’s family finally left. And another day still before Monty fucked him again. Lucca had enjoyed the reprieve while Chelsea’s family was around, but he hadn’t cared much for all the noise and company. He wasn’t sure which was better: the unwanted
attention from Chelsea’s family or Monty fucking him all hours of the night.

New Years was quiet. A snow storm had hit and stopped only hours before the countdown. Despite that, they could still hear the neighbors’ kids banging pots and pans to welcome in the new year. Chelsea had remarked how she couldn’t wait for their children to be old enough to join in. Three days later, Lucca had to ask her for napkins. Lucca was sure from the disappointed look in Chelsea’s eyes as she called a maid to retrieve them that she wondered if he had gotten his period just to spite her. If he could control that, he just might have.

~*~

January had brought a total of four snow storms; two were one right after the other. That one had left Monty unable to go to work for a week. Lucca spent the week in bed, tending to Monty—and his cock—through the freezing cold. Monty made sure to emphasize throughout the entire week how lucky it was that he was trapped inside right around the time Lucca would be ovulating. Every night, Monty led them in prayer for their efforts to be fruitful. Every night, Lucca silently prayed for God to kill him before he became pregnant.

After Valentine’s Day had come and gone, and Lucca was bleeding again, it became apparent that God wasn’t answering either of their prayers.

Lucca sat on the toilet in his bathroom, handing Monty the third—and hopefully final—pregnancy test he’d peed on. It was freezing, so Lucca was quick to pull up his pants. Monty sat the tests on the sink, watching them for a minute before turning his gaze back towards Lucca. Lucca had just finished his period; he wasn’t sure why Monty was insisting on this. Monty claimed that it wasn’t uncommon to still get a period in the early days of pregnancy.

“You’ve been very quiet lately,” Monty said, conversationally.

Or, at least, that was the tone he was trying to affect. He liked to pretend that he wasn’t constantly evaluating Lucca. Every conversation was a chance for Monty to psychoanalyze him. Lucca, despite knowing what Monty was doing, never had good answers whenever Monty started. So he simply flushed the toilet, shrugging.

“I don’t talk much as it is,” he replied, lamely.

Which was true. But that, really, wasn’t what Monty was referring to. Monty gestured for Lucca to join him at the sink. Lucca went, avoiding the pregnancy tests so he could wash his hands. Monty sat the tests on the sink, watching them for a minute before turning his gaze back towards Lucca. Lucca had just finished his period; he wasn’t sure why Monty was insisting on this. Monty claimed that it wasn’t uncommon to still get a period in the early days of pregnancy.

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Which was true. But that, really, wasn’t what Monty was referring to. Monty gestured for Lucca to join him at the sink. Lucca went, avoiding the pregnancy tests so he could wash his hands. Monty was close, and Lucca had to be careful not to splash him with water. Monty grabbed the tests as Lucca finished, looking at them while Lucca dried his hands on one of the towels he kept hanging next to the sink.

“You’ve been very quiet lately,” Monty said, frowning. He shook his head. “It’s a simple formula, and we’ve both been tested against any issues. If I were a different man, I would start to suspect you of sabotaging yourself.”

Lucca flinched, stepping back to give himself some distance from Monty. Not that it mattered; all that was behind him was the bathroom door. Lucca could feel Monty’s eyes on him, watching him. Analyzing. Always analyzing. Lucca didn’t have anything to say for himself; it wasn’t like he was actually that stupid. Lucca had seen enough surrogates at the center attempt to sabotage their fertility. He knew it’d only be a matter of time before he got caught. And then he’d be punished. It wasn’t worth it.
“No,” Monty said after letting Lucca stew in his words for a moment. “No, you wouldn’t do something that stupid, would you? You don’t try enough, though.”

Lucca bristled a bit at that. “I do try.”

“Chelsea says you try to eat as little as you can at meals. I’ve noticed how little you eat at dinner as well.”

“I do eat,” Lucca muttered. He knew he was being childish, but he refused to let Monty think Lucca wasn’t trying. “I just can’t eat as much as you think I should.”

“You can. You just won’t.”

Lucca had no response to that. He kept his gaze resolutely on the ground.

“How often do you pray, Lucca?”

Lucca didn’t have a response to that really. So he shrugged. Monty didn’t respond. Lucca didn’t have to look up to see that Monty hadn’t approved of his response. So he thought of something—anything—to say.

“I pray when you lead me in prayer.”

“What a good, obedient little thing you are.”

Lucca didn’t answer that. He wasn’t supposed to.

“Do you truly pray to be fruitful, Lucca?”

Lucca nodded.

“We’re back to silence?”

“I’m not confident praying on my own,” Lucca said, since he apparently needed to say something.

“You don’t care enough to pray on your own. Not for this, at least. I’m sure if I could read your mind, I’d hear prayers begging God to keep you barren and useless.”

Lucca flinched again, pressing against the door behind him. He didn’t want to fight Monty. Not on this. Monty would win. There was no way Lucca would be able to hide just how much he didn’t want to become pregnant. Monty would wrench it out of him somehow. And then he’ll get in trouble. Lucca’s mind instantly went back to that day in the cabin. Would Monty beat him again like that? For not trying hard enough?

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said after a while, unsure of what else to say. “I’m sorry, Monty. I’m sorry. I’ll try harder. I promise.”

“How?” Monty asked, his tone cold. “If you think you’re trying now, how will you try harder?”

Lucca shook his head, at a lost. “I—I’ll eat more. I’ll—”

“You’ve promised that before and didn’t follow through. Back when you were at that wretched center. Looked me straight in my eyes and promised to gain weight, only to go back and skip meals.”

Lucca closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. He didn’t want to, but he needed to look at Monty. He
needed to try to read him. So when he opened his eyes, he lifted them. Monty’s steely gaze met him, cold and dark and unyielding. He was mad. Angry. Lucca needed to diffuse this somehow. He blinked, not letting his eyes drop despite how much he wanted to turn away.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said. Admitted, as he hoped Monty would see it. “I’ve been difficult. I didn’t expect this to be so hard. I thought it would be easy. I thought I’d be pregnant by now. I didn’t think I had to try.”

Monty didn’t say anything, nor did he interrupt. Lucca knew this meant he was buying it, or was at least listening. He let himself look away.

“I’m sorry,” Lucca repeated. “I didn’t think I had to try so I never took any of it seriously. I didn’t think it was a big deal if I ate less, or if I didn’t pray. I thought it would still happen despite that. I’m—”

Lucca cut himself off. He’d meant to apologize again, but that wasn’t what was about to leave his mouth. Monty, however, seemed to catch it. Monty leaned down close to Lucca’s face. Close enough to kiss him, though Lucca knew he wouldn’t do that. Not yet, anyway. Lucca kept his eyes on the ground; losing his nerve as more and more time went by.


Lucca glanced up, considered just apologizing again. But Monty would recognize the lie. Or half-truth; whatever it was. Lucca wasn’t about to apologize, and Monty knew that. Lucca wondered if Monty knew exactly what he’d been about to say. Probably. That was why he was going out of his way to make Lucca say it. And Lucca knew he had to say it; whether he wanted to or not.

“I’m an idiot,” Lucca finally said, tears burning his eyes. He refused to cry, though. “I’m an idiot.”

Monty did kiss Lucca then. It surprised Lucca; he instinctively pulled back before remembering himself. Monty was gentle, kissing him deeply. It was the sort of kiss Monty used to try to convey his love. Lucca knew Monty loved him; he just felt Monty’s love was fucked up and miserable. When Monty pulled away, Lucca was almost disappointed.

“It’s easier,” Monty said, tilting his head affectionately, “to come up with a solution once we admit our wrongs. Our mistakes. God created you for this, did He not?”

“Yes,” Lucca said, feeling numb as he responded. “Yes, He did.”

“He would never ask more of you than what you can give. He would never ask you to be something He never intended for you to be, would He?”

“No, Monty.”

“He made you as He needed you to be. He made you fertile so that you may serve Him despite what you are. He made you everything you are. And what else did He make you, Lucca? Say it for me one more time.”

Lucca hesitated, just for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was quiet; a whisper.

“An idiot.”

Monty smiled, and Lucca tried hard not to hate him for it.

“See? He didn’t create you to be a doctor. He didn’t create you to understand the nuances of
pregnancies. He created you to obey. He created you to be fruitful. And that’s it, Lucca. That’s all you need to be.”

Lucca smiled at Monty, nodding. He didn’t believe this junk for a second. But he wanted Monty to think he did. So he smiled and nodded like the idiot Monty believed him to be.

“It’s my job to worry about everything we need to do to get you pregnant,” Monty continued, obviously feeling proud of himself for this breakthrough. “It’s Chelsea’s job to help me implement what’s necessary to help you with that. All I’m asking from you, Lucca, is your obedience. Do what we tell you, and the rest will follow.”

“That’s easy,” Lucca said, sounding like the idiot he felt like. “I want to be obedient, then.”

Monty smiled, his heart melting. Lucca kept his stupid smile on his face. He hated this, but there was nothing he could do. If it was obedience Monty wanted, he would get it one way or another. At least this would stave off any potential lobotomy conversations.

“You have a doctor’s appointment on the first,” Monty said, turning to throw the pregnancy tests out. “We’ll discuss our options then, reassess, and come up with an action plan. And then we’ll have you pregnant in no time. In the meantime, we’ll focus on building your submission. Okay?”

Lucca nodded as if excited to obey Monty’s every word. And Monty bought it, kissing Lucca briefly on the lips.

“We can start right away,” Monty said, reaching past Lucca for the door. “Go to your room, take your clothes off, and wait for me on your knees on your bed.”

Lucca gave Monty his fakest, biggest smile.

“Yes, Monty.”

Chapter End Notes

Today was a busy day and I'm exhausted. This chapter was a bit later in the day due to Game of Thrones returning! Did any of you watch it? What are your thoughts on the first episode?

Oh, and you can comment on your thoughts on this chapter too, I guess lol.
Chapter 22

This is my first time being late, lol. Sorry!

“Do you have a counselor, Lucca?”

Lucca shook his head, pulling his shirt back on. He had a new doctor now that he was out of the Center, which Lucca was grateful for. It was even a private practice instead of one of the physicians at the local Center. Lucca was happy he wasn’t forced to go back to a Center every three months to be poked and prodded at. His doctor was even a woman, taller than him with a deeper complexion and long braids. She had been gentle with him throughout the entire procedure, and she spoke with a softness that almost made Lucca think he could trust her.

Almost.

The doctor—Dr. Johnson—looked surprised at Lucca’s response to her question.

“There was a level of judgement in her voice that Lucca liked. It was nice to see someone notice that Monty wasn’t perfect. That Monty didn’t always have all the answers. That Monty didn’t always know what was best. Lucca wasn’t stupid enough to play into it, but he appreciated her derision regardless.

“I didn’t think I needed one,” Lucca replied instead. That was a safer answer.

“I recommend it,” Dr. Johnson said, writing something down on her clipboard. “Well, let’s bring Monty in so we can have a conversation about your concerns, okay?”

Lucca nodded, sitting on the examination table. Dr. Johnson left the room momentarily, and Lucca waited in the quiet. He thought it earlier but couldn’t help but appreciate the simplicity of the room. He was used to the cartoonish and immature posters surrounding the examination rooms at the Centers. The childlike drawings trying to communicate health concerns of people old enough to carry children; menstruation, vaccinations, and ways to prevent getting the flu.

This room, however, had a more professional feel. There was no getting rid of the sterile atmosphere of the white walls and cabinets, but there were a few shelves on the walls with books instead of posters. The doctor’s degrees hung framed by the door. Plants lined the windowsills in the back of the room, with warm curtains attempting to bring a level of coziness that Lucca had never seen from a doctor’s office before.

The door opened, the doctor returning with a tight smile at Lucca. Lucca wondered what had upset her and tensed when Monty followed her in with a hard set in his jaw. Had they argued over something? Or did she tell him that something was wrong? Lucca felt himself sit up a bit straighter as Monty walked over to stand next to him.
“How do you feel, Lucca?” he asked quietly, rubbing Lucca’s lower back. “Everything go okay?”

Lucca nodded, not sure what else he was supposed to say. Monty hummed a response before turning back to the doctor standing in front of them.

“I don’t like discussing medical results in front of him,” Monty said, and something about the way he said it made Lucca think it wasn’t the first time. “He’s fine, so—”

“You’re highly accomplished, Montgomery,” Dr. Johnson said, interrupting him. Lucca went still; as did Monty’s hand on his back. “It’s truly an honor to be tending to your family. The Nation expects great things from you. And I must do my part in helping you in that goal.”

Monty stood a bit straighter and narrowed his eyes at the doctor.

“Flattery is always appreciated,” he said, purposely not thanking her. “I am, at my core, a man, after all. I’ve read studies about surrogates taking well to being more engaged in their health, but I’m just not of the professional opinion of it doing much good.”

“I respect that,” she replied, though Lucca could tell from the tone of her voice that she did not. “Lucca doesn’t have a counselor and he’s still adjusting to his new lifestyle. It’s important that he finds something to help center himself so he can do his duty. If you truly disagree, we can dismiss him to the waiting room.”

Monty didn’t respond, and all of this made Lucca nervous. Something had to be wrong: something that Monty didn’t want Lucca to know about. Lucca knew he had no say in this. He didn’t want something to be wrong and him not know. It was a terrifying thought. And, yet, if Monty wanted it that way, there was nothing he could do.

It wasn’t fucking fair.

“I fear our conversation at this point has made Lucca nervous,” Monty said, his hand moving to create circles on Lucca’s back again. “I’ll consider how I’ll prefer these discussions to go down in the future.”

“And your choice on the matter will be respected and obeyed,” Dr. Johnson said. She paused to flip through her clipboard, her eyes scanning the papers. “We can confirm that Lucca is not pregnant. He’s not in the best condition for it, so I’d take this as a good sign. I’d actually suggest holding off attempts to focus on building his health a bit.”

“Building his health how?” Monty asked, his tone dangerous. Dr. Johnson was walking on thin ice.

“Well, he’s not at his target weight. Which I see from his history has always been a struggle for him. Surrogates get anxious when they feel out of control, and food is an easy way for them to try to reclaim control. Depression and anxiety disorders can also affect appetite, and the particular antidepressant he’s been on isn’t helping in that regard.”

Lucca knew he was on an antidepressant, but no one had ever said it. It was common for surrogates; he knew he didn’t fake it well enough to avoid being drugged. But it was still jarring to hear it stated so matter-of-factly. He didn’t want to be on it; he never had a choice.

“I don’t think he even needs it,” Dr. Johnson continued, flipping through another page. “Lucca is pretty sharp, but doesn’t seem prone to melancholy. He does appear anxious, however. I want to get him on a temporary Valium plan coupled with some aggressive counseling to help him before we see him pregnant.”
Monty looked confused; Lucca was too.

“Valium? His antidepressants also tend to any anxiety issues he could have.”

Dr. Johnson tilted her head, glancing at Lucca briefly before returning to Monty.

“You’re touching him now, are you not? Does he feel tense under your hands?”

Monty stopped rubbing and removed his hand entirely. Lucca looked down; he wasn’t sure if he liked being around for this conversation. Maybe Monty had a point about this.

“Lucca holds a lot of tension in his body. Anxiety can affect fertility; in fact, I’d say it’s the main reason you’re having issues conceiving. Both of you are too healthy to not already be expecting. While Lucca is not pregnant, I’d like to treat his anxiety for a solid month or two. If we can do this, you’ll find it easier to get him pregnant. It’ll also be a good time to start care routines for him and everyone in your household. Which will mean a happier household you’ll be bringing a child into.”

Monty seemed to think about this for a while, quiet. Dr. Johnson let him, soundlessly tapping a finger against the top of her clipboard. Monty glanced at Lucca, still unsure.

“Benzodiazepines are highly addictive,” Monty said.

“That’s why I do this as a temporary treatment,” Dr. Johnson replied. “I have a scheduled plan where he’s on a low dosage for about a month, and then we spend time weaning him off. You wouldn’t want him to get pregnant while he’s on it, so you will have to refrain from any baby-making activities.”

“I haven’t had the time to find a counselor in the area.”

“I have a few I could recommend. Two in particular I highly suggest; I’ve done this treatment with other surrogates before with them, and it’s been highly effective. Better results than a lobotomy even.”

Monty glanced at Lucca before nodding. “Okay. We can give it a shot.”

Dr. Johnson smiled. “I really believe this will help. While we’re doing this, we can focus on helping him gain weight. He also would do well with a workout regimen that is less cardio based and focuses more on flexibility and strength. Also, living in suburban areas can get lonely; it would be best for your entire family if you could find other families to connect to. They also can provide feedback and allow your wife and surrogate a chance to socialize. They’ll like that. Also—”

Lucca started to tune them out. Some part of him had hoped maybe he’d get a bit of a say in this. But it was more of the same; at least before he wasn’t told anything, and his health was decided for him. When his medication changed, Lucca wasn’t allowed to question it. Lucca didn’t even know what all he took with his vitamins in the mornings and evenings. Being there for the conversation about what would be changing didn’t matter: he didn’t have a choice either way. The only good thing that was coming out of this was that he would get to go a while without Monty fucking him.

Maybe being around for the conversation wasn’t an entire waste.

Chapter End Notes
I don't really have any excuse or reason for being late with this update. Yesterday just didn't go as planned, and so I never got around to it. My fault entirely.

I took off work this Thursday and Friday for some self-care days, so I might post a chapter or two on those days since I'll have the time. I'm not making any promises though, so we'll see. If not, see everyone on Sunday. I'll post first thing in the morning just so I know I'll be on time, okay?
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

I apologize if this isn't edited quite as well. I was halfway through editing this when Game of Thrones came on, and I just was NOT prepared for ANYTHING I just saw.

No spoilers, but GOT DAMN.

Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We’ve gotten a few new neighbors,” Monty said, his tone so casual that Lucca’s initial reaction was to tune him out.

It wasn’t for him to respond to anyway; Lucca turned his gaze to Chelsea across the dinner table. She didn’t react either, seeming too focused on watching Arielle fill her glass with a red wine Monty brought home with him. It wasn’t until a second too long went by that Chelsea realized all eyes were on her, waiting.

“Really?” she said, obviously distracted. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“You should host something,” Monty said, starting in on his meal. “I don’t think I’ve seen you interact with our neighbors much. And it would be a great way for you all to meet each other.”

Chelsea pulled away from Arielle—she finished pouring the wine and was retreating to the kitchen anyway—to narrow her eyes at Monty.

“Host something?” she repeated. “You mean for the women?”

“Yes. Maybe a brunch?”

“Do you intend to meet the men who live on our block?”

Lucca frowned, focusing on his own meal instead. Belinda had made garlic mashed potatoes. They were heavenly. But they went cold in his mouth while Monty lowered his own wine glass and turned his body to face Chelsea.

“Greg is next door, with his wife Natalie. She’s expecting their first son in April. Calvin’s still in active duty. He and his wife are on the other end; they have a zen garden where his wife hosts a monthly craft circle. The Kyles across the street have twin girls; they’re working on getting their surrogate pregnant again as they took a break while they adjusted to them. On the corner are Travonte and Kira; I carpool with Travonte when we work the same hours. I haven’t met the two couples who just moved in; though I planned on changing that soon.”

Chelsea took a sip—a long sip—of her wine and shrugged.

“Oh,” she said.

Monty didn’t answer right away, just staring Chelsea down. Lucca had to admit he found her blasé
attitude admiring; though he saw how she squirmed in her seat under Monty’s scrutiny. After a while, Monty’s eyes turned on Lucca, dipping down to see his barely touched plate.

“Lucca,” Monty started, the warning heavy in his voice.

Before he could say another word, Lucca picked up his fork and started to dig in. Monty was not playing around about Lucca’s eating habits anymore. Since the doctor’s visit a few days ago, Monty had apparently told Chelsea—and the maids—to monitor Lucca’s eating. Just the day before, Lucca hadn’t eaten enough to keep in line with his weight gain goals. Monty took Lucca over his knee and spanked him like a child. Lucca didn’t think that humiliation was worth not eating just to spite Monty.

Lucca could feel Monty’s eyes on him while he ate. There was a long moment of silence before Lucca feel Monty’s gaze shift again. Feeling a bit more relaxed, he slowed down; though Lucca would make sure his plate was finished before Monty’s.

“Lucca’s counselor thinks he needs to socialize more;” Monty said. His words were for Chelsea.

“Oh?” Chelsea said again. Her wine glass was almost empty. “We can enroll him in one of those surrogate daycares I’ve heard about.”

Lucca felt his body try to tense, though the feeling didn’t last long. Almost against his will, his body relaxed. He took a deep breath in and out. He didn’t know what Chelsea was talking about, but he knew that wasn’t what Monty was referring to anyway. There wasn’t any need to think Monty would listen to her. When he thought of it rationally, it was easy to not get upset; just like his counselor had said.

“I was thinking it would be good for the both of you if you had company during the day while I was away, ” Monty tried again. Lucca couldn’t help but think that Monty was being very patient with Chelsea. “And it would—”

“I have my girlfriends from my book club,” Chelsea said, waving him off. “I don’t need to befriend these little housewives.”

“You’re a housewife.”

“Well, my friends aren’t. And I like it like that.”

Monty paused, and Lucca finished off the last of his pork chops and mashed potatoes. He noticed Monty glance at his now empty plate, a faint smile on his lips. Lucca wanted to hate the way his chest swelled with pride at Monty’s approval, but he just couldn’t summon the emotion. Didn’t his counselor say it was supposed to be a small dose of this Valium?

“Neece, can you set Lucca up with a salad?” Monty asked the middle-aged maid standing against the wall. His eyes, however, were still on Chelsea.

Lucca kept his gaze on Neece as she reached for one of the bowls stacked on Lucca’s other side and prepared a large salad with nuts, avocados, and a light vinaigrette. Lucca had finished off the broccoli spears on his plate first, and wasn’t in the mood for more vegetables. But he also knew he had no choice, so he thanked Neece when she was finished and immediately picked up his fork to eat.

“Please tell Arielle my wife needs her glass refilled, Neece?” Monty said as Neece straightened up.

Neece glanced at Chelsea before nodding and disappearing to the kitchen. Chelsea swallowed the
rest of her wine, challenge in her eyes as she watched Monty. Monty didn’t speak, matching Chelsea’s gaze as Arielle returned with the bottle of wine. She refilled Chelsea’s glass and started to offer some to Monty. Monty covered his half-drunken glass with his hand, thanking her with a polite smile. Arielle nodded before returning to the kitchen; Neece returned soon after at her post against the wall.

Lucca glanced at Monty, aware of some sort of tension between him and Chelsea. But it didn’t include him, so Lucca focused on eating his salad. Chelsea took another sip of her refilled glass, her gaze still not leaving Monty’s.

“I assume your friends are all working women?” Monty finally asked, turning his eyes back to his own food.

Chelsea shrugged. “Yes.”

“Barren women often have to be, don’t they?”

Lucca paused, looking over at Monty. That was rude. Infertile women were common. And, yes, most who weren’t already from wealthy families often struggled to find men with jobs that allowed them to be housewives. Typically, those sorts of men married within their status, or looked for fertile women who could give them children. The remaining women often had to work to support themselves, and hope maybe they’d find a man who wouldn’t care about her infertility.

“You must be quite the celebrity with them,” Monty continued, calmly eating his food. “Not particularly rich, beautiful, or talented for men to overlook your infertility. And yet you managed to bag a doctor, and now you don’t have to work for a living. I’m sure your friends are jealous.”

Chelsea put her glass down, glowering at Monty. “Only you men care about the fertility of women and surrogates. Always so jealous of what you can never do.”

“We are alike in that regard then.”

“Oh, fuck you, Monty.”

Lucca sucked in a breath as he put his fork down. Chelsea’s face was pink, and she took another swing of the wine. Monty raised an eyebrow at her.

“I’m the only reason you two can play this stupid game,” Chelsea continued, gesturing between Monty and Lucca. “What are you provoking me for? Shall I run to confession on Sunday and tell the priest that my husband loves his surrogate the way he’s supposed to love his wife? Do I tell him what an abomination they are? Shall I watch as you’re hung as gender traitors?”

Monty chuckled, glancing at Lucca’s bowl. Taking the hint, Lucca picked up his fork and began eating again. He felt oddly calm considering this back and forth. As long as Monty’s ire wasn’t directed at him, Lucca found the scene in front of him more entertaining than stressful. Monty turned back to Chelsea.

“It’s an ugly lie,” Monty said, taking a sip of his own wine glass. “The sort of lie typical of wives envious of surrogates able to do what they cannot. I’d hate to have to associate such a deadly sin to you.”

“Oh please. Everyone at the Center you bought him from knew you love him. You can’t scare me: I know your secret.”

“The secret that Lucca and I are childhood friends? And that I maintained that friendship with him
so he wouldn’t be alone while at the Center? The secret that, once I got married and was ready to build a family, my wife was infertile, and I would need a surrogate to do so? It’s not a very shameful secret if you ask me.”

Chelsea’s face was red. She downed the rest of her wine, slamming the glass down on the table. Her eyes held a fiery glare that seemed silly to Lucca. All this because Monty suggested she host a brunch? Chelsea opened her mouth to speak.

“I—”

“You’re the one who said you wanted children as soon as possible. Lucca’s doctors are saying he needs to socialize more—that you to need social more—and instead of helping him do it, you’re fighting me on it. If I were a different man, I’d worry you’re intentionally trying to sabotage our attempts.”

“You—”

“Which is a crime, intentional or otherwise.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Chelsea spat, her voice low. “All this because I don’t want to play house your way?”

“What other way would there be?” Monty asked, his face serious as a heart attack. “Am I not the head of this household? Am I not doing my part to give you the children you desire? Was your plan to simply watch us do all the work while you reaped the benefits? What of our children? Will you have them fall into depression because you’re too proud to befriend the neighbors? You’d have them grow up isolated from the other children around them?”

Chelsea sat back in her seat, silent and sullen. “Of course not.”

“Well?”

“I’m no stranger to these women is all. I see them out and about when I run errands in town. They ask each other what you could possibly see in me. They whisper that my children will look nothing like me. They’re catty and petty and judgmental harpies.”

Monty smiled, rolling his eyes. “They’re women.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“They simply just don’t know you. They wouldn’t be able to speculate if they knew you.”

Lucca finished his salad, putting his fork down. He felt so full that he was sure he would burst. Chelsea glanced at him, before sighing.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll host a party. But not a brunch. A dinner; with the men too. I’m not going to be stuck in this house with a bunch of shrews I don’t know.”

“You’d really have to go all out to impress the wives with a dinner party,” Monty said, raising an eyebrow.

Chelsea rolled her eyes. “If we need to be a community, does it really matter?”

Monty smiled. “Now that’s the spirit.”
Chapter End Notes

I felt like there were some more things I needed to do, thus why I introduced this. I kinda wish, in retrospect, that I had just moved forward with Lucca getting pregnant asap, but whatever. The next chapter is going to be like crazy rough, jsyk, so please make sure to heed the warnings in the tags and just take precaution.

Also, seriously, does anyone who read this watch Game of Thrones? I literally had dreams about this fight days ago, and NOTHING could prepare me for what I just watched. Holy hell. Holy Christ. I'm in shock for real. Wow-wo-wee-wow. Wow.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

So, I fucked up in the notes of my last chapter when I said the next one would be rough. I literally forgot this whole ass chapter I wrote lol. It's kinda important, and after the warning I gave last chapter, I didn't want folks to read this on Sunday and be like wtf, what was so terrible about this? Next chapter is crazy rough though, so please be warned!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What was wrong with the baby?”

Lucca sighed, his eyes stuck on the window. Lucca hated when he had to go to one of his counseling sessions in the morning. It meant having to wake up when Monty did, which often meant Monty taking a few moments to molest and kiss Lucca before they both needed to get ready. It also meant Chelsea had to get up a bit earlier, which she hated. After an early family breakfast, they all piled into the family car where Monty would drop Chelsea and Lucca off at the clinic before he headed into work.

But the absolute worst part was that since Monty was still at work when the session was over, Lucca and Chelsea had to take public transport home. Which wasn’t bad in itself, but rather it meant Lucca and Chelsea were out together, alone, for an extended period of time. And since the early morning put Chelsea in a bad mood, it meant Lucca having to be subjected to her bad mood with nowhere to hide.

Lucca’s early morning dose of valium had put him in a bit of haze earlier, but he was coming down from it. Though the sun was shining through the window, lighting up the otherwise dreary office. He talked because he was supposed to, but his mind was on the warming weather outside. He wondered if Chelsea would take him to the local park for a walk if he asked.

“Lucca? Honey, I asked you a question.”

Lucca blinked, his eyes drifting back to his counselor. This counselor was a woman like his new physician; Lucca wondered if there were notes in his file that he took better to women considering his psychiatrist was also a woman. She was of mixed race like Lucca, her hair in a short, fluffy and stylish afro with eyes that looked like honey. Her face was round despite being so small and petite, which also made her look younger than Lucca knew she was. She tilted her head, tapping her pen against her notebook. Her glasses were on top of her head, threatening to fall back into place at any minute.

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said, apologizing because he knew she would expect that. “What was the question?”

“The baby outside you saw,” she—Dr. Lawson was her name—said. “You said it was wrong. What was wrong with the baby?”

Lucca blinked, thinking. That was a poor choice of words: there was nothing wrong with the baby per say. Out in the waiting room had been a woman a few years older than Chelsea showing off a
baby just under a year old. The baby was, honestly, ugly. It was a sickly pale color with hair so light that it looked bald. The woman had been across the room from Lucca, so the distant made it look like the baby didn’t have any eyebrows. Lucca would have wondered if the child was albino had he not known albino surrogates at the center: the baby didn’t have that sort of pale coloring.

But what Lucca had really meant was the entire scene. Next to the woman was a surrogate; obviously her surrogate. A surrogate who shared the same pale skin and wide nose that the baby had—though his hair was pitch black, so Lucca had to assume the light hair came from the father. The surrogate sat next to the woman, watching her parade the child to anyone who would listen. His eyes had a haunting look to them. Defeated. An abject misery that Lucca felt would frequent the surrogate for the rest of his life. And, despite his best efforts, Lucca was sure that he was staring into his future.

“He was just rather pale,” Lucca answered, before too much time had gone by. “White babies always look weird.”

Dr. Lawson chuckled, writing something down in her notebook. Lucca knew Monty wouldn’t be bothered by that sort of remark; Monty’s mother boasted a Greek background that blended well with his father’s mixed Italian and English heritage. Monty would never be mistaken as anything but white, but he had enough coloring that Lucca knew he wouldn’t have to worry about his children coming out so pale and odd-looking. It was a joke Monty would make since he first got the bright idea to bid on Lucca years ago.

Still, every time Dr. Lawson wrote something down in her notes, Lucca worried that he said something wrong. Even though she stressed there was never anything wrong in what he said, Lucca would never believe such an obvious lie. One wrong remark would have Monty scheduling Lucca for a lobotomy. Or evoke Monty’s ire.

“Do you worry about what your children will look like?” Dr. Lawson asked, smiling at Lucca.

Lucca shrugged. “Not really.”

“Do you imagine the children you’ll have with Monty at all?”

Lucca shook his head, thinking. “Not really. They’ll be his, but they won’t be mine. It doesn’t matter what they are as long as they’re healthy, I guess.”

Dr. Lawson’s smile deepened. “That’s a perfectly constructed answer, Lucca.”

Lucca blinked at her.

“There’s a lot of work in creating children,” she continued. “Surrogacy is always a tricky thing: I’d argue that it’s impossible to carry a child for almost a year and not form some sort of connection.”

“Hmm,” Lucca said, turning his gaze back to the window.

“Is there something more you’d like to say, Lucca?”

Lucca shook his head.

“You have no opinion of having children that you have no claim to?”

“It doesn’t matter how I feel about it,” Lucca said, shrugging again.

“Hmm,” Dr. Lawson said, writing in her notebook again. “I think ‘wrong’ was a very interesting
choice of words. I think that describes your feelings more than thinking a white baby is ugly.”

“Okay,” Lucca said. He wasn’t going to argue with her.

Dr. Lawson tilted her head. “Can you finish the story, then? What made you focus on the baby?”

“It was a baby. Everyone stops to look at a baby.”

“But you brought him up. Meaning you’re still thinking about him. There must have been something about the scene that stood out to you.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come, now, Lucca. You’ve been so cooperative up until now. Did the baby look ill? Is that why you were so focused on what it looked like?”

Lucca felt his heart try to pick up speed a bit. He’d forgotten why he hated counseling so much.

“I don’t know,” Lucca said lamely. “I couldn’t tell if he was sick. The surrogate was pale, so he might have looked that way because of that. He wasn’t coughing or anything.”

Dr. Lawson wrote something down, glancing down at her notebook as the silence stretched between them. When she looked up, her eyes were steady.

“You know what I noticed, Lucca?” she started. “In this story, you’ve mentioned the mother a couple times, but the focus of your attention seems to be split between the baby and the surrogate. The surrogate wasn’t holding the child, wasn’t attending to the child, was barely even looking at the child, and yet you keep bringing him up. Now why would you do that?”

Lucca turned back to the window, wishing he could shrink. He hadn’t even noticed that he’d been doing that. It was his own fault; he shouldn’t have been so reckless while talking about the baby.

“Well, Lucca?” Dr. Lawson pressed.

“I don’t know,” Lucca muttered, feeling miserable suddenly. Why couldn’t all of his sessions be in the afternoon after Monty got home?

“Do you want to know what I think?”

“No,” Lucca said, rather rudely.

Dr. Lawson didn’t seem to mind. Lucca didn’t have to look up to see the soft smile on her face.

“I think you keep bringing him up because it’s like some look into the future. You worn out and exhausted and ignored while everyone coos over the baby you gave birth to and a mother who didn’t do any of the work. I think imagining that in your future disturbs you.”

“I don’t want to be a mother,” Lucca said; which was true.

“Maybe, but you will still be the one carrying the child and giving birth to the child. Despite how our society defines things, it’s you doing the work, isn’t it?”

Lucca didn’t respond. He didn’t want to respond. He didn’t want to think about this. They weren’t even trying for a child right now. What did any of this matter?

“Even the term surrogacy is a bit of a mockery of what it once was,” Dr. Lawson continued. “It’s
not someone else’s fertilized egg being implanted inside you for you to carry. You have to participate in that fertilization process. The child has your DNA. But they call you a surrogate instead of a mother. It’s very strange, honestly.”

“I don’t want to be a mother,” Lucca repeated, lamely.

“No,” Dr. Lawson said, her eyes softening a bit as she watched Lucca. “You don’t want anything to do with this, do you?”

Lucca almost didn’t answer. Maybe it was the valium, maybe he was still sleepy from his early start that morning, or maybe he just didn’t care. But the fight in Lucca left him: there was no point in fighting. Dr. Lawson could read him better than any other counselor Lucca had seen over the year. Better than Monty. Maybe it was because she was a woman; also trapped in society’s role for her. Though she still had more freedom than Lucca.

“I don’t have a choice,” Lucca said. “It doesn’t matter what I want. I don’t have a choice.”

“Do you think distancing yourself from what will happen is a good way to deal with your emotions towards it?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s not, Lucca. I’m telling you it’s not. They say depressed people cling to the past while anxious people are caught up in the ‘what ifs’ of the future. Your future terrifies you, and you choose to ignore it instead of coping with it.”

Lucca sighed, unable to argue against that. He never thought of it like that: the idea that being pregnant could be the source of his anxiety. He couldn’t help but always think of it; it was how he survived all those years at the Center. Monty encouraged it: told him to think of their future together whenever things got hard for Lucca. And Lucca did imagine it. And it was always a hell he imagined.

Now, he was closer to that future Monty spoke often about. This therapy would only last a couple of months at most. And then Monty would be fucking him again. And Lucca would have to begin preparing for the day he found out he was pregnant. Then months of watching his body change as the baby grew inside him. And then he’d have to give birth.

And that was when the real hell would begin. Doctors only suggest three weeks of rest before Monty could start trying on another child. And Lucca had no idea if he could trust Monty to even honor that. As quickly as possible, Monty would do his best to knock Lucca up again. And on top of being pregnant again, he would have to nurse and help raise the child. Lucca would be the one getting up with it at night to feed it. And yet Chelsea was the one who would be praised for all her “hard work.”

It was despicable. The one thing. And Lucca wanted desperately to have no part in this. But he didn’t have a choice; there were no other options. And like a tidal wave, he thought of his mother. Tears stung his eyes, spilling over before he could stop it. Surprised, Lucca straightened up in his chair, rubbing at his eyes.

Before he could apologize, Dr. Lawson was there, kneeling before him with a box of tissues in her hand.

“It’s okay, Lucca,” she said, offering the box to him. Lucca took it, grabbing a few tissues. “Go ahead and cry. You’re allowed to be honest here, Lucca. Let it out.”
“What am I supposed to do?” Lucca sobbed, hating how his voice cracked. “I don’t want to do this, but I have to. What do I do? How do I stop being anxious about it?”

Dr. Lawson rubbed soothing circles on the back of Lucca’s hand. “You have to learn how to be okay with this, Lucca. Running from it and fighting it is just making you miserable. Wouldn’t it just be easier to embrace it?”

“I do embrace it,” Lucca said, the tears ebbing a bit.

“No, you accept it as an unescapable reality. The way one would the reality of death: but you don’t embrace it.”

Lucca didn’t respond, instead thinking on that while another wave of sobs took him. Dr. Lawson blissfully let him be, rubbing circles on his hand and quietly letting him cry. Once the tears receded a bit, Lucca had to admit he felt a bit better. When was the last time he let himself cry like that?

“Do I have to?” Lucca finally asked, feeling silly all of the sudden. He looked down at Dr. Lawson. “Embrace it, I mean? Do I have to?”

“If you want to not let it get to you, yes,” she said. She stood up and went back to her seat. “It’s not an exact science, but Monty and I can help you, Lucca, if you’d let us.”

Lucca wasn’t sure about this. But he knew it was better than Monty lobotomizing him to get Lucca to behave. Especially since Lucca’s anxiety was a big reason he wasn’t pregnant yet. Eventually, Monty’s patience would run thin. Lucca didn’t want to get to that point.

“Do you want to hear something amazing, Lucca?” Dr. Lawson asked, obviously thinking Lucca had had enough time to think about it.

Lucca looked up, hesitant, and nodded.

“You hit your target weight this week.”

Lucca blinked. Every time he had a morning session, he was weighed. He was never allowed to see the number; he didn’t even know what his target weight was. But it surprised him to hear he hit it. Panic surged through his veins.

“You’re tensing up, Lucca,” Dr. Lawson said, tilting her head. “Talk it out with me, please.”

“If I’m in my target, won’t that make it easier? Getting pregnant, I mean.”

“Yes, it will.”

“I don’t want to make it easier.”

Dr. Lawson was quiet for a beat. Lucca stared at the ground, unable to look up. She said he could be honest, didn’t she?

“You’re the only who suffers thinking like that, Lucca,” she finally said.

Lucca nodded. She was right. He knew she was right. Monty would just lobotomize him if Lucca kept fighting.

“We still want you to gain a few more pounds,” Dr. Lawson said, glancing at her watch. It was obvious they were coming up on the end of their session. “Do you think you can manage to try to gain more?”
Lucca nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Dr. Lawson smiled.

Chapter End Notes

"The woman is called a bearer, a provider, a suitcase, an incubator, a surrogate—she is never simply called ‘mother’ or ‘mom’. The very word ‘surrogacy’ is, etymologically, incorrectly used. The definition of ‘mother’ in the Oxford English Dictionary is “the female parent of a human being; a woman in relation to a child or children to whom she has given birth.” The definition of ‘surrogate’ is “replacement.” It is therefore the woman who pays who should be called the ‘surrogate mother’, because she replaces the mother who gives birth. But words mirror power: the ‘real’ mother is the one with economic resources, while the ‘false’ mother only has her own body."

Kajsa Ekis Ekman, Being and Being Bought: Prostitution, Surrogacy and the Split Self (2014)

I try to keep my political/social beliefs out of things, but a friend of mine (who doesn't even know shit about this story because I refuse to let her read it lol) shared this with me today and it made me think of my story. I think considering this chapter, as well, it was oddly relevant to Lucca's feelings. So I just wanted to share.

Also, I will say that the paleness of the surrogate and the baby was a direct reaction of me running into a coworker I hadn't seen in a while (she works in another department), and her showing me pictures of her few month old baby. My coworker is really pale (pale skin, pale blonde hair, pale blue eyes, etc), and her baby inherited that paleness. I ain't never seen a baby with no eyebrows like that, but lo and behold! Most babies look weird when they first come out, though. They just need to fatten up to be cute little chunk munchkins we fall in love with is all.

And because I feel like all I do is warn people, the ACTUAL next chapter--which will still be uploaded on Sunday--is going to be really rough. I reread it/edited it last night, and it even made me feel icky. Just, please be warned, okay? Okay. Cool. See y'all Sunday!
Hi all! I've warned about this chapter in the last one, and I just want to do another warning again. Mind the tags, please! This chapter is going to be rough. TW: assault, sexual assault, and molestation.

Also, in case you're someone who checks in on the new chapters weekly, I did add another chapter earlier this week after last Sunday's chapter. The notes will explain what happened there, but just be aware that if you haven't checked in since last Sunday, then there are two new chapters.

Okay, please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lucca held completely still, waiting. He was sure he’d miss it; or not feel it at all. Maybe you didn’t actually feel anything. Just when he thought about giving up, there was movement under his hand. Like a tiny foot kicking him. Lucca gasped, snatching his hand back.

“I felt her!” he said to Eli, one of the surrogates he was hosting in his room.

Chelsea had, finally, gotten around to planning the dinner party for the entire neighborhood. After a few introductions, the surrogates were dismissed to Lucca’s room with the children; which Lucca was grateful for. He hated having all the couples dote on him, telling him how beautiful he was and how gorgeous his children will look. One woman even impolitely asked why he wasn’t pregnant yet. Monty wrote it off as adjusting to his new schedule after a recent promotion made it hard for him to try. Though the men laughed and encouraged Monty to be more diligent.

Great.

Eli was the oldest surrogate, almost twenty-five in a few months. He was pregnant with his third: Ronald, his six-year-old, was playing with the Kyles’ twin daughters in the playroom next door while the baby slept in a pack-n-play next to their table. The Kyle’s surrogate, Nicolai, kept getting up to peek through the open door to make sure Ronald wasn’t harassing the girls. He was pregnant too, but only just so; the Kyles hadn’t even announced it yet.

Rudy, the third surrogate, belonged to one of the new neighbors Monty mentioned a while back at dinner. He was darker than Lucca, though the curl of his hair made Lucca wonder if he was biracial as well. He was also the surrogate closest to Lucca’s age; older by only a few months. Despite that, he seemed the most tired out of all four of them with dark circles under his eyes as he watched the baby sleep next to him.

“I told you she moves around a lot,” Eli said with a laugh, drinking from his glass of water. They had eaten with the children earlier and were allowed fruit to eat for dessert. They were lazily eating them while they introduced themselves and talked. “Cal said if she was a boy, he’d let her do mixed martial arts with all the moving around she does.”

“You’re sure it’s a girl?” Rudy asked, not taking his eyes off the baby. Which Lucca found odd: it
wasn’t his child to mind.

“Yeah,” Eli said, shifting in his seat again. “The doctors are sure of it now. And if not, we’re going to have a problem since the nursery’s pink.”

Lucca smiled politely while Nicolai chuckled. Rudy, however, just sat there looking miserable.

“That means she’s going to have babies,” Rudy said, more to himself than to any of them.

Eli rolled his eyes and picked up his water again. He turned to Nicolai. “Ron’s not being a nuisance, is he?”

Nicolai shook his head. “Not overly so. He keeps trying to wrestle them, but the girls team up on him and take him down. Nothing a lifetime as a man can’t cure.”

“He hates losing to girls,” Eli said, glancing his shoulder at the door. “He has a fragile ego. If they keep winning, he’s going to come crying—”

“Buddy!” Ron cried, running out of the room and straight to Eli. “The girls are being mean to me!”

“Am not!” one of the twins, Lulu, said from the doorway while her sister, Lily, looked on. “He was pushing Lily so I pushed him back!”

“Lulu,” Nicolai said as Eli patted Ron’s head, “didn’t Mommy talk to you about your behavior around boys?”

“Mommy said—!”

“Indoor voices,” Nicolai interrupted. Rudy lifted his head as the baby turned in the pack-n-play. “Do not make me have to go in there, girls. Play nice.”

The girls pouted for a second before disappearing back into the room. Nicolai sighed, running a hand through his hair. Eli gently detached Ron from his side and nudged him towards the playroom.

“Remember they’re girls, Ron,” Eli said. “You can’t be rough with them. Why don’t you go show them how well you can read?”

“Okay!” Ron said, turning and running back to the room.

“Bet you can’t wait to start having some of your own, huh?” Eli asked Lucca.

“Well,” Lucca said, grabbing a grape to give himself something to do. “Well, they wouldn’t really be mine.”

“They might as well be with how much we take care of them,” Nicolai said, rolling his eyes. “This is mean to say, but I sometimes wonder what Marjorie’s role in the house is? I take care of the girls and we have servants to cook and clean. And she had the nerve to spend their first year in bed talking about postpartum. Like she was the one who carried them!”

Lucca blinked, eating a grape so he wouldn’t have to respond.

“That’s how it is,” Eli said, agreeing with Nicolai. “We nurse and rear them while the wives get to parade them around as their pride and joys. At least when Ron gets in trouble, Lizzy is the one Calvin disciplines. Sometimes I let him be a little monster just so she gets blamed for it.”
Lucca couldn’t hold back his snort at that. He wasn’t sure what he expected from the surrogates when Monty told him that he’d be entertaining them in his room with the children. Maybe Lucca expected them to all be like Rudy; melancholy and miserable. But Nicolai and Eli didn’t seem miserable. And while the four were alone, they let their guard down about how they really felt.

At the Center, Lucca got used to having to hide his true feelings, even from his peers. Any expressed agitation at their lot in life could be grounds for punishment, or even reprogramming. But at this point, there wasn’t really the threat of reprogramming looming over their heads. And instead of looking at each other as potential snitches, they saw each other as allies in arms. It was nice to know he could meet with people who related to him. Maybe this was why his counselor wanted him to hang out with more surrogates. Though he wasn’t sure if she knew this was how their conversations would go.

“Speaking of Lizzy,” Eli said, turning towards Lucca. “I heard her ask about you not being pregnant. You’re really not?”

Lucca gave him a tight smile and shook his head. “No, I’m not.”

“How many did they project you to have?” Nicolai asked.

Lucca hated this question. “Six.”

“Oh, you poor thing. Once they get you started, you’ll barely remember what it feels to not be pregnant.”

“How many were you supposed to have?” Lucca asked, hoping to turn the conversation a bit.

“Four. I was only allowed a break because we got twins the first time.”

“Was carrying them hard?” Lucca asked. He never thought about having twins, but it wasn’t like it was an impossibility.

Nicolai shrugged. “I don’t have anything to compare it to,” he said. “I guess it was as hard as usual, though I was in labor for almost a full day. Is that normal?”

Eli opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted by a hard knock on the door. Lucca looked at the others; watched Nicolai’s smile fade and Rudy sit up for the first time that night. Eli moved, getting up slowly with his big stomach slowing him down, before walking over to the pack-n-play. Rudy, who had also been watching him, got up and picked up the baby before Eli had a chance to struggle to bend over. The baby squirmed a little but didn’t wake.

The door cracked open, and Monty poked his head in. He smiled before opening the door completely and walking in. The men walked in behind him, looking around Lucca’s room or looking at the table. Lucca turned to Nicolai for some sort of guidance, but the surly look on his face told Lucca he was not going to like whatever was about to happen.

“Where are the children?” an older man with a crooked nose said, his eyes falling on the baby in Rudy’s arms.

“In the playroom, right there,” Nicolai answered, pointing.

“That’s convenient,” another man said, sitting on Lucca’s bed. Lucca didn’t like that. “The playroom is next to the surrogate’s room.”

“That one was Chelsea’s idea,” Monty answered.
“Eli,” the first man said, his steely eyes falling on Eli. “Take the baby into the other room with the little ones. And shut the door.”

“Yes, Calvin,” Eli said, obediently moving to take the baby from Rudy’s arms.

Rudy, thankfully, was quick to give the baby up. In seconds, Eli had the baby sleeping in his arms and had disappeared to the playroom. As soon as the door shut behind him, Lucca felt trapped.

“Lucca, come here,” Monty said, holding out his hand to Lucca. “The men want to meet you.”

Lucca hesitated, glancing at Nicolai again. Nicolai shook his head, just enough for Lucca to understand it: Lucca would make things worse for himself if he fought. Swallowing, Lucca walked over to the group of men. Monty grabbed Lucca’s wrist, pulling him into the circle of men. There were six of them, excluding Monty. Lucca felt their eyes on him and immediately wanted to hide.

“Don’t be rude, Lucca,” Monty castigated. “Say hello.”

“H-hello,” Lucca said, his voice cracking. Why did it have to be like this? Why did he have to do this?

“Well, isn’t he precious?” one of the men said, garnering a sea of chuckles from the men.

“Is he always this soft-spoken?”

Lucca felt a hand on his ass, and yelped. Monty held Lucca steady, preventing him from pulling away.

“So he can speak up,” Calvin said behind Lucca, a hand running up Lucca’s back. “Or is he only vocal when he’s moaning?”

Lucca felt his face heat up as he stared resolutely on the ground. Why was Monty allowing this to happen?

“Aww,” the man on the bed said. “He’s blushing. Would you feel more comfortable on your bed, Lucca?”

Lucca wanted to shake his head no, but he didn’t protest when the man reached out and took his other hand. Monty let go of him, letting him be pulled over next to the man. Lucca kept his head down, his face hot with both anger and shame. He glanced over at the table and saw Rudy and Nicolai watching intently with fear and resignation in their faces. Lucca looked away: they were no strangers to whatever game this was.

“Lucca, your face is so red,” the man said, wrapping an arm around Lucca’s waist. “Are you hot, Lucca?”

Lucca wanted to tell the man that he wasn’t but remembered what his counselor had told him the other day. He was the only one who suffered when he fought. Hating himself for it, Lucca nodded.

“Do you want to take your shirt off?”

No.

Lucca nodded again.

The man moved, tugging at Lucca’s shirt at the hem. Lucca let him, lifting his arms so he could pull the shirt off. Lucca tried to school his breath; Monty would let these men touch Lucca, but he
wouldn’t let them hurt him. Lucca had to believe that: that Monty would keep him safe. As stupid a belief that was.

“There we go,” the man said, running a hand down Lucca’s chest. Lucca tried to hold back a shiver. “See? Your entire chest was red. You must have been very hot.”

“I was,” Lucca said, his voice distant. It was as though someone else was speaking for him. “I feel much better now. Thank you.”

“You still look a bit hot,” the man said, leaning closer to Lucca, their faces inches apart. “Maybe you’d feel even better if we took your pants off.”

Lucca’s breath caught, but he nodded. The man found Lucca’s waistband, and started to pull them down. Lucca moved to lift his hips when something in him snapped. He wanted to cry, but told himself he couldn’t. No matter what he did, crying wasn’t an option. Instead, he brought his hands over the man’s in a desperate attempt to stop him.

“Monty,” Lucca said, unsure if Monty could even hear his quiet voice.

But, apparently, he could. Monty was on his other side in an instant, his arms around Lucca’s chest as the other man let go. There was laughter among the men; it was jarring. Lucca racked his brain, trying to figure out what was funny, but the urge to cry pushed a dry sob through Lucca’s chest.

“Shhhhh,” Monty said, rocking Lucca back and forth like a child while laying kisses on his temple. “You’re okay. You did very good, Lucca.”

“Who bet on him breaking before you got the pants off?” one of the men said, cash in his hands. “Monty and who else?”

“Lou was with Monty,” the man on the bed said, standing. “He was playing so nice; I thought I could at least get him naked before he went crying for daddy.”

The men laughed as money changed hands. Lucca watched, suddenly feeling cold. One of the men offered a wad to Monty, but he waved it away to instead lay more kisses on Lucca’s head.

“Oh, come on Grayson,” the man said, rolling his eyes. “He’ll be fine.”

“I don’t think he knows we were playing,” Monty said, laughing. “Are you okay, Lucca?”

Lucca blinked. “Yes,” he said. And that was it. What else was he supposed to say?

Monty kissed him again on his forehead before standing. And, Lucca noticed, only then did he grab the money owed him. Lucca wanted to be angry, but he was more relieved that these men weren’t planning on going further. Though Lucca did have to wonder how far they would have gone if he hadn’t stop them. Would Monty have had a line? Where was that line? What would have happened to Lucca if they had gotten him naked? What came next?

“Alright,” one of the men said, taking out a notepad from his back pocket. “Now it’s the ladies’ turn. How far are we expecting Chelsea to go?”

“She’ll snap as soon as you touch her,” Monty said with a laugh.

“I’ll at least get her bra off,” the man who had undressed Lucca said. “I’m a pro at this.”

There was more talking, laughing, and bets being placed. Lucca watched distantly until the men
started shoving each other out of the room, laughing as they plotted their next assault. Lucca wondered how Chelsea would react. He hoped she swung on the men. And landed a few hits.

And then they were gone. Monty one of the lasts ones, leaving without so much as another glance at Lucca. When the door shut behind them, Lucca broke. He hunched over, letting the tears rip through his body in earthshattering sobs. It wasn’t until his cries turned to wails that he felt the bed dip beside him on both sides. A hand was on his back, rubbing circles.

“I’m so sorry, Lucca,” Nicolai said. He repeated it over and over. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s my fault,” Rudy said, a hand on Lucca’s thigh. Lucca didn’t want either of them touching him, but he also was afraid they would leave if he shook them off. “I was so out of it when they did that to me. I forgot. If I remembered, I could have warned you.”

“They don’t do that all the time,” Nicolai said, his words falling in deaf ears. “I didn’t even think—Lucca, it’s okay. They weren’t going to hurt you. They always stop before it goes too far.”

Lucca kept crying, listening to their apologies and excuses. All Lucca could think was how disgusted he felt. At himself, at those men, at Monty, and at the fact that Nicolai and Rudy had been through this as well. But what really made Lucca want to curl into a ball and never come out was that reminder those men had given him of just how helpless he was.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all. Just a few notes:

I finally hit 1000 views! Which is exciting as hell! To celebrate, I created a tumblr page. I figured I could try to promote there to get some more people reading (Self Promotion? I hate it. Kill me now), as well as talk more in depth about writing and stuff. Why tumblr? Because I refuse to go on twitter. :3

Anyway, you can now follow me at https://aizenat.tumblr.com/

Also, I've updated the tags (I think I need to update them again, we'll see. Le sigh), especially after a particular chapter I recently wrote out. As always, PLEASE MIND THE TAGS. I cannot stress this shit enough. Also, do note that I did tag this Happy Ending because I'm constantly being asked if things will get better, lol. I PROMISE A HAPPY ENDING. We're just going to take a very long time to get there. I appreciate your patience (why did that sound like the end of a work email????)

Anyway, I'm off to have a nerdy self care day of catching up on anime, going to see Endgame (finally!), and ending off with some Game of Thrones shenanigans. Hope you all have a great Sunday and a fantastic week!
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Allies help make everything more tolerable...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a knock on Lucca’s door. Lucca moved quickly, shoving the books back into the basket underneath the balls of yarn and needles. His counselor had suggested Lucca take on a craft, and Lucca knew how to crochet a little from his mother. So Monty had bought him more yarn than Lucca would likely go through, and a cute basket to put it all in.

Which worked perfectly as a hiding spot for his books. As well as a great cover if someone was to come in while he was looking at them. So far, he was able to understand and read all the words in the notebooks Derek left, but Lucca was at a lost when he tried to read the Bible. So he often spent his afternoons after lunch—which was usually the only time Chelsea left him alone long enough to think—sitting at his desk, looking through the notebooks.

Lucca finished hiding the notebooks, and pulled out the blanket he was working on. Because, honestly, the only thing he could make was blankets. The door opened, and Chelsea walked in, followed by one of the newer neighbors, Lindsay, and Rudy.

“Lindsay and I will be having tea in the sitting room,” Chelsea said while Lindsay looked around. She was rather young, though beautiful. She seemed impressed by what she saw. “Please entertain Rudy. And do behave, Lucca.”

The last bit was unnecessary, but Lucca nodded nonetheless. Once the women left, Rudy walked over to Lucca’s desk. He looked a bit more energetic than he had at the party, but he still looked exhausted.

“Do you not sleep, Rudy?” Lucca asked.

Rudy blinked at Lucca, as if deciding whether that was a serious question, before answering.

“Yes.”

“Really? It’s obvious Monty is very affectionate towards you. He lets you sleep?”

“Recently, yes,” Lucca said, turning to his blanket. He found where he’d left off and continued in the basic pattern.

Rudy watched him for a while. Rudy didn’t talk much, as Lucca learned at the party the other night, but he wasn’t bad company. Rudy leaned against Lucca’s desk, just watching.

“So you really know how to knit?” he asked after a while.
“It’s not knitting; it’s crochet.”

“Ah. So you know how to do that?”

“A little.”

“Can you make me a hat?”

“No.”

“A sweater?”

“No.”

“A blanket?”

“That,” Lucca said, lifting up his work-in-progress, “I can do.”

Rudy smiled; a small one, but a smile nonetheless. “Do you feel better? After, you know, the other day?”

Lucca shrugged.

“Has Monty tried to touch you since?”

Lucca shook his head. They were going to begin weening Lucca off his anxiety medication in a week. Lucca didn’t have much more time to enjoy his Monty-free nights. Still, it was a relief that Monty hadn’t tried to touch Lucca recently. He did apologize the day after the party, claiming to be drunk. It wasn’t an excuse, but Lucca dutifully forgave him. Or at least let Monty believed he did. In reality, it would still take Lucca some time to get over what Monty did.

“When Darrell—he’s the one who does that, by the way. It’s always him. When he did that to me,” Rudy said, looking out the window by Lucca’s bed, “I barely remembered it. I was under a lot of medication, so I wasn’t sure what was happening. When I realized I was naked, I panicked and started crying. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen to me.”

Lucca paused in what he was doing, looking up at Rudy. Something suddenly hit Lucca: Rudy was the same age as him, but also wasn’t pregnant. And, unlike Lucca, Rudy wasn’t asked about it all the time.

“Why are you always tired, Rudy?” Lucca asked, returning to his crocheting.

“I guess because I don’t sleep,” Rudy said with a dry laugh.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. I don’t know. The doctors say its depression, and something else. I think its because of what I did. I’m just tired of being a bad person.”

Lucca blinked. “How are you a bad person?”

“Because I killed my baby.”

Lucca didn’t buy that. He threw his stuff in his basket and brought it over to the table in the center of his room. Rudy didn’t move at first, watching Lucca with dreary eyes before going to join him. Once they were seated, Lucca making sure he was facing the door, Lucca took out his yarn.
“Have you crocheted before?” Lucca asked.

Rudy shook his head. “No. I’m not good at this stuff.”

“No one starts out good at anything. Besides, it’s crochet. Making a few small blankets is easy.”

Rudy frowned, but Lucca found another needle and grabbed a ball of red yarn. Lucca had really liked that color and wanted to save it for after he got back into the swing of crocheting. Then he would make a bigger blanket than he’s ever done before. Or something. But he started a loop for Rudy, showed him the simple stitch, and let him take over. Rudy’s movements were slow and shaky at first. But after a few minutes, he found a rhythm. Though his spacing was too wide and inconsistent.

“What happened to your baby?” Lucca asked after a long stretch of silence like that.

Rudy’s hands slowed a bit, obviously letting himself get lost in the memory.

“He was in me, and then he died,” Rudy said. “The doctor said I was, like, thirteen weeks along? Or so? I could tell it was a boy, but we still had to wait to know for sure. But then we did tests and he wasn’t moving. And when they tried to find a heartbeat, it wasn’t there. He just died.”

A quiet fell between them. Lucca focused on his blanket while Rudy found his rhythm again. He paused after a certain point.

“How do I start another row?” he asked.

Lucca moved to show him, doing it a few times before undoing it so he could try. Rudy struggled at first, his tongue hanging out of his mouth as he worked. On the fourth try, he got it, and was able to keep going. He smiled a little, obviously proud of himself. Lucca smiled too.

“And,” Rudy said, still continuing his story. “And, so it was my fault. I had to have done something wrong to make the baby died. I should have prayed harder. And ate better. It was hard to keep things down, but I still should have eaten. I should have, I don’t know, just done better.”

Lucca wanted to tell Rudy that it wasn’t his fault, but he knew Rudy wouldn’t believe that. Even Lucca couldn’t help but blame himself for why he himself wasn’t pregnant right away. Years of indoctrination weren’t easy to let go of. No matter how fucked up it was. So Lucca stayed quiet, letting Rudy work through his rows for his blanket.

“I think,” Rudy started, his hands faltering a bit. “I think Leo is going to make me get a lobotomy if I don’t snap out of it.”

Lucca stopped, looking up at Rudy. Rudy didn’t look up, but squirmed. He obviously felt Lucca’s eyes on him.

“He’s just so mean,” Rudy continued, as if Lucca hadn’t spoken. “And now I have to lie there while he fucks me, and he hates me. I know he hates me. And I’m not mad at him for hating me,
but he just makes it so hard.”

Lucca stood up, walking around the table to sit next to Rudy. Rudy didn’t cry—Lucca had a feeling he was well past the point of tears—but he just looked so empty. Lucca didn’t have any words for him. Would Monty ever come to hate him like that?

No, Lucca realized as he rubbed Rudy’s back. Monty would never hate Lucca. Monty’s love would always win out. But that didn’t mean Monty was beyond cruelty in the name of love for Lucca. Lucca was sure most men didn’t love their surrogates the way Monty loved him. But that didn’t mean there weren’t enough similarities.

“I don’t think he hates you,” Lucca found himself saying.

Rudy just shook his head miserably.

“I really don’t,” Lucca continued. “I think he’s mad. And so he’s punishing you. But he wouldn’t be able to touch you if he really hated you. He’ll be fine once you’re pregnant again. Even better once you have the child. But you have to do that. Making yourself sick like this won’t help you get there.”

“Like you’d know,” Rudy muttered, pouting. It was actually cute.

Lucca smiled. “Yes, I do know. I’ve been doing the same thing. There’s no reason for me not to be pregnant now. I mean, I’m on a medication so Monty hasn’t tried in a while. But I mean before that. I never hit my target weight. I’d shower after Monty had sex with me in the mornings and try to get him out of me. I even prayed to die before I got pregnant, Rudy. Imagine what sort of pain I’d bring a child who came to me like that.”

Rudy looked at the red yarn in his hands. Lucca took a minute, thinking of that conversation with his therapist. You’re the only who suffers thinking like that, Lucca. Lucca was getting in his own way. Things didn’t have to be like this; he was making it like this. He was making himself miserable.

“Leo’s a man,” Lucca said, trying to talk through this himself. “This is just how they treat us. Like what they did to me at that party. They do it because they can. We know what’s expected of us. And if we fail to do that, of course they’re going to get upset.”

It’s not right, Lucca thought. He wanted to say it, but it didn’t matter. What was right or fair had no meaning in their world. They were surrogates: they were foolish to want or expect different.

“But you don’t have to tear yourself up about it. You’re not in any state to get pregnant now. Just focus on getting there. Then the rest will follow. He can’t treat you like this forever.”

Rudy finally looked up, trepidation heavy in his eyes. “Why does it have to be like this?”

“Because they’re men, and they make the rules,” Lucca said lamely with a shrug. “You won’t win trying to fight them. We’re the only ones who end up screwed.”

Rudy reached for the red yarn again. He picked up the needle and went back to his stitches. He stopped after a moment, staring at the yarn in his hands.

“I don’t like this color,” he said, putting his work down. He reached for the basket. “What other colors do you have?”

Lucca watched him for a second before remembering what he had hidden in the basket.
“Rudy! Wait!”

Rudy pulled out the Bible Derek had given him. He stared at it, confused.

“Bibles aren’t illegal, you know,” he said, eyeing Lucca suspiciously. “Even for us.”

“I don’t have a reason to have a Bible,” Lucca said, holding his gaze. “So for me, it would be weird.”

Rudy didn’t answer, opening the book to a random page. He looked disappointed: he probably thought it was fake or hiding something. Lucca was glad it was the Bible he found, and not his notebooks. Rudy skimmed through a few pages.

“‘But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.’ Leo should read this more often.”

“You can read?” Lucca asked dumbly.

“Yeah,” Rudy said with a shrug.

It wasn’t too uncommon for surrogates to know how to read; the laws that banned teaching them were created when Lucca had just hit his teen years. His mother, as she later revealed to him, had seen the law coming and didn’t want to make things worse for Lucca. She claimed they would have given him a lobotomy immediately if he knew how to read.

“I have three older sisters,” Rudy continued. “All barren. They read to me a lot growing up. Before I had to leave.”

Lucca watched as Rudy put the Bible down, already bored, and found a blue yarn that Lucca hadn’t even rolled into a ball yet. He smiled and lifted it to Lucca.

“Can I use this?”

“I need to roll it first,” Lucca said, grabbing it from him.

“Why?”

“So the yarn doesn’t get tangled.

“Fine. Do you not know how to read?”

“No.”

“I could teach you.”

Lucca’s fingers paused in their work. Lucca looked up, saw Rudy looking at him with challenge in his eyes.

“If we get caught…” Lucca started.

“Then we don’t get caught.”

“It’s too risky. Chelsea leaves me alone, but Monty gets to leave early at all times. And he rarely knocks.”
“You’re just making excuses. Do you want to learn or not?”

Lucca hesitated. He did want to learn. But if Rudy was close to getting a lobotomy, getting caught teaching Lucca to read could be the final straw. He didn’t like that.

“How?” Lucca asked instead.

Rudy nodded at the yarn.

“You taught me to crochet.”

“I didn’t really teach you. I don’t know much.”

“Leo’s nice enough that if I ask for something, he’ll get it for me. If I ask for yarn, he’ll buy it. I like this. Crocheting. Using my hands for this. I felt better doing that and talking to you. So I can teach you something.”

It didn’t seem quite even. But Lucca thought of all the words he couldn’t make out in the Bible. Rudy could teach him. Fill in the gaps Lucca was missing. So Lucca nodded.

“I’d appreciate that a lot, Rudy,” he said. “Thank you.”

Rudy nodded, taking the small ball in Lucca’s hands and continuing to roll up the blue yarn.

“Probably not smart to start today, but I have a feeling Lindsay and Chelsea are going to be spending a lot of time with each other.”

Lucca caught the implication there. “Really?”

“Lindsay hasn’t shut up about her since the party. If Leo was smarter, he’d realize why.”

Lucca laughed, noticing the way the corner’s of Rudy’s lips twitched.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all! I know I didn’t post last week, and I feel like shit for that. Last Sunday got hectic with Mother’s day. I thought about posting sometime during the week, but then decided I needed to give myself a break. The last few weeks have been hell for me, and so my head is a little chaotic rn. To make up for it, I’ll post another chapter Wednesday.

I wrote for the first time in over a week yesterday, and it felt nice. Did some things I didn’t exist, and this story’s end is in sight. I feel like I keep saying that lol. I doubt I’ll finish this story by the end of the month, but we’ll see. I did need that break though.

Oh! And a reminder that I’m over on tumblr at https://aizenat.tumblr.com/
Please follow!

See you all Wednesday!
“And breathe out.”

Lucca let his breath out, eyes still closed. His first week on a lower dose of Valium meant all of his sessions were focused on cognitive-behavioral therapy and stress maintenance. Lucca had to admit that it was actually helping. At the very least, he’d learn how to rationalize and talk down his negative thoughts. Which Lucca found especially useful when dealing with Chelsea.

Since this was their first spring and summer in the house, Chelsea was determined to make sure the house exuded a bright and sunny atmosphere. It meant she spent days dragging Lucca to stores to buy plants, seeds, fertilizer, and decorations after his morning counseling sessions. As well as forcing him to spend time with her outside planting the garden. And over at Lizzy’s zen garden, getting tips.

While the latter meant Lucca could see Eli, it also meant helping Eli tend to the children since Eli technically was supposed to be on bedrest. And because, as he was realizing, Lucca wasn’t that great with children. Ronald was quite energetic, and always wanted Lucca to run around the yard or play ball with him. Ron, however, had preschool during the day. As such, it was only when Chelsea took Lucca over to Calvin and Lizzy’s home in the afternoons—instead of mid-morning—that Lucca had to deal with him.

The baby, however, terrified Lucca most. He was, unfortunately, old enough to crawl and apparently loved rolling over as soon as he was placed on his back. This led to a very scary situation when Eli was teaching Lucca how to change a diaper. Had Eli not been right there when Lucca walked away to grab the baby powder, the baby would have rolled right off the changing table.

But what had terrified him the most was when, while changing the baby, Lucca realized what the baby was. He had paused, not sure why it was surprising. He immediately thought of his mother, and the tears she would shed while bathing him. It wasn’t until that very moment that Lucca fully understood what those tears were for.

“I thought they took them away as babies,” Lucca had muttered while he lifted the baby’s leg to slide the diaper underneath him.

“They passed a law, Calvin said,” Eli had said, his voice quiet as he watched the baby reach out to him. “Not until they’re two.”

“They’re going to take him away.”

“Eventually, yes.”

“Why wait?”

“The women, apparently, were getting upset. They love cooing at babies.”

“It’s not fair.”

Eli hadn’t answered right away. He redid one of the straps Lucca did, and snapped the baby’s
onesie around his diaper. He grabbed a wipe from the container by Lucca’s hands and used it to wipe the baby’s mouth. The baby babbled a bit in response.

“It’ll be a while before he’s sent to a Center,” Eli finally said. “He has to go to a Day—”

“It’s not fair.”

“We all did it, Lucca.”

“They’re going to take him away.”

Eli smiled, picking the baby up and fixing him on his hip. With his other hand, he started to roll up the dirty diaper. Lucca moved to do it for him, rolling it with the wipes he used in a ball before tossing it into a small bag. Lucca was surprised Lizzy didn’t use cloth diapers.

“But he’s here now,” Eli said. “I get more time with him.”

Lucca opened his eyes, back in the counselor’s office. Dr. Lawson was watching him, a small smile on her face. It was obvious she’d been patiently letting him get lost in his thoughts. She did that a lot more lately; instead of demanding he stay present, she allowed him to wander. She said it was important for him to allow his thoughts and feelings to come and visit so that they can move on. Lucca wasn’t sure how helpful it was, but he did appreciate not constantly being pulled out of his thoughts. He felt less guilty about it, and it did make it easier to not get too upset over where his thoughts went.

“Where did you go this time?” she asked, her voice soft.

Yes, she always asked. Some days, Lucca didn’t share. He wanted his thoughts to himself. But he wanted to talk about this. Dr. Lawson, at the very least, did not tell Monty what he said in their sessions. Lucca tested her a few times, telling things his past counselors would immediately report to Monty. But when Lucca spoke with Monty, it was obvious he had no idea what he had told Dr. Lawson. So he knew this, at least, would stay between them.

“I have a friend,” Lucca started, looking out the window. A nice, warm spring day. “He had two babies. And the youngest one is a—like me.”

“He’s a surrogate?” Dr. Lawson asked, saying what Lucca didn’t want to speak.

Lucca nodded. “He’s a baby. I guess they take them away a bit older now. But they’re still going to take him.”

“Yes,” Dr. Lawson said. “A Daycare to be raised safely with other surrogates. And then he’ll eventually graduate to—”

“I don’t want to do that,” Lucca said, ignoring her. He knew what would happen to the baby once the Nation ripped him from his home.

“You don’t want to watch a surrogate child be taken? It can be emotional for surro—”

“I don’t want to have a child like me.”

Dr. Lawson was quiet, tapping her pen against her notebook. She frowned.

“Why not, Lucca? Because they’re going to take him?”

“Because no one will love him.”
“Lucca—”

“Monty won’t love him. Chelsea won’t love him. He’ll be a pretty toy until they take him. And once he’s gone, they’ll move on. The only one who might love him is me, and I’m not supposed to love him.”

Lucca thought of the way Eli looked holding the baby. How quick Eli was to encourage Lucca to play with Ron so that Eli was the one who had to hold and tend to the baby. How Eli rocked the baby to sleep instead of just laying him down in his crib for his naps. How, even though Calvin and Lizzy haven’t even given the baby a name, Eli calls him Tristan—after his brother who died during a conflict at the southern border when Eli was a teenager—when he believes no one is listening.

A child without a name wasn’t loved. Tristan—the baby—wasn’t loved. Any child Lucca had that was like him wouldn’t be loved. The same way that Lucca, as it turned out, wasn’t loved.

Lucca hated how being a surrogate meant being unloved. How could he give life to a child that was created to never be loved? A child he wasn’t himself allowed to love? A child he knew he would love anyway? How could Lucca suffer through that, and then watch as government officials came to take him away? How was Lucca supposed to happily get pregnant and give Monty and Chelsea more children after that? Nurse and raise those other children while remember his unloved child he’ll never see again?

“It’s not fair,” Lucca continued, grateful that Dr. Lawson hadn’t tried to speak over him again. “They kept telling me that even though the children I create wouldn’t be mine, they would still be loved. They’ll have a ‘proper’ family. But if my child is like me, he won’t be loved. He won’t grow up in a family. It’s not fair.”

Dr. Lawson’s pen danced over her notebook. She nodded.

“Surrogates will find love through the families they create,” she said, her words hollow yet kind. “He may not grow up with a family, but he’ll grow up to create families filled with love. There are lots of people raised in households lacking love. In countries and places where everyone only cares for themselves. I will admit that I don’t think surrogates must give birth to make up for what you are. But I do believe it is possible for you to find love in this life.”

Lucca just blinked at her. Seeing his reaction, or lack thereof, she chuckled.

“I will admit I’m biased,” she said. “But as a mother of three who owes each of my daughters to my surrogate, I know how much my daughters love him. More so than me, I feel. They may not understand how he helped create them, but there is a part of them that just seems to know. I’m not sure what love he may or may not have had in the past. But today, he’s surrounded by nothing but love.”

Lucca frowned, looking back out the window.

“You don’t believe me,” Dr. Lawson said. It wasn’t a question.

“How would I know?” Lucca said, shrugging.

“Well,” Dr. Lawson said, sitting back in her seat, “you have to start by having some kids first.”

Lucca glanced back at her, taking in the satisfied look on her face. She thought she’d made a great point. But Lucca knew there were no guarantees in life. Especially not when it came to love. But he nodded instead; maybe if he was lucky, none of his children would be surrogates. He wasn’t sure
what he’d do if they were.

Chapter End Notes

Me: -reads that last line while smirking to myself-

Anywho, wanted to apologize for my lack of inactivity. I've been very mentally drained recently. I have off from work tomorrow thanks to Memorial Day, so I don't feel that usual panic I do today while trying to get done all my chores before having to go to work tomorrow. It's nice, and allows me some time to sit with my thoughts. Long story short, I've been silently going through it for real, so I'm just feeling a bit overwhelmed tbqh. I thank you all for your patience.

I actually started to post the 30th chapter because I thought that's where I was. But when I went to edit it, I was like "wait, we're here already?" Then checked again and realized I wasn't quite there yet. Hehe, that would have been bad had I done that.

Anyway, I wanted to apologize because I -said- I would post another chapter on Wednesday and just didn't. I don't want to become that person who says they'll post on a consistent basis and never does. I have plenty of chapters, and the end is in sight (take a shot every time I say this lol), so there's no real excuse. It only takes about half an hour or so to reread and edit the chapter a bit before I post it. So it's just a matter of doing that. In my defense, spending all day looking at a computer screen makes that the last thing I want to do once I get home.

Now that I think about it, I could probably post during the week at my job since I get there crazy early and just kill time eating breakfast and sorting through emails. Hmmmm....

Sorry, I keep getting off track. Either way, I just wanted to say that to make up for my recent flightiness, and to help motivate me to FINISH THIS FUCKING STORY by bridging the gap between the chapters posted and what I actually have written, I'm going to post tomorrow (in celebration of the holiday) and on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. No Tuesday just to give myself a break. No excuses!

See you all tomorrow. And, as a reminder, I'm on tumblr, so you can always follow me at https://aizenat.tumblr.com/
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Lucca slips up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was halfway through May by the time the doctors had cleared Lucca for childbearing. Spring was in full swing with flowers blooming and the trees surrounding their home full of green leaves again. Lucca watched the trees sway in the breeze while Monty fucked him from behind. His mornings usually began with Monty waking him up with a cock in his cunt, and Lucca was past the point of letting it upset him.

Instead, he embraced how his body reacted to Monty’s attention. Now that Lucca was tracking his cycle—sick of being caught off guard whenever Monty commented on it—he reminded himself that the reason his body was so hot and excited was because he was ovulating and naturally hornier than usual. And the extra energy from the longer, warmer days was also going to affect how his body responded.

Monty adjusted his angle, pressing down on Lucca’s back and forcing him to lower his chest to the bed. It gave Monty more leverage, and meant his strokes landed deeper. Deep enough to hit that spot in Lucca that made him tremble. Lucca let out a small moan, his heart racing as Monty relentlessly struck that spot again and again. Lucca was also past freaking out in these rare moments where sex actually felt good; his sanity was more important than the mental gymnastics of coping with it.

So instead, Lucca let Monty fuck him harder, trying to keep his moans at a modest level. He could tell from the frantic rhythm of Monty’s hips that he was close. His grip on Lucca’s hips tightened, and Lucca knew he’d have bruises there. When Monty gave one last thrust and stilled, Lucca dutifully prayed Monty’s seed would catch.

Lucca lay there patiently while Monty caught his breath. Lucca also tried to calm his breath, willing his heart to slow down a bit. He felt hot and he was still hard. Lucca didn’t mind it, though; Monty enjoyed seeing Lucca’s excited state after he was fucked, and Lucca had learned to take pride in Monty’s pleasure.

That was another thing that was easier to just accept than keep fighting.

Monty moved, pressing down on Lucca’s lower back so he’d lower his hips. Lucca went, noting that Monty was still hard and inside him. Monty wasn’t done with him, then. Lucca smiled as he buried his head in his pillow, feeling Monty collapse on top of him.

“Why can’t I spend all day in bed with you like this?” Monty asked, his voice a growl.

“You could if you wanted to,” Lucca said, moving his hips a bit.

Monty laughed in Lucca’s ear, finally pulling out of Lucca. Lucca sighed, happy for the
momentary reprieve. It didn’t last long; Monty started to move Lucca until he was laying on his back. Monty settled between Lucca’s legs, pausing to look down at Lucca’s red face.

“I do want to,” he said, pushing Lucca’s hair off his forehead. “We’re working on an important project right now, though. I’ll settle for just one more round.”

Lucca nodded, not fighting when Monty pressed into him again. The second time around didn’t take as long as the first time, and Lucca was happy for it. Though he was hot and almost painfully hard by the time Monty was done. And it didn’t help that Monty still wanted to cuddle a bit before finally getting up.

“Alright,” Monty said, finally sitting up. He put a hand on Lucca’s stomach. “Fifteen minutes, then come down for breakfast.”

Lucca nodded, watching as Monty slid off the bed and found his clothes. He kissed Lucca again before dressing. Lucca watched him as he dressed, sloppily, before leaving. Lucca took a deep breath in and out. The room smelled of sex, as it often did these days. Lucca wished his window opened.

He waited about five minutes before getting up, heading for his bathroom. Monty would be too busy getting ready for work to check on Lucca again, and Lucca needed a shower. A cold shower. He refused to relieve himself after Monty had sex with him; the last bit of resistance Lucca didn’t want to shake. And he needed to get his erection down somehow.

Lucca sat at his desk after his shower, pulling out the Bible Derek had given him. He was getting better at reading it now thanks to Rudy. Some words were difficult; and the language was an older style that made it even more difficult than usual. But Lucca spent a few minutes trying to get through a story about Jesus in the desert until enough time would pass that he could go downstairs with his wet hair without Monty being suspicious.

Lucca finished the chapter, getting up from his desk. He kept his crocheting basket in his closet now, and so he turned to head there to put it away. And stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Monty standing at his door.

Lucca’s body went cold, the Bible heavy in his hand. Monty tilted his head, his face a curious calm that reminded Lucca instantly of that day at the cabin in the woods. Monty had changed into one of his fitted, dark blue suits with a light gray tie. Lucca was caught, and everything about his reaction told Monty that he was caught.

“What are you doing?” Monty asked, walking into the room.

Lucca didn’t answer. He didn’t have an answer. And nothing came to him. There was no getting out of this. Nothing he said could turn this around.

“What is that, Lucca?” Monty asked again, nodding towards his hands.

Lucca still didn’t answer. Not even as Monty walked in front of him, and took the Bible from his hands.

“A Bible,” Monty said, answering his own question. “This isn’t your Bible, Lucca. You left yours in the car last Sunday. Who gave this to you, Lucca?”

Lucca shook his head.

“Silence? That’s not good. You get silent when I catch you doing something you weren’t supposed
Lucca shook his head again. It was a lie. An obvious one. And one that Monty didn’t believe for one second. He raised an eyebrow, as if surprised Lucca had lied.

“A Bible I didn’t give you, and suddenly you know how to read it. This is new. I wonder who you’ve been around who could have given you this and shown you how to read it.”

Lucca blinked, too terrified to look away from Monty. He seemed to be thinking. Finally, Lucca’s brain started working. Lucca only interacted with his family, the neighbors, and his doctors. His doctors would never do that, but he’s often left alone with the other surrogates on their block. And, Lucca realized, just as Monty’s face seemed to lit up as he reached the same conclusion, there was one surrogate in particular that Lucca spent a lot of time with alone.

“Rudy comes over here often, doesn’t he?” Monty said. “Did he give you this?”

Lucca shook his head, frantic now. He couldn’t let Rudy take the fall for this.

“Did he teach you to read this, Lucca?”

“No,” Lucca said, the panic high in his voice. “He didn’t. He didn’t give me this, and he didn’t teach me!”

“Then who did, Lucca?”

“No one,” Lucca said, looking down.

Monty moved, making Lucca flinch again. He opened the Bible, turning to a random page, before shoving it in front of Lucca’s face.

“Can you read this?” he demanded.

Lucca shook his head. “No,” he lied, fighting tears. “I can’t! I can’t read it.”

“Then why do you have this, Lucca? Why were you hiding it? Who gave this to you?”

“Vic.”

Monty went silent. Lucca felt his heart racing. It was a lie. A terrible lie. But Vic was in Texas; there was no way Monty could hurt him. Hopefully. Lucca looked up at Monty, deciding to just commit to it.

“It was Vic’s,” he said, shaking his head. “His abuela had given it to him when he’d been taken from his family. Vic could read, but he said it made him think of home too much when he tried to read it. Before he left, he gave it to me. I told him I couldn’t read it, but he said when he prays, it helps to pray over it. And you told me I had to pray on my own more, and…”

Lucca let his voice trail off, shaking a little. He wiped away a few tears that were threatening to spill. That story wasn’t a total lie: Vic did have a Bible his abuela had given him. But he would never part with that: he didn’t mind the nostalgia of thinking of his family. He never read it nor prayed over it: but he always kept it as a keepsake of home.

Lucca had to admit that his lie impressed even him.

Monty sighed, closing the Bible. He held it in front of him, and it took Lucca a second to realize he was giving it back to him. Lucca took it, blinking at it warily.
“Why did you hide it, Lucca?” he asked, his voice gentle.

“I was afraid you’d take it away,” Lucca said, looking down.

“Why would I do that?”

“Because,” Lucca started, pausing to sniff. “Because I’m supposed to be focusing on my new family, not the past. And I can’t read it anyway. And—”

Lucca’s words were cut off as Monty pulled him into a tight hug. Lucca felt tense, waiting for the ball to drop. It always did with Monty. But after a few minutes, Monty simply pulled them apart, shaking his head.

“You didn’t need to hide that, Lucca,” he lightly scolded. He had that sort of look on his face as though Lucca was acting silly. “When you hide things, it leaves the impression that you’re doing something wrong. It’s a Bible, Lucca. Why would I ever discourage you from developing your relationship with God?”

“You wouldn’t,” Lucca said, as though just realizing he’d been acting silly.

What a great actor he was becoming.

“No, I wouldn’t. Come on now. Enough crying. It was just a misunderstanding, right?”

Lucca nodded.

“Let’s forget about it and go eat, okay? We’ve left Chelsea waiting long enough.”

“Okay,” Lucca said, putting the Bible on his desk.

Monty took Lucca by the hand and led him out of his room. Lucca breathed a sigh of relief, promising himself to be more careful. He couldn’t make a mistake like this again.

Chapter End Notes

Tbqh, there is really no need to have this scene. If I was editing this story for real and trying to get it published, this would be a chapter to cut. So I guess it’s a good thing I’m posting this while I’m doing a chapter bombs this week as opposed to letting y’all wait an entire week for this shit lol.

Follow me on Tumblr @ https://aizenat.tumblr.com/
Chapter Summary

Lucca gets sick...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There was a rushing sound, like water, surging through Lucca’s head. Everything was muffled. Someone was speaking, but he couldn’t make out the words. Lucca knew this was bad. He was disassociating; something his counselors warned against. He couldn’t do this. He had to be present.

So Lucca remembered the technique Dr. Lawson had taught him. He took a few deep breathes in before counting. Five things he could see. The young female doctor who was speaking, Chelsea standing next to him, the clipboard the doctor was holding, the red heels she wore rather unnecessarily, and the jade bracelet Chelsea was twisting on her wrist.

Four things he could touch, three things he could hear, two things he could smell, and one thing he could taste. He went through them all; touching the coarseness of his dry hair that needed a good wash, focusing on the words the doctor was saying and hearing them, smelling that sterile alcohol smell that was synonymous with a doctor’s office, and finally tasting bile that kept threatening to rise in his throat.

“Isn’t it too early?” Chelsea was asking, side-eyeing Lucca with a look of disbelief.

“It is early,” the doctor agreed, her round face making her look so much younger than she had to be. Her short height didn’t help; the heels didn’t really do anything to make her look older. “But we did a urine and blood test: both came back positive. Congratulations.”

Chelsea smiled, letting out a contented sigh. Lucca felt like he was in a dream. He knew this was the goal, but it was so weird to actually achieve it. He remembered what Derek had said that day Josiah left the Center.

*We’ve all known we didn’t have a choice. It’s just...weird. That it’s actually happening.*

Lucca understood what Derek meant now: it was weird. He was pregnant.

“It’s too early to try to determine much,” the doctor was continuing. “Technology has come a long way; we can detect conception almost as soon as it happens. Not surprisingly, though, that means we’re in a very fragile time. If he’s on any sort of exercise regime, I’d recommend having him stop immediately. He needs to be careful; I would suggest lots of quiet and calm. Limit any sort of stress; if your husband is still attempting to conceive, advise him to stop. Most miscarriages happen during the first trimester, so we need to be mindful at this stage.”

Chelsea nodded seriously, her hand under her chin as she listened. Lucca wondered if this meant he was going to be stuck in bed. He didn’t want that. He wanted to go outside and enjoy the warming weather.

“I would also suggest minding his health,” the doctor continued. “We need to adjust his vitamins;
cut back a bit on the iron and up the calcium and manganese. I’m going to write down some dietary adjustments that should help. Also, limit his interactions with anyone outside your family; including your waitstaff. The last thing you want is someone bringing a virus or something into your house and he gets sick.”

“Of course,” Chelsea said, taking the paper the doctor had been writing on and glancing over it. “I guess we should keep him inside?”

“Not necessarily. I wouldn’t encourage long or arduous walks, but a stroll around your backyard would do him so good. Not to mention with the weather turning, he would really benefit from some time in the sun. Even if he was left outside to garden or some easygoing hobby, it would keep him in a relaxed state and increase the chances of this pregnancy sticking.”

“He crochets. You mean something like that?”

“Oh, that’s perfect! Just mind any allergies and don’t let him stay out too long if it’s a bit cooler.”

Lucca wondered if he would be fine to zone out of the conversation since the women were talking about him as though he weren’t there. But right as he thought about letting his mind wander to the portrait of the couple at the door, the doctor turned her gaze to him. She gave Lucca a gentle smiled that looked too rehearsed and unnatural. Lucca wondered just how old this girl was if she was that bad at faking a smile.

“You’ve been getting sick a lot lately, Lucca?” she asked.

Lucca nodded. It was the reason they were even at the doctors. Last week, Ron had come down with a bad case of the flu. Which, not surprisingly, Eli ended up catching. Just two days prior, Eli had to be hospitalized due to potential complications with his pregnancy. Considering how often Chelsea had dragged Lucca over to their house, Lucca was sure that when he woke up the day before puking, it was the flu. And when his nausea didn’t subside by morning, Monty had demanded Chelsea take Lucca to an Urgent Care.

Lucca didn’t expect to find out that he was pregnant.

“Ginger tea will help with the nausea,” the doctor said, writing something down on Lucca’s file. “Also, have him eat less but more frequently. And I would try to have him eat something before he gets out of bed. Toast and tea in the mornings helped my sister when she had really bad morning sickness.”

Chelsea nodded, glancing at Lucca. “I hate spoiling surrogates, but I guess we don’t really have a choice now.”

The doctor chuckled politely. “Yes, he will need the utmost care and attention now. Once we’re in the second trimester, things should ease up significantly. And the third, obviously, will be draining on him physically. But it’s best to worry about that when we get there. For now, lots of rest, healthy foods, and calm are what he needs most. Any way you and your husband can facilitate that will lead to a healthy child.”

Chelsea and the doctor went back and forth a bit, while Lucca rested a hand on his stomach. He didn’t feel different. He was sure that when it happened, he would know. Nicolai swore that he felt the exact moment he caught. He also claimed to feel when the twins’ egg split in two, however, so Lucca was sure Nicolai was full of shit half the time. Either way, he thought he’d feel something.

“Congratulations again,” the doctor said, grabbing Lucca’s attention.
She shook Chelsea’s hand—rather awkwardly—before leaving. Chelsea started to gather her things while Lucca took that as a sign that he could get off the table.

“I can’t believe this,” Chelsea said, a huge smile on her face. “Of course, aside from Monty and the help, no one else can know about this. We’ll wait until the second trimester to announce it. Aren’t you excited?”

Lucca nodded, hoping he did look interested at least. “I was sure it was the flu.”

“Thank God it’s not,” Chelsea said as she put her jacket on. “I can’t wait to redecorate the nursery. I assume you want to tell Monty when he gets home?”

Lucca paused, looking at her. “I don’t have to,” he said. “If you want to.”

Chelsea waved her hand as if swatting the thought away. “All I really care is that I know. I don’t care how Monty finds out, honestly. I just figured since you two have your little fake relationship going on, you would want to break the news. Have a moment.”

Lucca blinked at her, incredulous. Was Chelsea serious? Did she think Lucca loved Monty? That Lucca wanted to get pregnant with Monty’s baby? Either Lucca was a better actor than he’d given himself credit for, or Chelsea was an actual idiot.

“Here,” Chelsea said, folding the paper the doctor had given her, and handing it to Lucca. “Just give him this. Let him read it. It says your pregnant and every instruction she just gave. Maybe if he reads that he’s not supposed to fuck you, you’ll be spared the congratulatory rape.”

Lucca took the paper with a flinch. “Surrogates can’t be raped” he said.

“No,” Chelsea said, cocking her head. “You can’t, can you?”

She turned to leave, and Lucca followed. No, Chelsea wasn’t an idiot; and Lucca wasn’t even close to being a good actor.

~*~

Lucca had fallen asleep after lunch. He’d spent the afternoon reading through the papers the doctor had given them. It was hard, and took almost a full hour, but Lucca managed. Afterwards, he folded the papers up, hid them under his pillow, and went straight to sleep. When he woke, it was Monty gently waking him up.

“Poor thing,” Monty said, pushing Lucca’s curls off of his forehead. “Are you that sick? Chelsea wouldn’t tell me what the doctor said. She said I had to see you myself. You don’t look particularly ill.”

Lucca blinked sleep out of his eyes, shaking his head. Monty brought the back of his hand to Lucca’s forehead, frowning when he saw that Lucca wasn’t warm. Lucca glanced out the window, noting that the sun was setting. It was pretty late: did Monty come home later than usual, or had he let Lucca sleep before coming to him?

“What’s wrong then?” Monty asked, tilting his head. “What did the doctor say?”
Oh. Right. Lucca remembered how the morning went, and reached under his pillow. Monty tensed when he saw the papers; Lucca didn’t realize until he saw Monty’s reaction how suspicious it looked for Lucca to be hiding papers. So he quickly unfolded them and pressed them into Monty’s hands.

“Chelsea said you should read these,” Lucca said, deciding to play dumb.

“Do you know what they say?” Monty asked. His tone was casual, but Lucca wasn’t stupid enough to not see the trap.

“No exactly,” Lucca said, without missing a beat. “I think I know what it says in general considering what the doctor told us.”

Monty looked a bit concerned as he looked at the papers. He must have been skimming over it, because understanding dawned on his face in seconds. He shook his head; Lucca wondered if it was shock or disbelief. His lips broke into a slightly goofy smile as he looked back at Lucca.

“What do you think is written here?” Monty asked.

“That I’m pregnant,” Lucca said.

“Is that what the doctor told you?”

Lucca nodded. That, at least, was truthful.

“It does say that,” Monty said, looking back at the papers. He looked at the second page, skimming it briefly. “Among other things. We’ll need to wait a few weeks to confirm how far along you are.”

“The doctor said we have to be careful,” Lucca said, playing stupid. “Because it’s so early and it’ll be easy to have a miscarriage.”

“Yes, I saw his instructions.”

Lucca waited. Monty’s reaction wasn’t at all what he was expecting. He was expecting smiles and hugs and probably sex. Joy. Something. Not calmness. Lucca couldn’t read anything from it.

Monty returned to the papers, reading them in earnest now. The small smile on his face didn’t change, and after a long stretch of silence, Lucca realized that Monty wasn’t happy.

“Isn’t this good?” Lucca asked, trying to keep his voice light.

Monty looked up at him, confusion on his face. “Of course, honey. We’ve been working very hard at this, haven’t we?”

“You just don’t seem happy. Did I—?”

“Who was this doctor? Chen?” Monty asked, pulling out his phone. “Is he new? I know all the doctors at the Urgent Care.”

“She did look pretty young,” Lucca said idly, glancing at the papers Monty dropped between them. Was Monty mad at what she wrote? “She—”

“She? Your doctor was a woman?”

“Yes.”

Monty nodded. “This area is very liberal in that regard,” he said casually, crumpling up the papers
and dropping them on the floor.

Lucca tensed: was there a problem with his doctor being a woman? Did Monty care about that? Most of Lucca’s current doctors were women; his counselor, his primary physician, his psychiatrist, and his gynecologist were all women. Lucca was used to men from the Center in charge of his health, so the women were a nice reprieve. Women were allowed to pursue education if they were barren. So Lucca didn’t know why it would be a problem.

Monty interrupted Lucca’s thoughts with a kiss. Lucca jumped a bit, but quickly relaxed. Monty moved on top of Lucca, guiding him onto his back as Monty settled between his legs. Lucca felt his stomach flutter. He didn’t want to irritate Monty further than he obviously was, so he didn’t protest. But when Monty broke the kiss, his smile finally reached his eyes.

“Do you still feel sick?” he asked, his hands moving to undo Lucca’s pants.

“No,” Lucca said with a shake of his head, watching Monty’s hands.

“Good. We have some time before dinner. God, I can’t wait to see your belly grow. Are you excited, Lucca?”

Lucca nodded, noticing the slight flash in Monty’s eye. He saw the lie for what it was, but it didn’t matter. Not at this point. He leaned down and kissed Lucca again. Lucca closed his eyes, moving his own hands down to help Monty take his pants off. Despite his long nap, Lucca was already tired again.

Chapter End Notes

Monty is fucking weird.

Don’t be shy: leave some comments on what you guys are thinking. Events are going to pick up a bit, but there’s still a lot that needs to happen. See y'all tomorrow!
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Best friends don't keep secrets from each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rudy’s sneeze this time didn’t even cause Lucca to jump. Rudy sniffed, reaching for one of the tissues on the patio table they were sitting at. Lucca smiled sympathetically. While Monty didn’t have much regard for the doctor’s orders, Chelsea had cultivated an entire routine for Lucca to keep him as calm as possible. Which included outdoor crocheting sessions after lunch. Now that summer was right around the corner, being outside was a dream.

Except for Rudy, whom, it turned out, had allergies. And with all of the flowers surrounding them in the garden Lucca and Chelsea spent the mornings cultivating, it meant the patio area had become a dome of pollen. Rudy—and by proxy, Lindsey—weren’t allowed to visit until after lunch. And while the visits had been sparingly recently, it meant that when Lucca did have to entertain Rudy, they had to sit outside where Rudy spent most of the time sneezing.

“Sorry,” Lucca said as Rudy paused to blow his nose. “We could go sit by the pool. There’s less flowers over there.”

Rudy shook his head. “I can’t swim, and Lindsey will get mad if I’m over there without supervision. Besides, there’s pollen in everything. All these trees do more than these flowers.”

Lucca looked around the backyard at the dense trees that surrounded their land. Every house was similarly designed to use trees to separate lands than fences. And they weren’t allowed to be touched or altered without the government’s approval. Lucca’s eyes fell on the pool. The tarp had been removed, and the water had been changed out and cleaned. It wasn’t open yet; Chelsea was hosting a Memorial Day celebration that weekend and it would officially be opened then.

“Can you take medicine for it?” Lucca asked, adjusting the blanket he was working on off his lap so that he wouldn’t get too hot.

“Normally I get shots, but I can’t get them right now,” Rudy said, his voice getting a bit lighter.

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t.”

Lucca paused, looking at him. He had a small smile on his face as he worked on his blue blanket. Rudy had been in lighter spirits recently, though Lucca had assumed it was due to the turning of the weather. Spring always brought renewed energy with it, and Lucca was sure Rudy was getting more vitamin D from his afternoons outside with Lucca than he did all last year. That had to be helping.

But there was a hint of something else in his face; a secret that Lucca didn’t know. Lucca tilted his head, taking in Rudy’s rounder face—the way it almost glowed with golden undertones in a way
his skin hadn’t before—and how much his hair had grown into a large afro on top of his head. Lucca put his needle down.

“You’re pregnant?” Lucca asked.

Rudy looked up, his eyes wide in shock. “How did you guess that?”

“Why else wouldn’t you be able to get the shots?” Lucca said, shoving his shoulder playfully. “And you wouldn’t tell me. You’re not that far along then?”

Rudy put his needles down, glancing at the sliding door as if afraid Lindsey or Chelsea would happen to walk in at that time. A shy smile slid up his lips.

“Nine weeks tomorrow,” he said, a bit proudly. “I’m not getting too excited though. I figured I’d wait until I’m at least twenty weeks along before I let myself believe I won’t lose it.”

“Well, congratulations anyway!”

Rudy looked down bashfully, his smile growing. Lucca knew he was genuinely excited to be pregnant. Rudy actually wanted a child. Lucca wished he could feel that happy instead of the growing dread he was trying so hard to ignore.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Rudy said, looking back at him. “Not Eli or Nicolai. Not even Monty. The doctor said I might take longer to show, so we’re waiting before the announcement. Probably on Labor Day since Lindsay is hosting that barbecue.”

Lucca nodded. The neighbors had agreed to a rotation for who would host community get-togethers on holidays. Someone could, of course, volunteer for events if they really want to host it and there were no objections. And that didn’t mean people couldn’t have random parties and barbecues when the mood hit them. But the rotation was supposed to limit any arguing since Chelsea had gotten into it with Marjorie Kyle over who would host the Easter egg hunt a couple of months prior. Marjorie won that one—thus why Chelsea got stuck with the Memorial Day barbecue—but the men thought a rotation would minimize any potential feuds.

Though Lucca didn’t expect Chelsea to do something as uncouth as to try to announce their pregnancy at another family’s party, Lucca knew she would likely try to do it around some event or holiday. And Lucca, as they found out earlier that week, was five weeks along. So he’d be close to hitting his second trimester around late August.

“I need to make sure Chelsea doesn’t do the announcement around then,” Lucca said, trying to count when a good time would be.

“You’re pregnant too?”

Lucca blinked, realizing his mistake. Shit.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Lucca said, feeling panic rise in his chest. “If Chelsea finds out I—”

“I won’t tell a soul, Lucca,” Rudy said, scooching his chair closer and running a hand down Lucca’s arm. “Calm down.”

Lucca nodded, remembering his calming techniques. Old habits were hard to break: he couldn’t help but immediately think of how angry Chelsea would be if she found out Lucca had spilled the beans. From there, his mind had gone down the rabbit hole of how Monty would punish Lucca, and how Lucca had to make sure he didn’t get too upset and hurt the baby. Now that he was able to
think rationally, he knew it was silly. He knew Rudy’s secret as well; of course Rudy wouldn’t tell.

“I’m only five weeks along,” Lucca finally said when his heart slowed down a bit. “It’s still really early.”

“Are you excited?” Rudy asked, his eyes lit up. Lucca felt that ache in his chest again: Rudy was really happy about all of this.

“It doesn’t feel real yet,” Lucca said. That was the safest answer.

Rudy’s face brightened even more. Lucca had never seen him so happy. “That’s how I felt last time. At first. Like it wasn’t real. Do you have morning sickness? Is that why I haven’t been allowed over until the afternoons?”

Lucca wanted to tell Rudy that “morning” referred to the beginning of the pregnancy, not the day. But that would have been rude, and unnecessary, so Lucca just smiled and nodded.

“It hasn’t been as bad as it was a few weeks ago. We thought I had the flu.”

Rudy laughed at that. A laugh. A real, full bodied laugh. Lucca almost wanted to cry: he felt like such a fraud. A liar. Rudy didn’t deserve someone like him to share in his pregnancy. Rudy wanted this this so badly. Lucca wanted it over with quickly. Fuck, he didn’t want to do it at all.

And when that thought hit Lucca, how much he didn’t want to be pregnant, Lucca did start crying. The tears broke suddenly, streaming down Lucca’s face. Rudy jumped up, reaching for his tissues. Lucca looked down at the patio table, watching his tears splash along the glass. What the fuck was wrong with him?

“It’s okay,” Rudy said, handing him the tissues. “It’s just the hormones. I cried a lot last time too. Okay?”

Lucca took the tissues and just buried his face in them as he cried. When the sobs started, Rudy was there, rubbing his back. And Lucca hated himself even more. There was no escaping this: he knew that. So why couldn’t he accept it? Why couldn’t he be happy like Rudy? What was wrong with him?

Chapter End Notes

God, I love writing Rudy. He’s such a sweetheart. He turned out a lot different than I originally planned, but I’m happy for it.

Please leave comments; it motivates me so much, and I love talking to you all!
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Prologue to something that's been long overdue...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two babies were born in late May. The neighbors, Greg and Natalie, had a boy a week before Memorial Day. Eli finally had his baby two days before the weekend. A girl, as predicted. As such, both families were stuck in the hospital—or at home—in time for Chelsea’s barbecue.

And Chelsea was pissed.

“It’s not like they did it on purpose,” Monty said in the kitchen, watching Chelsea take her anger out on the cooks. They’d hired a few more to help with the meats to barbecue, and they managed to work around Chelsea with a precision that Lucca envied.

Lucca was helping out in the kitchen; now that his morning sickness had subsided, for the most part, Lucca was ravenous. His meals were never enough to satisfy him, and he found out pretty quickly that the waitstaff had been informed of his pregnancy. As such, if he spent time around the kitchen, they would indulge him with snacks and even take requests for future meals. Arielle had promised to make a potato salad her mother used to make that she said was “real, southern soul food.”

So Lucca sat with her at a table in the corner by the door, peeling potatoes. And watching with interest as Chelsea ranted about the selfishness of their neighbors. As if Memorial Day was a major holiday.

“Oh, please,” Chelsea said, turning on Monty. “This is hardly Lizzy’s first child. And she and her surrogate are still in the hospital. A few hours here isn’t a big deal.”

“Chels,” Monty said, rolling his eyes as he grabbed a slice of apple from a fruit tray one of the new cooks had designed. Without missing a beat, the cook rearranged the tray to make up for it. “It’s still their child. Of course they’re going to want to stay at the hospital with her.”

“Oh, and what about Nat? She’s been home for days!”

“Two days, Chelsea,” Monty said, shaking his head. “She had preeclampsia. She still needs time to recover. And with this being her first, she’s not going to leave her child so early just to come to a party. And,” Monty emphasized as Chelsea opened her mouth to combat that, “she’s not going to bring a baby hardly a week old to a party. What if the baby got sick?”

Chelsea frowned. “I saw her the other day, and she wasn’t—”

Monty swallowed the rest of the apple he’d grabbed and moved. His hand went straight to the nape of Chelsea’s neck, and he walked her towards the door. Arielle made a show of pointing out how Lucca was pealing the potatoes too aggressively, replacing his knife with an actual peeler. When Monty spoke to Chelsea, his voice was low, and Arielle and Lucca had to both pretend they
couldn’t hear him.

“I know you’re stressed with this party, Chels,” Monty said, humor gone from his voice, “but you’re acting like a little diva. It is not your place to judge what happens in another family. Did it ever occur to you that their husbands decided it would be best for their families if they stayed away today? Would you criticize how a man decides to run his household?”

“No,” Chelsea said, glancing embarrassedly at Arielle and Lucca. “I wasn’t thinking—”

“No,” Monty interrupted, letting go of her neck. “You weren’t. I give you a lot of freedom out of respect and appreciation for all you’ve done for me and Lucca. But please do remember your place, Chelsea.”

“And what place is that?” Chelsea challenged.

Lucca tensed and felt Arielle do the same next to him. Why was Chelsea so determined to fight Monty lately? Even if they hadn’t married for love, nor behaved as husband a wife, the fact was the law still saw them as such. Monty could strike Chelsea down and she wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. At this point, even if she tried to out Monty and Lucca, Monty fucking his surrogate to get him pregnant wasn’t against the law. It was the very point of surrogacy. All she would do is make herself look like a crazy wife overly jealous of her surrogate.

It wouldn’t end well for her.

“Where wives ought to be,” Monty said politely. “Next to their husbands, silent and obedient.”

“That’s not what I agreed to,” Chelsea snapped, her eyes narrowing in disgust.

“We have multiple witnesses to your vows. Or have you suddenly forgotten that we’re married? Or, maybe, you’d rather suffer the embarrassment of a divorce. Would you rather go back to your parents like your sister?”

There was nothing but hatred in Chelsea’s eyes. Lucca couldn’t blame her; bringing up Chelsea’s sister was a low blow. But Chelsea simply shook her head, rolled her shoulder’s back, and planted a polite smile on her face.

“Of course not, Montgomery,” she said. “You are absolutely right. I appreciate the reminder.”

“Wonderful,” Monty said. He leaned in and kissed Chelsea on her cheek. “Please finish up and get ready. Our guests will be here soon.”

“Yes, Monty.”

Monty smiled at her before leaving the kitchen. The cooks were still moving, ignoring the entire showdown between Monty and Chelsea. Arielle finished up with the potatoes, taking the last one Lucca had, and began cutting them up. Their movement caught Chelsea’s attention.

“Lucca, what the fuck are you doing?” she snapped.

Lucca froze, looking up at her. She wasn’t really angry at him; he knew that. But, like Lucca, she couldn’t take it out on the person who she was actually angry at. So that left Lucca. Lucca opened his mouth to say something, already knowing it was going to be wrong to her.

“He was helping me with the potatoes,” Arielle answered for him. “He asked if there was something he could do to help, and I figured this would be the safest and keep him out of
everyone’s way.”

Chelsea’s eyes snapped to Arielle. Lucca felt his heart drop.

“Does he look like the fucking help?” she said, her voice low and dangerous. She looked at Lucca. “Lucca, are you the fucking help?”

Lucca didn’t know how to answer that. Surrogates, once they were done having as many children as their families wanted, essentially became glorified nannies. Would nannies be considered the help?

“Look at you,” Chelsea said, gesturing to Lucca’s messy shirt. “You’re a mess. Go upstairs and get ready. Our guests will be here any minute and you look like destitute! God, Lucca, what were you thinking?”

Lucca just nodded, not in the mood to argue.

“And you,” Chelsea said, turning back to Arielle. “Next time he wants to help, give him some food to set up in his room for the children. Do you know how much his bid cost? Way more then we pay for you to work here. He’s not a fucking servant for you to order around. Understood?”

Lucca stood, feeling his face get hot with anger. He didn’t like Chelsea talking about him like that. Who cared how much his bid cost? Why would she compare that to how much Arielle was paid? Lucca made his way around the table while Arielle also stood up. She nodded her head politely.

“Yes, Madam. Understood.”

Lucca glanced at Arielle, shocked by how calm and unbothered she was. It seemed Chelsea wasn’t so happy about that. She frowned at Arielle before turning and leaving. Lucca turned to her.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to get you in trouble.”

“She’ll get over it,” she said, smiling. “She’s just embarrassed that she got put in her place. Go do what she says before you get in trouble too.”

Lucca nodded before leaving the kitchen.

“And I’ll save some potato salad for you,” Arielle called out as he left.

Lucca headed for his room, smiling to himself. He couldn’t wait to try that potato salad.

Chapter End Notes

Wanted to start off with apologizing. Which seems to be all I do these days. I posted more frequently last week, but yesterday became so overwhelming that I couldn’t even think to post. I also haven't been writing lately. I haven't hit a block, really; it's just that this story still has some dark moments to hit, and it's rather hard to push through it now that I'm coming to a point where the climax is in sight. I know if I get over this hump, then I can end it on the high I've had planned, but it's so hard.
For now, I'm sticking with my once a week updates, so you can expect a new chapter on Sunday.

As always, please let me know what you think. It's easy to let Chelsea fall to the background since she was simply a means to an end, but she's here and go her own opinions on how things should go. Too bad Monty disagrees.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Misery doesn't always love company.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“She’s so tiny.”

Lucca smiled, watching Rudy hold baby Moira. July brought a series of thunderstorms that had ruined every garden in the neighborhood. As such, the wives had started a mission to get together and help repair them one house at a time. Currently, they working on the Kyle’s garden. That meant all the surrogates were together at the Kyle’s house, watching the children.

Lucca was glad Ron was in school. The twins were very mild manner when they didn’t have him around to rile them up, and they played with bubbles near the patio while the women walked around the backyard, planning how to go about fixing the damage. Natalie’s baby, Tim, was asleep in the pack-n-play next to Eli. And Lucca was holding Tristian.

Tristian was now walking, though was still content to be held by anyone who would have him. Which wasn’t often, according to Eli. Now that Eli had to nurse Moira, it meant Tristian had to rely more on solids. And between Ron’s rambunctious nature and the baby needing so much attention, he had been lacking in attention. So with Moira getting passed around and Ron absent, Lucca decided to shower Tristian with attention.

“How is she through the night?” Nicolai asked Eli.

Eli, who had been nodding off a bit at the table, glanced at Moira in Rudy’s arms, and shrugged.

“Average, I guess. She wakes up every three hours to eat no matter what time it is.”

Nicolai placed a hand on his growing stomach. Since summer began, his belly had begun to swell. He was still a way off from the end, but Lucca could see he was already sick of being pregnant.

“How’s he been?” Nicolai asked, nodding towards Tristian.

Tristian ignored them, shaking the water bottle someone had put beans in as a makeshift rattle. Nicolai shook it, banging it on the table. Eli watched him, frowning.

“If he breaks that glass, I’m going to be the one to hear it,” Eli said, his voice short.

Lucca glanced at Eli, noting the bags under his eyes, and nodded. He reached for one of the bottles of bubbles sitting on the table and replaced the water bottle with it. Tristian was immediately intrigued, forgetting about his rattle immediately. Lucca blew a few bubbles in front of him, and watched him squeal as he tried to reach out and grab them.

“He’s been very needy,” Eli finally answered Nicolai, once Tristian was completely entrenched in the bubbles. “He didn’t used to want so much attention. Now he’s crawling into my arms any time
Moira’s not in them.”

“He’s still a baby,” Rudy said, adjusting Moira in his arms. She was quiet, just watching him as if not sure what he planned to do with her. Her eyes were green, like Eli’s. “He doesn’t understand that things have to change now that there’s another one.”

“Ron wasn’t that needy,” Eli muttered, rather bitterly.

“Does Lizzy help during the night with her?” Nicolai asked, nodding towards Moira. “Does she help in general?”

Eli sat up, raising an eyebrow at him. “Yes. She’s been very hands on. Just like she was with Ron.”

“She wasn’t helping you nurse him.”

Eli frowned as he looked back at Tristan. Tristan was none the wiser to being spoken about, and he grabbed the wand Lucca took out of the bottle and tried to blow. He didn’t manage any bubbles, and he looked at the wand in confusion. Then immediately went to put it in his mouth.

“Okay, I guess we’re done there,” Lucca said, taking the wand and putting it back in the bottle. He handed the bottle to Nicolai.

A bunch of squealing grabbed their attention. They all watched as the women just about screamed “congratulations,” and hugged Lindsey. She was blushing, as if embarrassed by the attention. Lucca glanced at Rudy.

“What’s that about?” Nicolai wondered aloud, watching at the twins wandered over to the women to show them how big they could make their bubbles.

“Should we draw straws to see who’s hosting the baby shower?” Lizzy asked loudly, garnering a round of laughter. Lucca saw Chelsea roll her eyes as she pulled Lindsey into a hug.

“Baby shower?” Eli said, squinting his eyes at the women. “Who’s pregnant?”

There was a pause before Eli turned to look at Rudy and Lucca. It took Lucca a second to realize he was asking which one of them it was. Lucca wasn’t supposed to tell anyone yet, so he kept silent. But he did look at Rudy to see if he would fess up. Rudy, however, had already turned his attention back to Moira, who was getting a bit fussy.

There was another pause as Rudy found Moira’s pacifier buried in her blanket and guided it into her mouth. He smiled and glanced up, freezing when he realized everyone was looking at him.

“What?” he asked, glancing at Moira. “Is she not supposed to use it?”

“The ladies are talking about a pregnancy,” Nicolai said, raising an eyebrow at him. “And Lindsey seems to be in the center of it.”

Rudy’s eyes glanced at the women, before he sat up a bit straighter.

“Right,” he said. “Um, yeah. I am.”

Nicolai and Eli looked at each other, then at Lucca. Lucca hoped he didn’t look guilty, but something on his face must have tipped Eli off because he narrowed his eyes at Lucca.

“You knew already, didn’t you?” he accused.
Relieved, Lucca glanced at Rudy before answering. “I wasn’t allowed to say.”

“Hell no,” Nicolai said, getting up and taking the chair next to Rudy. He pulled Rudy into a hug. “We don’t keep secrets. Not even this.”

“Okay, okay,” Rudy said, laughing. “Get off.”

“Never. God, this is incredible. How far along are you?”

“Sixteen weeks this Saturday.”

“How the hell did you keep this a secret for this long! You’re not even showing!”

“You didn’t start showing until you were well into your second trimester,” Eli reminded him.

“Whatever. I would have been chomping at the bit to say something. I’m serious. No secrets.” Nicolai turned to Lucca. “What about you? You hiding something?”

“No,” Lucca said, his attention distracted as Tristian decided he was bored and wanted to try to climb up Lucca’s chest.

“Lucca’s pregnant too,” Rudy said. “He’s not as far along as me, but he should be in his second trimester soon.”

Lucca got Tristian’s hands detangled from his hair and shot Rudy a glare.

“I’m not supposed to tell anyone that, either,” he said.

“And you didn’t. I did.”

“I would hug you too,” Nicolai said, beaming, “but if the women see that, they might wonder why. So I won’t make trouble.”

Lucca got Tristian to settle.

“Awww, so we’re all pregnant together,” Nicolai said, his hand ghosting his stomach. “Except you, Eli. You should have held out a bit longer.”

“I was already overdue when I had her. No thanks,” Eli said, waving his hand. “That’s a club I’m okay to not be in.”

The others laughed, and Lucca gave a small smile. He didn’t want to be a part of that club, either.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all. I’m super late with this update. I had a rough weekend so there was no getting it up, and then the last few days sort of flew by. My birthday is tomorrow and so I've been reflecting a lot as I get closer and closer to 30 how I need to shape up.

So with that said, I'm going to be more consistent with my updates. It's easy to let life get in the way of my goals and deadlines, but if you keep letting life get in the way, you'll never get anything done, right? At some point, you just gotta prioritize what's important to you. That's what being an adult is.
Also, my ass took off work on Friday so I can get fucked up tomorrow night lol. I'll upload a new chapter on Friday, and be back on posting on Sunday every week.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

-in Hozier's voice- Take me to church...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca hated service. It wasn’t too bad at the Center: there was a small chapel in the middle of the campus and Sunday service was mostly a local priest preaching at them about God’s mercy to give boys like Lucca purpose through surrogacy. It only lasted about an hour and was easy for Lucca to tune out most weeks. And the Wednesday mass was optional, which Lucca dutifully skipped.

Church was a different ball game outside of the Center. There was only one church per town; something Lucca heard was different back when there was different sort of denominations in the Nation. Instead, there was one word, one message, and only one church was needed for that. And the church was huge: if a national disaster hit, it could easily fit all of the thousands of residents in town. And still have space for the children to run around.

And instead of just catering to one group, the Church split the citizens up in three—obvious—groups: men, women, and surrogates. Any children under five were kept with surrogates while the older ones were also split up by gender and age into separate groups. Everyone spent almost two hours in Bible Study, which Lucca supposed only the men actually read the Bible. For surrogates, verses were read to them, and they were told what it meant for them. That part was similar to Church back at the Center: a lot of preaching about how surrogates were an abomination, and their only path to salvation.

Afterwards, the men and women are brought together in the main hall for the priest to begin his sermon. Surrogates, however, were placed in a separate room with the children where they watch the priest on a giant screen hanging on one wall. This part usually went on for at least another hour and a half. Surrogates are supposed to use this time for mindful prayers and meditation, but it was almost impossible to do so since the children are often antsy by that point.

Normally, Lucca would help the other surrogates with the children, especially the ones with more than one child to care for; however, Lucca wasn’t in the mood to deal with children. So he sat in the corner on one of the prayer pillows, and kept his eyes closed so everyone would assume he was praying. There were two other surrogates next to him: a tall boy with short hair and very round belly as well as an older surrogate who looked just a little too old to be praying for children. Lucca liked them both because they were quiet.

Lucca felt the air shift next to him and knew someone had sat down. There weren’t any pillows on his right side, and so he knew it wasn’t someone looking for a quiet space to pray. Lucca ignored them, whoever they were, and tried to pretend he couldn’t feel the weird fluttering in his stomach. He was going to hit twenty weeks in a few weeks, and his obstetrician told him that he’d likely start feeling signs of the baby moving soon.

Lucca was determined to write it off as gas.
“Are you really praying?”

It was Rudy. Lucca didn’t open his eyes, instead nodding his head. Rudy had been sticking to Lucca like glue recently. Chelsea had told Lindsay about the pregnancy, and the two were planning a pre-Labor Day barbeque where Chelsea planned on announcing Lucca’s pregnancy. As such, it meant he’d been spending a lot of time with Rudy while the women spent their days working on that. Rudy was really enjoying his pregnancy now, his stomach getting the slightest of bumps. Lucca was also noticing his own stomach bloat a bit, but, like most everything else with this pregnancy, he was ignoring it.

“You hate praying,” Rudy whispered in Lucca’s ear in response to his answer.

Lucca sighed, finally opening his eyes and looking at Rudy. He was truly glowing; instead of looking tired and miserable, his face looked bright and energetic. His eyes looked full of life, and the extra weight helped him look much healthier than he had when Lucca met him.

“What are you praying for?” Rudy asked, raising an eyebrow.

“A boy,” Lucca lied.

Rudy shook his head, not believing him. “Surrogates should wish for girls. Lots and lots of girls.”

Lucca watched as a toddler walked over to the tv, reaching up trying to touch it. A surrogate, who had been busy nursing a baby, saw him, and walked over to get him. They looked nothing alike; Lucca was sure it wasn’t his child. Lucca had a distant thought of how nice it was that surrogates helped each other in spaces like this. He felt like he’d need it.

“I hope I get a girl,” Rudy kept going, his voice low so as not to disturb the other two on the pillows still praying. “Girls born to surrogates are always fertile. It would be nice to have nothing but girls.”

“I want all boys,” Lucca said, and it didn’t feel like a lie. Fuck the Nation: the last thing he wanted was to give them girls for the Nation to tear down.

“You’re so weird. Have you felt movement yet?”

“No.” Another lie.

“You might not know it yet. I felt it a bit last time too, so I think I noticed it earlier this time. It feels like butterflies early on. Or like a bubble—”

“I don’t care what it feels like,” Lucca interrupted, standing up.

“Lucca—”

Lucca ignored him, walking away. Rudy didn’t move to chase him, and Lucca was grateful for it. He sat down at the table in front of the television where two surrogates were watching two girls try to color in Jesus from a Bible coloring book. Lucca didn’t know these surrogates by name, but they all recognized each other from this wretched Sunday ritual. They gave him small smiles as he sat down and looked at the screen.

“Which brings us back,” the priest was saying, “to Psalm 9:17: ‘The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.’ After the last war, all nations that had forgotten God were cast out. The heathens in the Middle East, in Asia, in Africa, and even now in South America: we see time and time again how a failure to keep God first as a nation leads to destruction.”
“Kol khara,” the younger of the two surrogates muttered, scowling at the television.

One of the children—a darker skinned girl with long, shiny hair—looked up at the surrogate with her eyes wide. Lucca watched her as she turned to the other surrogate, an older one with a slightly lighter shade of brown to his skin than his friend, and pointed at him. He rolled her eyes, said something to her in another language, and looked at the other surrogate.

“Watch your tongue, Amir,” the surrogate scolded, nodding towards the girls. “Children are always listening.”

“They know this man lies,” the younger one said, turning to the girls and smiling at them. “Heathens. My mother and father were good Muslims. Not fucking heathens. As if Americans have the right to call anyone else barbaric.”

“If you refuse to mind the children, Amir, at least mind the walls. They listen too.”

Lucca watched as Amir’s face twisted into confusion until he looked against the far wall where the other surrogate was looking. There stood one of the handful of chaperones in the room. As usual, they stood at random intervals against the walls, their eyes moving as they looked for any sign of problems or issues. This chaperone was looking directly at them.

“He didn’t hear me,” Amir said, though he didn’t sound confident.

“And if you shut up, he won’t hear any more heresy. We are in the Nation now. Remember that.”

Amir sat back in his chair, frowning. He turned back to the tv for a few seconds before turning his gaze on Lucca. He tilted his head.

“You are pregnant?”

It didn’t sound like much of a question, but there was that slight inflection that Lucca knew meant he wanted a response. Trying to keep his frown off his face, he nodded.

“I thought so,” Amir said, watching the television again.

“How did you know?” Lucca asked. Because it bothered him that this relative stranger somehow knew.

“You’ve been very miserable lately. You didn’t help with the children last week either, and you sat over there with those two to pretend to pray when you never prayed before. Only one thing would change you so much.”

Lucca swallowed, feeling annoyed. He wasn’t sure why. He glanced at the other surrogate, who just gave him a sympathetic smile.

“How did you know?” Lucca asked them, ready for a subject change.

Amir gave a dry chuckle, his eyes glued to the television. “Douma. It’s in Syria.”

“How did you know?” the older one offered, giving no other explanation.

“So what were you speaking earlier?”

“English,” Amir said, finally turning from the tv to give Lucca a hard look.

Lucca stared him down. He was already in a bad mood: he didn’t care who he pissed off at this
“What was that you said? Khaal kahara?”

“Not even close,” Amir said, sitting up and turning to face him. He leaned over the table and kept his voice low. “Kol khara.”

“What is that?”

“It’s Arabic.”

“What does it mean?”

“Eat shit.”

Lucca quirked an eyebrow. “I like that.”

“You didn’t hear it from me.”

“Did you learn English after you came here?”

“You ask a lot of questions,” Amir said, sitting back in his chair. “I’ve found that people who ask a lot of questions do so because they don’t want to be asked questions themselves.”

Lucca blinked at him. He glanced at the older one, who simply watched him, waiting.

“My mother was from Faust City,” Lucca said, with a shrug. “She moved to Jersey during the war.”

“Voluntarily?” Amir asked, his eyebrow scrunching in confusion.

Lucca nodded. Things were different then. Changing, but still different. She didn’t expect the turn. Hadn’t thought that by the time she’d settled down and was pregnant, all of her rights would be stripped away.

“You must have been born after the war,” the older one said. “My parents came here before it started. I remember a bit of what life was like before.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard a lot about it,” Amir said, his tone slightly mocking. “Your mother must have told you.”

Lucca didn’t have an answer to that. He knew he was being challenged, but he wasn’t sure how to respond. So he just shrugged. Amir smirked, turning back to the screen.

“A lot of good that did you.”

Lucca let the silence hang between them, deciding he was done with the conversation. He watched the television screen, listening as the priest repeated his earlier quote. *The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.* The Nation was hell for all he cared. And if that was the case, that means God was lost in this country a long time ago.

Chapter End Notes

There will still be an update on Sunday.
Comments are much appreciated as always! Thank you!
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Doctor, doctor, gimme the news. I got a bad case of loving you!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“How will the baby know your voice if you never talk to it?”

Lucca shook his head, tired of listening to this conversation. He was tired in general. He had hit twenty weeks, and that meant the entire day had been spent at numerous doctor offices. Lucca had started the morning in a counseling session, being told that he needed to connect more to his pregnancy without, somehow, bonding to the baby itself. After that, he was doing stress tests and getting blood drawn to make sure he was still healthy. Then there was the ultrasound, where the doctor took 3D pictures that were then given to a family counselor who would reveal the baby’s sex at their afternoon session.

Monty had taken off of work for it, and had spent the entire day energetically asking the doctors to check for every little thing. As well as discussing birthing options. It was something Lucca had never thought about; it wasn’t like he was a woman where he’d want some natural homebirth in a pool of water to replicate how women gave birth back before modern medicine. Birth wasn’t a divine blessing for him.

But Monty had already decided that Lucca, at the very least, would not be allowed an epidural. Lucca wasn’t at all surprised Monty had opted to let him suffer throughout the labor: it was starting to become his MO. But it did surprise Lucca when Monty asked about home births and getting a midwife.

“Why on earth,” Chelsea had asked before the obstetrician was able to respond to Monty’s question, “would you want to have the child at home?”

“It’s more natural that way,” Monty had said. His tone was patient, but the tight smile he wore spoke to how much he hated being challenged. Especially in front of the doctor.

“He’s not a woman, Monty,” Chelsea had sad with a roll of her eyes. “He doesn’t need to connect to this experience. We just need him to push the baby out.”

“And how would you connect to that?”

Chelsea had merely blinked in confusion at that, and the doctor had taken her pause to interject. Now, instead of being home so Lucca could eat, he was stuck at a “family” counseling session with Monty and Chelsea. Lucca only vaguely remembered being told about this: after twenty weeks, the Nation required families to go to at least one weekly counseling session to make sure everyone was mentally prepared for the baby’s arrival. And on the same page.

The latter of which, Lucca realized listening to Monty and Chelsea calmly argue about Chelsea’s involvement, or lack thereof, the two were not on. It was amusing at first, watching Chelsea scowl
in disgust as Monty preached at her to connect to the baby more. According to Monty, he had assumed that Chelsea had been up Lucca’s ass while he was at work: reading and talking to the baby and getting the baby accustomed to her voice. He’d been shocked to learn that Chelsea was as close to the baby as she was to Lucca.

Actually, Lucca was sure he had a closer relationship to Chelsea than the baby did.

“He’s barely even showing yet!” Chelsea said, gesturing vaguely to Lucca. “What am I supposed to do with him?”

“It’s a bit disconcerting how disconnected you are from this pregnancy, Chelsea,” Dr. Wilson, the family counselor—a male family counselor, Lucca had noted—said to her, writing something down in his notes.

“This isn’t some Handmaid’s Tale pantomime shit,” Chelsea snapped at him. “I’m not going to be pretending it’s me writhing in pain during the birth when it’s not!”

“The Handmaid’s what?” Monty asked, sitting up straighter. He scowled at Chelsea, and though Lucca had no idea what they were talking about, the way she tensed told him that she’d made a mistake. “The Handmaid’s Tale is illegal content. Has been almost as long as you’ve been alive. What would you know about that?”

Chelsea blinked at Monty, and recognized her expression. She was trying to create a feasible lie. After a tentative glance at the counselor, she dropped her shoulders and shook her hair.

“Oh, please, Monty,” she said, waving her hand as if Monty were being unreasonable. “Like no one has ever read a book they shouldn’t have or watched some banned movie before. I went to an all-girls boarding school: it was tradition to watch the movie at some point.”

Lucca watched as Monty just looked at Chelsea, both of them unbending. They’d been doing this a lot, lately, ever since that last party Chelsea hosted. Moments where it seemed like Chelsea was challenging Monty, as if daring him to reprimand her. Monty eventually gave a small smile, before sharing a look with the counselor.

“That’s not important for now, Chelsea,” Monty said. “Lucca is having your child on your behalf. Because you can’t do it yourself. You—”

“So am I supposed to kiss his ass?” Chelsea interrupted.

Lucca started to tune out. He was so sick of being talked about like he wasn’t there. Why did he have to be there and listen to this? It wasn’t his fight: he was quite content with Chelsea not showering him with attention. It made it easier to try to pretend this wasn’t all happening.

“Because it’s your child, Chelsea,” Monty said, his voice low and snapping Lucca out of his thoughts. “You wanted a child; I didn’t force this on you. If you’re this disconnected when the child isn’t even here yet, how are you going to mother once it is here?”

Chelsea shook her head, looking away. At least she didn’t argue that point. There was a moment of silence while Lucca felt more of those flutters he was pretending wasn’t the baby moving. Lucca instead thought back to when he met Chelsea, and what she told him. How she wanted children but couldn’t make them. How she didn’t want to be a wife, but needed to be one in order to have any shot at children. Was she bitter? Did something in her believe Lucca’s baby would never be hers?

“Let’s put a pin in that,” the counselor said, pulling out a small envelope. “I got the ultrasounds here, including the ones that confirmed the sex. Do you want to know now?”
Monty turned to Chelsea. “Do you?” he asked.

“Isn’t that more your decision?” Chelsea asked, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

“Do you want to know the sex now?” Monty repeated, not missing a beat.

Chelsea scoffed, and shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

The counselor got up, taking the pictures out and showing them to Monty and Chelsea. Lucca noticed the way Chelsea’s shoulders relaxed as she looked at them, a small smile even growing on her lips. The three murmured to each other as they went through each shot, trying to pinpoint features way too early in the game. Lucca thought, again, how much he was ready to go home.

“And this one,” the counselor said, “was a very good shot to confirm what’s there.”

“Or what’s not there,” Monty said with a chuckle.

“Oh my God,” Chelsea said, looking up at the counselor. “This means it’s a girl?”

The counselor nodded. “Yup. It’s a girl.”

Chelsea stood up, abrupt enough to startle Monty a bit. She looked at the ultrasound, her smile growing as she stared at it. Then she turned, her eyes on Lucca. Lucca felt dread fill his chest, watching as Chelsea kneeled in front of him with the ultrasound clutched to her chest.

“Do you want to see her?” she asked, her voice gentle.

Lucca wanted to shake his head. He glanced at Monty and the counselor, knowing that they were watching him. Lucca knew Monty could see his hesitation. He would hear about that later. Lucca knew he should just be good and nod his consent. But in the end, all he could do was simply look down and away from Chelsea.

“Look, Lucca,” she said, showing him the ultrasound. “Just look.”

Lucca did. He blinked, tilting his head. He’d never seen any of the previous ultrasounds: Chelsea or Monty would usually take them, and neither had seen fit to show him until this point. Lucca had expected it to be a simple blob at this point, but instead, he saw a head. A tiny head with Monty’s nose in the middle, and tiny hands resting in front of it. In one of the shots, the baby’s mouth was open as though she were yawning.

Lucca looked at more, counting arms and fingers and legs and toes. And then the one shot that Lucca could easily tell confirmed the sex. Lucca shook his head in shock: this wasn’t just some bundle of cells or a banana sized mass. It was a baby. A tiny human inside him.

Seeing her was different than vaguely knowing he was pregnant. Seeing her made her real. And Lucca didn’t feel a disgusting sense of his body being taken over by some alien like he typically imagined. Instead, all he felt was love.

And sadness. A girl meant she wouldn’t be taught to read. It meant she’d be found fertile one day. It meant she’d be raised knowing her role was to be a perfect submissive wife who bore her husband many children. And it meant she’d be married off to that life as soon as she was legally able. She’d know nothing else but the Nation. And Lucca loved her enough to want to spare her from that.

But there was nothing Lucca could do. She was a girl. A girl he couldn’t claim. A girl he already
couldn’t protect. A girl who would know him more as a glorified nanny than a parent. A girl who was already doomed. Lucca realized that this was why he didn’t want to acknowledge this pregnancy: he knew he’d fall in love with the baby—when he wasn’t supposed to—and he’d want to protect it from this world.

Suddenly, Lucca heard his mother’s voice for the first time since he last saw her: *It’s all wrong, baby.*

Lucca had hated her then; felt she had chosen herself over him. But Lucca could understand it now; the helplessness of everything. He accused her of hiding him so no one would look too closely at her, but that wasn’t the case at all. She really did try to protect him. She did everything she could, but she got caught. There was nothing she could do to protect him at that point; so she protected herself instead.

Lucca felt terrible for what he said to her in that moment. He had no way of knowing what a mother’s love felt like. Lucca wasn’t a woman, but he was sure this was it. The way his chest seemed to break at the idea of bringing a girl into this world only to suffer was overwhelming. That was why he tried to ignore it. Pretend it wasn’t happening. Because he knew there was nothing he could to protect her.

He had done the same thing his mother did when she realized this: he protected himself. Mentally cut himself off from the entire process. Because he couldn’t just willing volunteer in all of this. Even if he had no way to fight, he would at least refuse to believe any of this was okay.

“Oh, Lucca,” Chelsea said, pulling him from his thoughts as she moved to sit next to him. She pulled him into a side hug. “What are you crying for?”

Lucca hadn’t realized he’d been crying. He immediately wiped his eyes, blinking the tears away. He was aware of the counselor and Monty watching him, judging his every move. Analyzing it. Was this an appropriate reaction to have? Lucca had no idea. So he just shook his head and shrugged.

“It didn’t seem real,” he said. That, at least, was honest. “Until now.”

Chelsea wrapped another arm around Lucca and nodded. “I know. I felt the same way. I’m sorry I haven’t been helping. But we both know she’s real now, right?”

Lucca nodded, unsure what to even say to that. He let Chelsea hug him, thinking to himself how fucked all of this was. He wanted this baby to be his. He wanted to protect her. He wanted to take her away from the Nation and save her from the hell she’d one day lead.

And he was too helpless to do anything.

Chapter End Notes

I’m so tired of this story, lol. The ending is in sight and I’m hitting walls trying to get to the ending without rushing. I think I have one more chapter before the final ending sequence. The ending sequence is probably going to be at least three or four chapters. Maybe even more. We’ll see. I really hoped to finish this story before summer, but I think I can take solace knowing it's definitely going to be done before summer is over. Haha.
I didn't say anything in my last update, but I wanted to apologize for disappearing. I've been going through the ringer, and mentally have been hitting more lows than highs. I'm trying to do better; since I have off on the 4th, I figured I could try to do a few uploads this week. I spent the two weeks I wasn't posting really banging out chapters. I'm about to start chapter 60! Ahhh, did NOT intend for this to get so long lol.

I think the slice-of-life type of chapters are easier, but I struggle with plot. This story, as I've said a BILLION times before, was an exercise. A way for me to get the cobwebs out and also just have fun and let lose and not restrict myself. But it's also been a process of trying to figure out how to do this writing thing well. Plot is easily the part I struggle with most since the point of the story is exposition. I'd like to think that in any other story, the plot would be a bit more coherent, but I'm not sure lol. It's good to know where your weaknesses are so you can work on them. If plot is where I'm weak, then I will happily work on it!

That said, I'm going to TRY to upload tomorrow. I don't have any 4th of July plans except making a desert for work on Friday. We might do a bbq this weekend instead, but it's also supposed to rain from now until next week. Idk. We can't win. I just want some hot dogs and potato salad. But I shouldn't have any issues uploading. We'll see. I'll get on a more consistent schedule.

I was actually considering changing my upload day to either Saturday or Monday. I feel like Sunday is best in terms of getting views, but Saturday is often the easiest for me to upload. Monday I could probably try to make happen by doing it when I go into work (I've done it before), but I lowkey don't want to do that? Leave comments letting me know what days you're most likely to read stuff on here. And leave comments letting me know what you think, of course!
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Summer is over, but life keeps moving forward.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I hear we’re getting new neighbors.”

Lucca let out a heavy sigh as he folded the cards in his hands. He hated poker. He wasn’t sure why Nicolai wanted them to waste their free time during Chelsea’s “Welcome Autumn” party. Summer passed filled with lots of barbecues, birthdays, and just-because parties. Lucca had gotten sick of seeing his neighbors so often, and had welcomed fall when it brought chilly temperatures to cool the neighbors’ appetites for parties. There had only been one party in September: Ron’s birthday party, which was right after Lucca’s 20-week appointment.

Lucca and the other surrogates didn’t have to be seen until dinner, and even Lucca wouldn’t subject Rudy to the ragweed he’d already complained was triggering his allergies again. So they were cooped up in Lucca’s room, the children for once allowed to run rampant outside and leave them alone.

“Those three houses that went up down the block, right?” Eli asked, as he showed his hand. Three nines and two jacks.

“Yup,” Nicolai answered, showing his hand. Four of a kind. “Still close enough to get invited to these little parties. I hear two of them have surrogates.”

“I’m getting tired of these parties,” Rudy said, showing his hand. Straight flush.

“What the fuck?” Eli said, rolling his eyes as he gathered the cards to start shuffling them. “Why are you so good at this?”

“I’m not. I just keep getting lucky.”

“I’m over these parties too,” Nicolai said, leaning back in his chair. His stomach was getting huge. He looked ready to pop. “Rudy, isn’t your gender reveal next?”

“It’s a boy. Surprise.”

Eli laughed as he dealt the cards. “And we’re going to have a party to welcome the new neighbors once they move in.”

“Halloween is just two weeks away.”

“Lindsey’s birthday right after that.”

“I forgot about birthdays! Calvin’s is next month, though I can’t imagine Lizzy doing anything too big.”
“The twins’ is next month too. There’s another one.”

“Baby shower for you around Thanksgiving, right?”

“I’m praying this baby comes before then so we can bypass that.”

“Doubt it. So after your shower is Thanksgiving. Then Christmas.”

“Then New Years. Though I think Lindsey wants to have a shower before Christmas.”

“So then a shower for Lucca a bit after that, right?”

“Lucca? Are you going to draw?”

Lucca blinked, realizing he’d been zoning out of the conversation. The last thing he wanted to do was imagine the next round of parties. Was this what his life was going to be? He looked at his hand, discarded two cards and drew two more. Four aces and a ten of diamonds. Better than what he’d been doing.

“Lucca, are you okay?” Rudy asked him.

Lucca looked up, a bit surprised to see that all three of them were looking at him. Concerned. Lucca just shrugged.

“I’m fine.”

“Did you learn the gender yet?” Nicolai asked, his tone light and careful.

“No,” Lucca lied.

“Didn’t you have your twenty-week appointment last month?” Eli asked.

Because nothing escaped him.

“Only Monty knows. He’s keeping it a secret from me and Chelsea.”

“That would stress me out,” Rudy said, discarding four cards and replacing them. Was his hand that bad?

“I think it’s a girl,” Nicolai said. “You’re carrying high.”

“I’m barely even showing yet,” Lucca snapped, putting his cards down.

An awkward silence fell at the table. Lucca watched with annoyance as they glanced at each other, as if afraid of how to proceed. As if he were some child. He hated it. He wanted to be mad at them for it, but he couldn’t bring himself to get too angry. They were just worried.

“If we ask you what’s wrong,” Eli said, the first to speak, “would you tell us?”

“Everything’s fine,” Lucca said, picking his cards up again.

“Lucca—”

“Everything’s fine,” Lucca repeated. “The baby’s fine. I’m fine. Everything is fucking fine.”

“You never talk about your baby,” Rudy said, his voice quiet.
Lucca looked up at him, saw the confusion in his eyes. Lucca hadn’t thought much about it, but he guessed it was true. Especially compared to Rudy. Rudy loved being pregnant; he was excited to have a baby. He asked Nicolai and Eli questions on what to expect at the delivery, talked about every little ailment and issue the baby was giving him, and gave updates every time he went to the doctors.

Lucca didn’t do any of that.

“It’s not my baby,” Lucca answered, showing his cards.

“That’s bullshit,” Rudy answered, throwing his cards down. Three queens. “We carry them. We help raise them. They’re practically ours.”

“She’s not mine.”

“Lucca—”

“I lied. Earlier. We all know: she’s a girl.”

“That’s great, Lucca. Girls are—”

“Rudy, shut the fuck up,” Lucca snapped.

Rudy did get quiet, though his face fell. He was hurt. Lucca had hurt him. And if it was any other day, Lucca would care. Would apologize. But he couldn’t bring himself in that moment to give a fuck about Rudy’s hurt feelings.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Lucca said, pushing his cards away. “I don’t want to play this game anymore.”

“God,” Nicolai said, tossing his cards down. “God, you’re both moody little brats.”

“Pregnancy brain,” Eli agreed.

“In Lucca’s defense, this is all new for him. There’s a lot he obviously hasn’t worked through yet.”

Lucca looked up at Nicolai. He was staring straight at Lucca, his face serious and his eyes dark. Lucca looked away.

“Because,” Nicolai continued, gathering all the cards and shuffling them, “it’s a very simple formula. The men fuck us, we have their babies, we help raise the babies, and we shit talk about them behind their backs during their stupid parties.”

“And that’s what we’re just supposed to do?” Lucca snapped. “For the rest of our lives?”

“And what else are we supposed to do?” Rudy asked, his face still in a scowl.

Lucca opened his mouth to speak, but stopped himself. It wasn’t that they were supposed to do anything per say. But the whole situation was fucked. Lucca hadn’t even lived in this neighborhood a year and he was already sick of the neighbors and the parties and everything else. How could he continue on like this, year after year after year? Would kids make it easier, or would that too reach a point where everything becomes a miserable, never-ending cycle?

Lucca hated this. He hated everything about this new life of his. It wasn’t at all what Monty had promised him back he was stupid enough to believe him. And even after feeling deceived, it still wasn’t a life he could feel content in. Nothing about this was okay. And Lucca couldn’t accept that.
But he also didn’t have an alternative. Nothing that anyone would take seriously, at least. The Nation viewed people like him as abominations. Against God’s perfect design. Surrogates had no rights; how could they fight against a system that wouldn’t bend? Fighting would be hopeless.

So Lucca just shook his head.

“I don’t know.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi all. I think I’m going to stick with the Sunday uploads. For now at least. So the next upload will be on Sunday. And after that, I’ll keep doing uploads once a week until I finish this story. Then I’ll probably upload more frequently.

The next chapter might make some people really excited since it’ll feature the return of someone we haven’t seen in a very long time. There’s not a lot of characters in this, so it shouldn’t be too hard to guess who I mean. I actually wrote that chapter when I got a comment a while ago asking about this character. I thought, “oh yeah, let me bring that back” lol. The next chapter won’t be the last we see of that character, just as an FYI.

Hope everyone had a happy 4th. My strawberry parfait came out nice, so I’m excited to take it to work tomorrow. I’m lowkey angry as fuck that I have to show up to work tomorrow, but days like tomorrow right after a holiday tend to be slow. AND we’re having a potluck/cookout, which means lots of yummy food, so we can't go wrong there! Lol. Everyone better eat my goddamn parfait.

Anyway, see you all Sunday for your regularly scheduled program. Oh, and please leave comments. The lack of comments recently is lowkey depressing and I need something to motivate me to FINISH THIS STORY. Thanks!
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

In which Lucca wishes for a strawberry parfait, and ends up with something more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I think I’ve created a monster.”

“You did. And I’d better not hear any complaints.”

Monty laughed as he watched Chelsea walk around the bakery. Lucca leaned against a display of breads. It was Saturday, and after the Halloween party a few weeks ago, Lucca thought he’d be safe from any more community events until Thanksgiving. He’d been wrong because Chelsea had decided to plan a “Let Them Eat Cake” tea party for the wives. Meaning she needed cakes. Lots of them.

So Chelsea had forced Monty—who in turn forced Lucca—on a family outing to a small bakery outside of town. Monty, apparently, had never heard of it, and seemed excited to check it out. Lucca, however, had noticed that his feet started to swell if he was standing too long.

And as he glanced around the bakery, he saw that there wasn’t a place to sit. Lining the store were glass displays of cakes, cookies, brownies, breads, and other baked goods. There was a door on the back wall opposite the door, behind the register. In the middle of room was a large table displaying cookies and breads at a discount rate; likely things made days prior but never sold. The walls were a soft yellow, lined in brown. Everything was labeled in an old-fashioned calligraphy that took Lucca a bit longer than usual to try to read. Which, as he tried to piece the letters together, he started to think was in another language.

“Is no one here?” Chelsea asked, looking around.

They were the only ones in the store; they’d gotten there around noon hoping to miss the early morning rush. There weren’t other stores in the area; just a general store further down the block and a residential neighborhood. Lucca couldn’t imagine the place ever being too packed, even on a weekend.

“Why is everything in French?” Monty asked as he looked at three-tiered cake with chocolate icing.

“I like it! It gives this place a European feel.”

“We’re not in Europe.”

“I’m sure they got approval.”

Monty hummed a response, looking disappointed. Lucca straightened up before Monty saw him; the last thing he was in the mood for was Monty doting on him. So Lucca walked along the display, reaching the parfaits right next to the register. He wondered if Monty would buy him one
if he asked; the strawberry one looked good. The doctor had recommended Lucca watch his sugar and carb intake to prevent any potential gestational diabetes, but Monty had been in a good mood when he fucked Lucca earlier. Maybe he was still in a good mood.

“Welcome to Chez Sœur! How—”

Lucca looked up, watching a woman come out from the door behind the register. Lucca felt his heart drop as he recognized her: Anya. This was her shop? Anya stepped around the register, her eyes wide as she looked at Lucca. She obviously remembered him; it was hard to believe it had been a year since he met her. Her locs were in a bun on the top of her head, and she was wearing a pink apron over a long, white dress. On the apron was the same logo on the card she’d given Lucca. The one he had hidden with all of his alphabet notebooks.

“Oh my,” she said, her eyes still on Lucca. “Aren’t you very pregnant?”

Lucca put a hand over his swollen belly, looking at Monty. Monty was looking Anya up and down, that analyzing look on his face. Anya turned to Chelsea and Monty, a pleasant smile on her face.

“Do forgive my rudeness,” she said. “I don’t see surrogates in my shop often. Especially pregnant ones.”

“It is his birthday soon,” Chelsea said, as if just remembering. Lucca had forgotten himself; now that he wasn’t counting down until his bid was up for auction, a birthday meant nothing to him.

“But that’s not why we’re here. I’m planning a party and I need a lot of cakes. Or cupcakes? I’m still not sure.”

“Well we have lots of them,” Anya said, leading Chelsea over to them. “Are you looking for a particular kind, or a variety?

“Variety, really. The point is to have a bunch of different types, but I fear getting a lot of cakes, even little ones, would end up going to waste.”

“Let me show you my book; I can create specialized ones that are smaller than these. What sort of party is this?”

Anya led Chelsea away while they talked cakes. Lucca turned his back to them, returning his gaze to the parfaits. His heart was racing; Anya obviously wasn’t stupid enough to greet him like she knew him. He wasn’t sure what Devon had told her after Lucca was gone, but Anya must have realized that the entire situation wasn’t by-the-books. Still, they shouldn’t know each other. And Lucca wasn’t sure how Monty would react if he realized how they were connected.

“Do you know that woman?”

Lucca jumped, turning to Monty. He hadn’t heard him walk up to him. Lucca glanced at Anya and Chelsea on the other side of the room, looking at a binder as Chelsea spoke. He turned back to Monty and shook his head.

“Strange,” Monty said, looking at her. “She looked at you like she knew you. And she looked familiar to me too. I was thinking maybe you were around when I met her before.”

“No,” Lucca said, his voice low.

Shit.

“Normally, I would schedule a taste test,” Anya was saying as she walked over to the register,
grabbing a couple of business cards from the stack displayed on the counter. She handed one to
Chelsea and then Monty. “But I’m booked for the next month with those. If you’d like, I can send
you home with the cupcake versions and you can give those a try. Then just call me, make an
order, and we’ll get them made. I’ll even give you a discount on the cupcakes since you’re using
them to sample.”

“That would be wonderful,” Chelsea said, smiling from ear-to-ear. “You’re a saint. Thank you so
much.”

“Of course! I’ll be right back.”

Anya disappeared behind the door again. Monty was staring at the business card, his eyebrows
crinking in concentration. When Anya came back, she was holding a large box that she took to the
cupcake section. Chelsea drifted over, watching her load the box. Monty’s head snapped up.

“I knew you looked familiar,” Monty said.

Anya paused, looking up from what she was doing. “Pardon? I don’t believe we’ve met before.”

“No, not formally, though I’ve seen your wedding pictures. You’re Devon’s wife, right? Anya?”

Anya’s face brightened as understanding hit her. She smiled, finishing up her task and walking
back to the register. “You know my Devon?”

“Yes. Montgomery Grayson. Devon and I—”

“Were classmates!” Anya said, reaching out a hand. The gesture seemed to confuse Monty, who
hesitated a bit before taking her hand and shaking it. “Yes, Devon would speak of you at times. He
said you were very bright. You went into psychology, correct?”

“Yes. I hope Devon’s been keeping his hand steady.”

“Very. He just got certified to perform C-sections.”

“Really? I never knew he was into obstetrics.”

“He’s not, really, but he works at Saint Luke’s.”

“Oh right. They just lost three surgeons, I heard.”

“Yes. Well two of them were certified, so when they were looking for replacements, my Devon got
recommended. The youngest one too! The current director worked with him a lot, so I guess my
Devon is very good at cutting people open.”

“Such messy work,” Monty said, shaking his head. “I could never do it. Oh, excuse me. This is my
wife, Chelsea. And our surrogate, Lucca.”

“Lucca. What a pretty name,” Anya said, smiling at him. She turned back to Monty. “How far
along is he?”

“Twenty-nine weeks,” Chelsea answered.

“No complications?”

“No, we’ve been very blessed in that regard,” Monty said.
“Fantastic. Hold on; let me grab something from the back for you. Friends and family special.”

Monty started to protest, but Anya waved him off and continued back into the kitchen.

“I like her,” Chelsea said. “We’ll have to use her for deserts for any other event we host.”

Monty didn’t answer her, instead walking over to Lucca and leaning close so Chelsea didn’t hear them.

“You’ve met her before.” It wasn’t a question.

“I didn’t,” Lucca insisted.

“‘My fiancée came home early and stopped us for a second.’ That’s what Devon told me when you two were late to the cabin.”

Lucca could hear his heart pounding in his ear. Monty never mentioned the cabin. It was as if it didn’t happen. And so Lucca knew that for Monty to bring it up, he needed to tread lightly. That still didn’t stop a lie from leaving his lips though.

“I don’t remember meeting her,” he tried.

Deny, deny, deny.

“I don’t know why you insist on lying to me,” Monty said, his voice dangerously calm.

“I’m not. I really don’t remember seeing her.”

“Then when we get home, I can help you remember.”

Everything stopped, and Lucca felt panic surge through his chest. He shook his head.

“It was only briefly. I didn’t recognize her until you started talking about Devon.”

Monty just stared at Lucca, incredulously.

“Here we go!” Anya said, grabbing their attention as she returned with a bag with a large box inside it. “It’s a special loaf I make on my own. Family recipe, and I don’t sell this. I also added a lemon pound cake.”

“Thank you so much!” Chelsea said as Anya put the other box on top of that one and rang them up.

There was a bit more small talk while Monty paid, and then goodbyes. Lucca was dreading going home, wondering if Monty would punish him for lying. Would he hit Lucca even though he was pregnant?

Monty and Chelsea turned to leave, and Lucca moved to follow them. The two suddenly jerked to a stop, however, and Lucca had to move around Monty to not bump into him. He looked up to see what the problem was, and saw they were just standing there, their eyes distance, in mid-walk. It was like they were frozen.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” Anya said from the register, grabbing Lucca’s attention. “They can’t hear us. Everything has stopped for them.”

Lucca gulped, moving to touch Monty’s arm. No reaction. He remembered his last interaction with Anya, and how she made Devon stop speaking. How she made Lucca tell her the truth. He looked...
back at her, wary.

“How are you doing that?” Lucca asked.

“Magic,” Anya said, matter-of-factly.

Lucca wasn’t sure if he believed that. “Magic isn’t real.”

“Magic is real. It’s alive and well in Faust City. The Nation ignores it. Persecutes it. But it’s real, Lucca.”

“So you were born a witch?”

“Yes and no. Magic runs in the blood; people from magical families are more in tune with it naturally. But anyone can do magic.”

Lucca looked back at Chelsea and Monty, frozen. This would be a lot of work just to fuck with him if she was lying. He decided to take her word for it: it was the only explanation for what he was looking at.

“What would you do if you could use magic?” Anya asked him.

Lucca glanced at her, thinking of the obvious answers. Running away. Finding refuge. Maybe raging against Monty. Hurt him even. Punish him for all the pain he caused Lucca. Maybe make Devon pay too. But Lucca put a hand on his stomach, one thing ringing out louder than any petty motivation for vengeance.

“I’d keep my baby,” he said. “And I’d keep her safe.”

“Are you ready to leave Lucca?”

Lucca felt tears sting his eyes. He wanted to. When Anya asked before, Lucca took a bet. And bet wrong. Trusting in Monty—in Monty’s love—had cost him dearly. Lucca was miserable, helpless, and weak. He thought he’d be fine; that Monty would keep him safe. But Lucca learned his lesson: he couldn’t rely on anyone to keep him safe.

“I want to,” Lucca admitted.

“But…” Anya prompted.

“But I can’t protect her there, either. I’m too weak to help her.”

There was a pause between them. Lucca wished there was a way to get stronger. A way to get some sort of power. A way to not be so helpless anymore. A way to fight.

“Do you pray, Lucca?” Anya asked.

Lucca looked up at her. “No. I don’t.”

“When I was a girl and my mother taught me how to use my gift, she told me that magic is like prayers. Here in the Nation, you’re taught to pray to God; to ask for your desires to come true. Magic is simply commanding the universe to make those desires real.”

“If it was that simple, we’d all have our way.”

“The way men run this country is like magic. If they don’t like something, they create a law to
change it. Or overturn old ones. This country wasn’t always like this: but their magic made their desires come true. And those too meek to command different are left to suffer. The Bible says ‘blessed are the meek,’ Lucca, but that’s a fucking lie. Blessed are those who demand the world bend to their will.

“ Asking for something isn’t magic, Lucca. Declaring and then claiming what will be done is. The first step to being able to use magic is to stop thinking of yourself as someone who doesn’t have any say in how things go. If you think you’re helpless, then you are. If you think you’re weak, you’re right. But if you decide you are powerful, power comes to you. If you decide you are strong, you will be.”

Lucca wanted to scoff at Anya. She sounded crazy. Magic couldn’t be that simple. Nor could the universe truly bend to just one person’s will. It sounded asinine. Heretical. Egotistical. Blasphemous. Ridiculous.

But when Lucca met Anya’s eyes, he couldn’t help but wonder if there was at least a little truth in her words. Lucca remembered that night in the cabin, that truth he kept to himself at all times. That truth he remembered every time Monty fucked him, every time Monty berated and belittled him, every time Lucca felt powerless beneath Monty’s will.

So he nodded.

“I think,” Lucca said, hesitant, “that one day, I might call you.”

“I look forward to that call, Lucca.”

Lucca nodded, taking a few minutes to collect himself. If he was going to call her, he had to get stronger. There was no point running to Faust City if he couldn’t survive on his own. He needed to find that power Anya was talking about.

“I’ll let them go now,” Anya said, leaning against the register. “One last thing, Lucca. The first spell we’re taught to do in the city is to change the color of something. It helps if it means something to you. For me, it was a teddy bear my father had given me before he died. It was white and I changed it blue.”

Lucca smiled. “Okay. Thank you.”

Anya nodded, waving her hand. Chelsea and Monty started walking again, none the wiser to what had happened. Lucca followed them, giving Anya one last look before he left. Unlike the last time he left her, he was sure he would see her again.

Chapter End Notes

Anya is back!!!!! This definitely won't be the last we see of her. I wrote this chapter a while back after someone asked what happened to her. Nothing much: she got married, though! I had someone recently say they didn't trust Anya, so I hope this chapter restored their faith in her. Haha. The way she's introduced is shady, but she's definitely on Lucca's side!

I do want to say this: Anya lives in her own world, which is easy to do considering her magic and how her relationship with Devon is. It's easy for her to forget what sort of
society the Nation is. She's also very new to the country: her blase attitude towards a lot of things is more so her ignorance than any ill intent. I wanted her ignorance to come across as frustrating; as readers, I hope people see her and get annoyed with how she views things considering we know how much Lucca suffers.

With that said, I think that's why meeting Lucca rattled her. She's heard of surrogates, but seeing one made her realize that this isn't a game to everyone else in the Nation. That's why her immediate reaction is to help him escape. She's well intended, just a dumbass. Her sister would agree with me on that.

Anyway, I also wanted to warn that the next three chapters are going to be very, VERY heavy. I felt like I needed something like this to happen. Actually, I think the chapter after what happens next is also pretty heavy. And the few after that. Shit. I'm sorry. Just always remember to mind the tags, and any additional warnings I feel are necessary will always be added at the beginning of the chapter. So please pay attention to those.

I'm in the middle of writing the final sequence. It's both exciting and overwhelming. If I can finish it before the week is out, I'm going to upload the next chapter on Thursday, and then on Sunday, start dumping a new chapter daily for a week. If I don't finish it, then expect the next upload on Sunday as usual. I want to be able to dump the next few chapters a bit because they're so heavy and I'd hate to drag this out for weeks on end. So we'll see. Wish me luck!

-in Dr. Strange's voice- We're in the endgame now.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

This chapter is pretty heavy. Warnings for blood, and a psychological breakdown.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca had always made a practice to ignore his reflection. Especially as of late, with his stomach consistently growing larger and larger with every passing day, he tried so hard to ignore how his body was changing. He’d gotten too large for his normal clothes, and his wardrobe consisted of pants made out of a stretchy material and an elastic waistband and tunics that gave room for his stomach to grow. His hair had also grown like crazy, and Monty refused to let Lucca get it cut. Lucca usually wore it in an afro-ponytail just to get Chelsea off his back about how unpresentable his hair was these days.

So it had been an accident, really, when he exited the shower in his bath, and caught his reflection of the large mirror on the opposite wall. He wasn’t sure why he had to have such a large mirror in his bathroom. It was almost the length of the entire fucking wall and stood as tall as he was. He initially was going to ignore what he saw, as he often did in those rare instances that he found himself glancing at a mirror for longer than half a second, but something stopped him.

His stomach was distended, pale brown stretch marks clawing around his belly button. His hips looked a bit wider, and his thighs definitely were a bit thicker than he was used to. His face was rounder too, bloated in a way that made him look even younger than he was. His skin was starting to lose the tan he’d gotten from spending so much time outside during the summer, and his eyes looked sullen with dark circles under them.

But it was his hair that made his body get hot with anger. Wet after his shower, his curls stretched to his shoulders. He’d never had his hair this long; the only reason he maintained the modest fro during his time at the Center was just to appease his counselors and teachers who preferred all the boys sustain more androgynous aesthetics. His hair had always been long enough to style if he wanted to, but never this long. What was he supposed to do with hair this long? He wasn’t a girl, and no one expected him to be. So why?

He thought back to a few days ago, when he’d asked Monty if he could get a haircut. It had been late in the evening, just the two of them in the backyard, watching the stars in the cold. As Lucca neared his third trimester, Monty pressed how important it was for him to spend more time with Lucca alone. Before the baby came and would demand more of Lucca’s time. Lucca didn’t point out how most men would say that to their wives.

Monty had pulled away from the stars at Lucca’s question, looking at Lucca under the dim light of the patio lamps behind them. He reached out, smoothing a hand over Lucca’s mane, stretching a curl out until it was straight before letting it go to bounce back in place. He smiled, leaning forward until he was inches away from Lucca’s lips.

“No,” he said, his voice light and airy; he was in a good mood. “I like it like this. Let’s keep it this way a bit longer.”
And he leaned in to kiss Lucca again, as if that was the end of that. Lucca allowed it for a few seconds before pulling away.

“But I don’t like it this long,” Lucca said, making sure his voice sounded a bit whiny. Being too aggressive would just piss Monty off.


“I don’t want to look adorable.”

“How do you want to look then?”

It was a stupid question because Lucca’s issue with his hair had nothing to do with how he looked. He hated it because it got tangled easier, it took longer to wash and even longer to dry, and he had to do more to take care of it. It was time consuming. He was sick of wasting his time on it.

But of course Monty would just assume Lucca’s issue with his hair was his looks.

“I want to look normal,” Lucca said, pausing. He decided to just state his case: maybe if Monty saw it wasn’t cosmetic, he’d listen. “It’s just that—”

“But you’re adorable normally,” Monty said, cutting him off.

Lucca let out a small huff. “Okay, but—”

“Lucca, I said no.”

“I know, but—”

“Lucca, you’re not listening to me.” Monty moved then, turning his body to face Lucca. He reached forward, grabbing the sides of Lucca’s face so Lucca was forced to look at him. “I didn’t say ‘convince me.’ I didn’t say ‘maybe.’ I said ‘no.’ No means no, Lucca. End of discussion.”

Lucca felt his breath get heavy as rage burned in his belly. Or maybe that was the baby: it was hard to keep up these days. But he dutifully ignored it, and simply nodded his consent. Monty, satisfied, gave him a light kiss before letting him go. Lucca turned back to the scene of the quiet backyard.

Then, because he felt bold, he said, “It must be nice to be a man since you’re the only ones that no actually means no for.”

Monty had moved so fast that Lucca was sure he’d missed it entirely. One moment, he was feeling haughty for his little dig; the next, Monty had snaked an arm around Lucca’s back, pulling him closer until he was right on top of Lucca. He was gripping Lucca’s arm, hard, while using his other hand to push Lucca’s hair off his temple.

“Do you think, Lucca,” Monty said, his voice low and dangerous, “that I will not beat you because you are pregnant?”

Lucca’s heart skipped and real fear made his body freeze. He went back to that day at the cabin, Monty laying Lucca on the bed before pulling out the belt. Lucca remembered that first strike, landing right on his hip, hard enough to bruise. Monty had been serious: he hadn’t held back at all.

“I asked you a question, Lucca,” Monty said, snapping Lucca from his thoughts.

Lucca just shook his head. What was the question again?
“I don’t know,” he finally said, his voice a faint whisper.

“I will if you force me to, Lucca,” Monty said, not missing a beat. “You’ve been so good this whole pregnancy. I’ve been very proud of you. I know this is all very uncomfortable and new. If you’re overwhelmed, we can discuss it at counseling. But you will not disrespect me, Lucca. You do that again, I will beat you. Do you understand?”

Lucca nodded frantically, closing his eyes. Monty didn’t speak, letting an uncomfortable silence fall between them. Then he moved again, letting go of Lucca’s arm and leaning away from him. Lucca still didn’t open his eyes, focused instead on willing his heart to stop racing. He’d forgotten, for a second, just who Monty was.

Now, as Lucca stared at his reflection, his hair still too long, he decided he was done. He looked around the bathroom, letting his towel drop. Lucca walked over to the sink, where another mirror hung. He pulled the mirror to the side, revealing the medicine cabinet behind it. Lucca wasn’t allowed anything sharp like razors or scissors. All that stood there was mouthwash and stocked up soaps.

Lucca turned, his eyes scanning the bathroom. Nothing on the shower caddy would help, nor anything on the storage shelf above the toilet. His eyes came to the mirror again: to the reflection. He hated that big ass mirror. He hated his big ass hair. He hated his big ass stomach and this big ass house and Monty’s big ass ego.

Lucca turned back to the storage shelf, looking at the metal legs. He tilted his head, an idea coming to him. He walked over to it, taking off the tissues and air freshener and small cups with q-tips and cotton balls in them. Soon, the entire shelf was empty. Lucca then picked up the shelf, carrying it over to the mirror.

Lucca took one long last look at himself in the mirror before putting the shelf down and bending down to pick it up the legs. It was awkward trying to hold it like that, but he just needed it temporarily. He’d only get one shot at this. Afterwards, he’d have to be quick. There was no way he’d have too much time alone.

So with that in mind, Lucca widened his stance and cocked the shelf back. Then, with all of his might, he swung forward, smashing the shelf into the mirror. The sound of glass shattering and hitting the floor was like music to Lucca’s ears. He dropped the shelf, falling to his knees, ignoring the slight stab he felt from small pieces of glasses sticking him. He found a good, long jagged piece of glass and grabbed it, immediately bringing it up to his hair.

Lucca’s hands were quick as he stared ripping at his hair with the glass. He simply grabbed fistfuls of it and tore away, throwing the clumps on the ground around him. He’d gotten almost halfway around his head before he heard banging on the door.

“Lucca!” Monty shouted, his voice panicked. “Are you okay? Can you open the door? Unlock the door, Lucca!”

Lucca paused, forgetting that he’d locked the door. It was a bad habit; one he knew Monty would punish him once he found out. But it simply hadn’t happened until now. Lucca laughed, feeling a bit high. Monty was locked out while Lucca was surrounded by shards of glass. Lucca could kill himself and Monty wouldn’t be able to stop him.

Laughing still, Lucca kept going at his hair, ripping more and more clumps out. He’d only intended to cut off a few inches, but the more he heard Monty banging on the door and yell, the more of his hair he wanted to cut off. He got closer to his scalp, cutting chucks off that were shorter than his
hair has even been.

He was cutting his hair and Lucca couldn’t stop him.

The door banged open and Lucca paused, watching as Monty rushed in. Monty jerked back when he saw Lucca, pausing to look at the scene. Lucca wondered how he looked. Did he look crazy? Suicidal? Was Lucca going to be sent to get reprogrammed? Lucca didn’t know.

But the confused look on Monty’s face made him laugh again. And Lucca laughed and laughed and laughed until the laughs turned to sobs. Then his vision went blurry with tears. If he didn’t look crazy before, he knew he did now. He didn’t feel crazy; just light and high. He laughed again, then cried again.

“Monty…” Chelsea said, her voice sounding pretty far away. She must have been at the door. After a moment, she tried again. “Monty, what are you—”

“Get out,” Monty said, his voice calm and low.

“Monty, what is going on? Lucca, are you—”

“Chelsea, get the fuck out now.”

“What?”

“Now!” Monty roared, turning on her.

Lucca didn’t see her face, but he was sure it was priceless. Monty rarely yelled, especially at her. Even when he got mad, Monty always maintained his cool and calm exterior. But that was gone. He was shaking, Lucca realized, though he wasn’t sure with what. Anger? Sadness?

Chelsea left, her steps echoing in the hall. Monty said something after her, but Lucca didn’t hear it. When Monty turned around again, his face was a blank mask. He walked over to the tub, turning the water on. After waiting for the temperature to get right, he plugged it up and turned.

He walked over to Lucca, kicking shards of glass away as he did so. Lucca watched, fascinated. He hoped Monty hit him. Fuck, he knew Monty would. So when Monty carefully kneeled down, Lucca braced himself.

“What are you doing, Lucca?” Monty said, his voice soft and gentle.

Like Lucca was going to fall for that.

“Cutting my hair,” he answered, raising his chin in a challenge.

Monty nodded as if that made sense.

“Okay.” He pointed to the mirror. “Did you do that?”

Lucca nodded.

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to cut my hair.”

Monty nodded again, this time, as if understanding something.
“I see. You’re bleeding, Lucca. Did you hurt yourself?”

Lucca looked down and saw that Monty was correct. The glass he was holding had cut through Lucca’s hand, blood dripping slowly on the floor. His other hand also had small cuts; some fingers were bleeding a bit. He didn’t feel any pain through. He might the next day once the adrenaline wore off, but his hand felt fine in that moment.

“It’s just my hand,” Lucca said, as if that mattered. “That’s all.”

“Okay.” Monty reached his hand out, palm up. “Can I have that, please?”

Lucca looked at the shard in his hand. He probably wouldn’t be able to get his hair cut right with it. So he nodded, handing the shard over to Monty. Monty stood up, putting the shard in the sink, before returning to the tub. He turned the water off before going back to Lucca. Lucca tensed again, sure Monty would hit him this time.

Monty kneeled again, grabbing one of Lucca’s arms.

“I need you to stand so I can clean you up, okay?”

Lucca didn’t really want to be clean, but the adrenaline of what he’d done was slowly ebbing, and he couldn’t think of a good reason to disobey Monty in that moment. So he let Monty help him up, his feet stinging as he stepped on small shards of glass. Monty leaned down, gently brushing off the glass stuck on Lucca’s knees. Lucca watched, enjoying the red scratches they left.

Monty then reached down, hooking his arms under Lucca’s knees and back before lifting him off the ground. Lucca immediately wrapped his arms around Monty’s neck so he wouldn’t fall. Monty brought Lucca to the tub, gently sitting him in it.

Lucca watched in silence as Monty disappeared out the room for a moment before returning with a first aid kit. He used soap and water to wash at Lucca’s wounds, starting with his knees and legs. Then he moved to his hand, murmuring that Lucca was lucky he didn’t need stitches. By the time Lucca was bandaged and clean again, his hand started to throb in a dull pain.

“Am I in trouble?” Lucca asked when Monty finished putting everything away.

“I think you’re very tired, Lucca,” Monty said, helping Lucca to stand before he picked him up again. This time, he headed for the door. “I think you need to rest before we move forward with what needs to happen.”

“So you’re going to beat me tomorrow?”

Monty sighed as he gently kicked open Lucca’s door. He placed Lucca on his bed, then started pushing back the covers so Lucca could crawl in.

“I’m not going to beat you, Lucca.”

“Are you going to have me reprogrammed?”

“No, Lucca. That’s not what you need.”

“Why not? I cut my hair. I disobeyed you. Doesn’t that mean something needs to happen?”

“What do you want to happen, Lucca?”

Lucca paused, thinking about that. He wasn’t sure what he hoped would come out of this. He knew
it would be nothing good; at least not for him. Still, at least his hair was shorter. He reached up and touched it, feeling the unevenness of it and smiled.

“I want to leave this country and never come back,” he said, honestly.

“Lucca—”

“Without you.”

Monty went silent. Lucca thought about that; imagined it for a moment. Freedom. True, real freedom. Being able to cut his hair without asking permission; without having to worry about how someone else would like it. A life without Monty. Even if he was alone, that would be better than how things were. He was sure of it.

“We’ll worry about it tomorrow,” Monty said, leaning forward and kissing Lucca on the forehead. “Sleep for now, okay?”

Lucca nodded, letting Monty tuck him in. When Monty left, he didn’t close Lucca’s door. That was odd, but he decided to let it be; it probably made Monty feel better. Lucca turned to his other side, relaxing and not even caring that his hair was still wet and he hadn’t done anything with it. He fell asleep quickly and easily, getting the best rest he’d had in years.

Chapter End Notes

Hey.

HEY.

Guess who finished writing this story. 67 fucking chapters! So much longer than I intended lol. So we're at least more than halfway there. Ugh. Y'all are going to hate me having to read all the ups and the downs coming up. It's so nice to be done, though I honestly don't know what to do with myself now lol. I do need a break from writing though. Gonna try to get some reading done to rest.

As promised, starting Sunday, I will be posting doing a story bomb. Every day this upcoming week, I will update a chapter. I'm also off Monday and Tuesday, so even work won't stop me from uploading. Muahahahaha.

I want to have this whole thing posted by the end of August, so there will likely be at least one, or two, more bombs later in the summer. I won't spoil the ending, but now that I've finished it, I have to say I'm quite happy and surprised where it ended up. I wasn't 100% sure what all I was going to do, but it was fun writing the final sequence. And, like, the last two chapters were so exciting! It made me want to write the story I MEANT to write. But I want to plan that story and write it properly. And not have it be 171717 words (that was legit my word count when I finished lol. Granted, that's an estimate, but still).

I'll also say that based on some comments, some of y'all are gonna love this ending. And get some resolutions/answers to questions I haven't wanted to spoil. :P

I really want to write the next story now. I kinda have an idea for two sequels to this.
If I do, it'll only be a trilogy type of story. No more than three stories total.

We'll see...

Anyway, I'm having a great week. Tomorrow, I'm going bowling and drinking with coworkers, and then I have a four day weekend! I'm going to sleep so hard this weekend! SLEEPLEEPLEEPLEEPLEEPLEEP!

See y'all Sunday.
In the end, there was no yelling. There was no beating. There was no reprogramming, nor threats of a lobotomy. The next day, Lucca spent the day with his counselor. Lucca was sure it was some lack of fear over the worst happening that made him talk more; what was the point of hiding his feelings after a breakdown like that? They took a break for lunch, which left Chelsea and Lucca alone while the counselor convened with Monty.

Chelsea had been shaken by the ordeal. Lucca knew it, but felt no proclivity to appease her anxiety by pretending everything was okay. So instead, he refused to answer her questions when she asked where he wanted to eat, staring at her, unblinking, until she picked a diner across the street from the counseling office. He kept silent when she went through the menu and asked what he wanted. And when the waiter came over to take their orders, Lucca kept his gaze on Chelsea, letting her order salad and sandwiches for them.

“Dr. Lawson said you were more open today than usual,” Chelsea said, her words a bit shaky. “I guess after all that talking, you might not want to keep going, huh?”

Lucca quirked an eyebrow at her. Did she expect him to answer that? He almost wanted to, just to throw her off; she was already making excuses for his silence. Chelsea took a sip from her glass of water, looking everywhere but at Lucca. Lucca adjusted the beanie on his head, covering his unseemly haircut. He had really wanted to walk around with his hair looking as crazy as it did, but he knew he was walking on thin ice as it was.

When the food came, Lucca ate heartedly while Chelsea nibbled and picked at her food. Lucca couldn’t help but be amused at how awkward Chelsea was; it was as if she had no idea how to act. How to talk to him. How to deal with Lucca. Lucca liked it. He was tired of being treated like a thing that needed to be handled. He didn’t need to be handled for Christ’s sake.

Lucca finished before Chelsea, sliding to the window in the booth and watching people walking around the sidewalks. This time of the day mostly saw mothers with children out and about, as well as a few young students with odd class time hours and the occasional man on his way back to the office from lunch. He felt movement in his stomach and shifted; the baby always liked to start moving after he ate. Some days, it made him sick, but he was fine with it today.

He knew everyone had been anxious about how his little meltdown would affect the baby, so he was glad she was moving about as if nothing had happened. He was in the third trimester now, and she kicked a lot. He placed a hand on his stomach and felt her feet press against him. He smiled.

“She’s moving,” Lucca said, sitting up straighter. “If you want to feel her.”

Chelsea jerked her head to Lucca, her eyes wary. As if Lucca was setting a trap or some shit.
Chelsea had yet to catch the baby when she was moving. Part of that was because Lucca purposely rarely told her when the baby was throwing a fit inside him. But he didn’t feel like being petty about that now.

Chelsea seemed to make her decision, standing and walking over to Lucca’s side of the booth. She pressed her hand on his stomach, tentatively. Lucca grabbed her hand, guiding it to where his hand had been. The baby stilled for a bit, though Lucca knew she would start up again. Sure enough, after a tense and awkward minute, the baby moved again.

Chelsea gasped, feeling it. “She’s really moving,” she said.

Chelsea turned then, facing Lucca completely as she put both of her hands on his stomach. Lucca had to force himself to not push her away.

She’s just excited, he told himself. Chelsea felt the baby start another fit, chuckling as she moved her hands around Lucca’s belly to feel more.

“How does it feel to you?” Chelsea asked, mystified. “When she moves around in you?”

Lucca didn’t answer: she was pushing it. Not that she seemed to notice. Chelsea was so enamored by the movements that nothing else seemed to get to her. So much so that she leaned over and kissed Lucca’s stomach.

Lucca pulled away then. Chelsea jerked away as well, her eyes wide with hurt. Lucca didn’t care: he didn’t want her touching him like that. Chelsea sighed, getting up and going back to her side of the table. She called the waiter over, asking for the check.

“I’m glad she’s okay,” Chelsea said, a small smile on her face.

Lucca turned back to the window. He was back to silence now.

~*~

“I wholeheartedly disagree.”

Lucca knew he was grinning like an idiot, but his day only seemed to get better as time went on. After his awkward lunch with Chelsea, he was back in Dr. Lawson’s office. Only this time, he was with Monty. Lucca wasn’t sure what they discussed while they were away, but Dr. Lawson had started with what almost seemed to be a list of grievances on how Monty was handling Lucca. Monty had calmly listened to her, seething.

Lucca enjoyed the entire thing. There was so many levels to it: Monty finally getting called out, a woman being the one to do it, and Lucca being right there to witness every ounce of the humiliation. And Lucca knew it was all of those layers that added to Monty’s fury. Lucca hid his smile behind his hand, sure that either Monty or Dr. Lawson would see it anyway. So when Dr. Lawson paused in her reprimand and Monty finally had his chance to respond, Lucca waited with baited breath. He was about to witness a major showdown.

“Okay,” Dr. Lawson said calmly, much better at hiding her anger than Monty was. Or, maybe, Lucca just knew Monty too well to know how angry he was despite his calm demeanor. “Those were simply my suggestions, so I’d obviously like to create an action plan that works for your family.”

Monty sat up in his seat, barely suppressing a scoff.

“Surrogates are designed to relinquish control,” Monty said. “Giving in to this little outburst will only encourage bad behavior. I don’t want a repeat of this.”
“I agree that surrogates must understand that their roles means they do not have a say in most of what happens to them in their lives,” Dr. Lawson said with a pointed look at Lucca before turning back to Monty. “But Monty, Lucca is still human. And we all long for some semblance of control in our lives. Wives run their homes while their husbands are at work, some of us have careers we can bury ourselves in—"

“A surrogate’s purpose is to reproduce and help raise the children they create,” Monty interrupted.

“But Lucca doesn’t have a baby yet to focus on. And you still have about two months before you do. And even then, aside from nursing, how much will he truly care for the child? He’s not the mother nor the father: the real raising will be with you and Chelsea. And so what does he do in the meantime?”

“He focuses on the next one.”

Lucca felt Monty’s eyes on him, but he kept his eyes on Dr. Lawson. She, honestly, looked exasperated. Lucca could relate: talking to Monty was like talking to a brick wall.

“In my first assessment of Lucca, I told you that Lucca’s need for something to control is our biggest obstacle. Even without meaning too, he does things to find something he can control. Whether it was skipping meals or classes at the Center, or this little fiasco now, Lucca will destroy himself if it means he has control over it.”

Lucca tilted his head. He hadn’t been around for that assessment, so he didn’t know that was an issue. He also hadn’t thought about that. He never thought of himself as a control freak. Not like how Chelsea or the other wives are with their party planning, nor like Monty with, literally, anything. Surrogates weren’t allowed control; so what was the point in wanting it?

But as he thought of it, maybe there was some truth to that. He wasn’t even allowed near scissors without supervision like a goddamn fucking child. So if he wanted to cut his hair, it made sense to simply smash a mirror and use the broken glass to tear out his hair. It made sense at the time. It made sense now. Lucca could recognize it as insanity, but it fucking made sense.

But was it just his hair that had triggered it? He did hate that fucking mirror. He was glad it was broken.

“I would never let him get to that point,” Monty said, his expression cool.

Lucca recognized that for the threat it was: Monty would lobotomize Lucca before Lucca snapped and actually tried to hurt himself.

“Do you really think he’s not at that point?” Dr. Lawson said, visibly getting frustrated. “He took the glass to his hair because that was the focus at that time. What if he had taken it to his body? He didn’t have control over his hair, so he took control over it. What if the source of his frustration is his pregnant stomach growing against his will? His womb that he has no say in how it’s used? This will escalate if you don’t change.”

“I believe this is a cry for help,” Monty answered. “I think Lucca wants me to help take his resistance away.”

“Through a lobotomy? Do you really think he wants that?”

“I think he’s overwhelmed by it all. I think he wants me to help him.”

“A lobotomy won’t fix anything, Monty. He’ll be changed; you’d have his submission at the cost
of himself.”

“He’ll be happier.”

“This is human, Monty. His instinct to rebel against you is human. The more you take from him, the more he resents you. The more he rebels.”

“So you’d have me reward his rebellion with power?”

Dr. Lawson let out a sigh, shaking her head. Lucca watched her, wondering if she would just give up. Monty wouldn’t break on this: was it worth arguing about? Monty moved, grabbing Lucca’s attention. He turned to Lucca, his eyes heavy with exhaustion and annoyance.

“Tell me, Lucca,” he said. “Tell me why you did this. Help me understand this.”

Lucca shrugged. “I wanted to cut my hair.”

“Then you ask, Lucca.”

“I did ask.”

“And what did I say?”

“You said ‘no.’”

“And what did I tell you about that?”

“That when you say no, it actually means no, apparently.”

“So why did you do this, Lucca?”

“Because I wanted to cut my fucking hair!”

Lucca’s shout seemed to stun Monty into silence. At least for a few seconds. His face finally fell into an angry scowl, and he stood up so that he could tower over Lucca. A stupid, and pointless, intimidation tactic. Lucca didn’t need Monty to flex to show his power over him.

“What do you want from me, Lucca?” Monty asked, his voice a low growl. “What am I supposed to do to fix this?”

“Let me cut my fucking hair,” Lucca answered, cutting his eyes up at Monty.

“Why can’t you just accept my no as an answer?”

“Because it’s my fucking hair!” Lucca snapped, standing himself.

The action forced Monty to take a step back, his eyes wide in shock. Lucca loved it. He loved that look of surprise, watching Monty try to orient himself back to a position he knows and is comfortable with. He wants to be in control, and in this moment, Lucca held the power. Lucca wanted to pounce. Wanted to snap. Wanted to attack. He wanted to leap at Monty, scare him some more, maybe even hurt him a bit.

But Monty wouldn’t respond to that. Lucca knew that. His current string of outbursts would only be forgiven up to a point. Lucca didn’t want to cross that. At this point in time, he had Monty’s attention. His actual attention. Monty was listening to him. He needed to be smart in how he did this.
So he took a step back, letting the tension go in his shoulders. He looked at the ground, at Dr. Lawson watching them both warily. And he sighed.

“I just wanted to cut my hair,” Lucca started, his voice calmer. “I don’t know if it’s a control thing or not; I don’t understand all that. But even at the Center, I could cut my hair. And I didn’t even want it this short, Monty. I just wanted it shorter, like how I normally wear it.”

“Lucca…” Monty said, though he didn’t say more.

“That was all I wanted. I’ve always known what was expected of me. Even if I wasn’t too thrilled by it, I never fought it. You come to fuck me and I spread my legs like I’m supposed to. My body is changing and it keeps changing—I keep getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And I can’t stop it, and I have to have this baby. And the next one. And the one after that. Again and again until I have the six I’m supposed to have, and if they say I’m okay to have more, I’ll have more.

“And I’ve never had any intentions of fighting that, Monty. I’ve always understood that I’d have to do that, and I was fine. I was fine doing that for you and giving that to you. I never wanted to fight that. I don’t want to fight it now. It’s just my hair, Monty. I wasn’t even going to cut it that short. It’s just my hair.”

Lucca sat down, his eyes glued to the carpet. There was a moment of silence between them: the ball was in Monty’s court now. It was up to him how this would end. Lucca was almost sure it would end with Monty just opting for a lobotomy out of principle. But as the silence stretched, he wondered if maybe something got through to Monty.

Maybe.

Monty moved, walking back to his seat and sitting down. That was an interesting choice: he wasn’t going to pull a power move.

“If it’s just hair,” Monty said, his voice soft, “then why is it so important that you cut it? What’s wrong with it long?”

Lucca looked up, catching Monty’s eye. He didn’t understand; he thought it was a cosmetic issue. Lucca wanting to control his looks. A simple matter of vanity. In that regard, why wouldn’t Monty think he had the right to control that? If he liked Lucca’s hair longer, then of course Lucca should keep it long. It was still unreasonable, but knowing Monty didn’t understand made it easier. So Lucca turned to face Monty.

“It’s inconvenient,” he said.

Monty blinked at him. “Inconvenient?”

Lucca nodded. “Yes. It takes forever to wash, and even longer to dry. I can’t just let it go, so I have to style it, which also takes forever. And Chelsea yells at me if I don’t do anything to it, and then she yells at me when I take too long to do it, and then we’re late to appointments or her get-togethers. And I don’t mind styling it when it’s short like how I normally have it, but it’s just too much when it’s long. It was driving me crazy.”

Monty was quiet, blinking a few times before shaking his head.

“It’s inconvenient,” Monty repeated.

Lucca wondered if he should leave it there. Let Monty take whatever he wanted from it. But he still felt like there was a little more to work. A little more to get Monty to come down from his
lobotomy talk. So Lucca looked away, ready to play demure.

“I don’t care how it looks, Monty,” Lucca continued, shrugging as if at a loss for words. “I don’t care how I look, so if you want me to look a certain way—I mean, I don’t mind looking a way that pleases you, Monty. I just—I fight with Chelsea over my hair every day. I just didn’t want to fight anymore.”

The last bit was a lie: Chelsea did get annoyed with the amount of time it took for him to do his hair if they had somewhere to be, but it definitely wasn’t a daily argument. In fact, once Lucca’s hair got long enough for him to just pull it back into an afro ponytail, she started to lay off him a lot.

But anything to get Monty to understand just how annoying his hair was.

“That’s reasonable,” Monty said, surprising Lucca. “But your reaction was not.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Breaking things and chopping your hair off, terrifying Chelsea the way you did—none of that is excusable Lucca. Do you understand?”

Lucca nodded. “Yes.”

Monty sighed, running a hand through his hair. He turned to Dr. Lawson, who had been frozen the entire time, as if afraid to jump in and ruin anything. Lucca watched as she straightened up under Monty’s attention, now ready to give her two cents.

“So where do we go from here?” Monty asked her.

Dr. Lawson smiled; Lucca sat back in his chair and hid his.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, wow, Monty actually being understanding? Crazy.

Sure would be a shame if the other shoe dropped next chapter or something. :)

Tbh, the next chapter was a weird one for me to write, so I'm not sure how anyone will take it. Hmm.

ANYWAY, reminder that I'll be uploading a new chapter every day this week in celebration of me finally finishing the story! And also a reminder that I need comments in order to live, so please leave them or else I'll die before I get a chance to upload every chapter! Kay? Kay! Great! See everyone tomorrow!
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

The thrilling conclusion to this dramatic saga.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca turned his head in the mirror, unsure of how he felt about his new haircut. After the day of counseling ended, Monty had called a barber to make a house visit. Because of how close some of Lucca’s chops had gotten, the barber had cut Lucca’s hair tapered on the side with a few inches on top. It framed his face well, but Lucca just wasn’t used to his hair being this short.

“It will grow out,” Monty said, watching him from the doorway.

“I know,” Lucca answered.

Another new rule was that Lucca wasn’t allowed in the bathroom alone again. At least for the time being. Dr. Lawson had suggested Monty hire a chaperone for that; in the meantime, Monty had volunteered to supervise.

Of course.

“I think this bathroom needs to be renovated,” Monty said, almost absentmindedly as he looked around.

The glass had been cleaned up, the wall empty and a white, blank space instead of the ugly wallpaper that decorated the rest of the walls. The shelf was also gone, though that was unnecessary considering the mirror was destroyed. Lucca couldn’t blame Monty too much: the panic of what had happened last night was still fresh.

“Hurry up and shower, Lucca,” Monty said suddenly after the moment of silence between them.

Lucca nodded, moving away from the sink. The shower curtain had also been replaced with a clear, plastic one so Monty could watch him. It was odd, showering with someone watching. Monty simply stood against the opposite wall, where the mirror once stood, and watched. His face was blank. Emotionless. Lucca had no idea what he was thinking, and it was unnerving. By the time Lucca had finished, he was red-faced and glad it was over.

“We don’t enjoy that, do we?” Monty mocked once Lucca was out and drying himself off.

Lucca glanced up at him, shaking his head.

“Hmm,” Monty said, gesturing for Lucca to leave.

Lucca hesitated before heading to his room. He was tired, and ready for bed. It was pretty late too; Chelsea had retired shortly after dinner. Lucca was sure everyone just needed some time to rest. So he was a bit surprised when Monty followed him into his room, shutting the door behind them.
“We’ve had a long day, haven’t we?” Monty asked.

Lucca dropped his towel on his bed, nodding. He wondered if it was worth his time to put his pajamas on. He sat on his bed, facing Monty, waiting for whatever was about to happen.

“I still have to punish you, Lucca,” Monty said after the silence stretched too long.

“Okay,” Lucca said, wincing a bit. He hated being hit. “Okay.”

Monty didn’t respond, the quiet between them loud. Lucca knew Monty had to enjoy making him sweat like this. Just when Lucca thought he wished Monty would get on with it, Monty moved. He stood in front of Lucca, and Lucca stared at his shoes, bracing himself. Monty leaned forward, placing a hand on the bed next to Lucca’s hip.

With his other hand, he brought something out of his pocket. It was small, a few inches long, and a sleek black. Like a bullet. Lucca looked at it, confused. Monty moved his hand along the flat bottom. The bullet clicked before vibrating in his hand. Lucca jumped a bit, surprised.

“I’ve noticed,” Monty said, dragging the tapered top of the bullet along his chest. He paused over one of Lucca’s nipples, the vibrations tickling Lucca in a way he didn’t like. He tried to pull away, but Monty followed him, pressing the bullet against him. “I’ve noticed that when we have sex, it upsets you if you enjoy it.”

Lucca didn’t say anything, squirming in a fruitless attempt to pull away from Monty. Monty finally eased up, dragging the bullet down Lucca’s stomach. Lucca tried to calm his breath, watching with chagrin as Monty brought the bullet lower and lower. Lucca thought he knew where this was going, and he was sure this would be worse than getting hit.

“Have you ever had an orgasm, Lucca?” Monty asked.

The bullet hovered over Lucca’s pelvic like a threat. Lucca shook his head.

“I thought so. You’ve gotten close, but I’ve never seen you go over the edge.”

Panic gripped Lucca’s chest. No. Anything but this. He could take getting beat. Berated. Even humiliated. But he couldn’t take this. And Monty knew it was a punishment. He knew how much Lucca would hate this.

“Monty,” Lucca said, his voice a whine. Fuck. “Please…”

“You’re going to come tonight, Lucca,” Monty said, ignoring him. “You’re going to come again and again and again until I’ve decided you’re done.”

“Monty, I’m sorry,” Lucca said, needing to diffuse this somehow. “I know what I did was wrong. Please. I’m sorry!”

“I know you are, Lucca,” Monty said, leaning down and kissing him.

Lucca jerked back, but Monty was right there on top of him, pushing him onto his back. Before Lucca could orient himself, Monty wrapped his hand around Lucca’s dick, trapping the bullet between Lucca and his palm. The vibration sent heat throughout his pelvic, climbing up through his stomach. Lucca groaned, throwing his head back.

“Please,” Lucca pleaded, pushing at Monty’s arm. “Please, no. No, Monty. Please.”

Lucca whined, trying to pull away, to reduce the vibrations and the heat it brought. It felt good. Too good. Lucca wanted to hated it; he didn’t want to enjoy this. Sex was fine if he could just treat like it was: a means to an end. A way to make a baby. Something for Monty—for men—to enjoy. Something for Lucca to tolerate. *This* wasn’t fair.

So when the heat spread through Lucca’s body, the pressure building faster than Lucca had ever felt it before, he cried out. Monty jerked Lucca off, the bullet moving all over his dick. It was just too much. Lucca hated every second of it and wanted to it to end. Monty adjusted his hand, the bullet moving to the tip of Lucca’s dick.

Lucca lost all control them, writhing under Monty as he tried to pull away. Monty held him steady through it, unwavering. Calm and solid like a rock. Lucca grabbed Monty’s arm, needing his strength while he felt so weak. So helpless. Lucca felt it, his orgasm hitting him hard, crashing into him like a tidal wave. It was as if his body seized, everything going white while electricity raced through his veins and come splattered on his stomach.

The bullet vibrated against him, causing little aftershocks to pulse through Lucca’s body. Lucca twisted away, and only then did Monty finally let up. He let go of Lucca, the bullet falling to the bed. Lucca placed his elbows on the end in an instant, crawling away from Monty. His heart was racing, his body felt too hot, and he just needed a second.

Monty caught Lucca’s leg, climbing on the bed fully as he pulled Lucca towards him. Lucca yelped as Monty manhandled him to the center of the bed. Monty kissed him. Briefly. Before placing a hand over his mouth, finding the bullet, and bringing it back to Lucca’s dick. Lucca tried fighting again, but it didn’t matter. It was minutes before Monty wrung another orgasm from it.

Monty, it turned out, was serious on making Lucca come as many times as he wanted. After the fourth time, Lucca managed to at least make it on his hands and knees for leverage. Not that it mattered: Monty simply wrapped his arm around Lucca’s hips and jerked Lucca off that way.

Lucca stopped fighting after a while, burying his head in his pillows. Eventually, his sobs brought real tears, and his orgasms ran dry. And Monty kept going until Lucca’s tears melted into begging. And even then, Monty still didn’t let up.

Lucca had completely lost track of time. The fight left him as if his body realized that there was no point to it. Lucca asked Monty if he could get on his back, and Monty paused long enough to let him turn. Completely giving up, Lucca threw an arm over his eyes and simply laid there while Monty forced more and more orgasms out of him.

When the vibrator suddenly turned off, Lucca didn’t dare think this was over. He was sure Monty planned on going all night with this. So he didn’t move, just waited. Monty moved off him, lying down next to him.

“*We’re done, Lucca.*”

Lucca shook his head, not believing it. Monty chuckled, moving Lucca’s arm to the side, leaning down and kissing him.

“*We really hated that, didn’t we?*”

Lucca was getting sick of all of Monty’s “we” talk. But he nodded: he hated every second of what just happened.
“Did we learn our lesson?”

Lucca nodded.

“And what was that?”

Lucca moaned. “Not to break anything anymore?”

Monty pinched Lucca’s hip, and Lucca yelped, pushing away from him.

“We can go again if you’d like,” Monty threatened.

“No, no!” Lucca said, shaking his head. He thought, trying to pinpoint just what Monty’s message would be in forcing him to come more times than he could count. “I—m-my body—what happens to my body isn’t my choice.”

Monty smiled. “Good. And who makes any choices about what happens to your body?”

“You do,” Lucca said, looking away.

“So who’s choice is it when you get pregnant?”

“Yours.”

“Whose choice is it how much you eat?”

“Yours.”

“And who decides when—and how many times—you come?”

“You do.”

“And who decides if and when you can cut your hair?”

Lucca hesitated, wanting to scream. He had thought maybe, just maybe, he’d gotten somewhere with Monty after all of this. That maybe his voice had finally been heard. Maybe Monty wouldn’t be such a totalitarian asshole about everything. But nothing had changed. So Lucca told Monty exactly what he wanted to hear.

“You do, Monty.”

Monty kissed Lucca again, long and hard, before finally pulling away and making his way off the bed.

“I’m glad we could clear that up, Lucca.”

Chapter End Notes

This was a hard chapter to write. I don't like writing Lucca being punished, but this was especially hard. Monty really goes out of his way to fuck with Lucca. I want to kick him in his balls or some shit.

Also, just as a side note: I was in bed, set to go to sleep, and then remembered that I
was supposed to upload lol. I had a very off day. I think getting my period is what really kinda threw me off.

Another side note: when writing this chapter, I sort of forgot that Lucca was pregnant. Like, VERY pregnant. I was going to go back and add some remarks to mention it, but then decided I just didn't care lol. Or, rather, I didn't think Lucca being pregnant would have really changed too much of what happened. All I would have added was how being on his back would have made it a bit harder to breath, but that wasn't worth going back and adding imo. Idk, I've never been pregnant, so what do I know.

Speaking of which, the amount of times I googled pregnancy related things for this story, google now only shows me ads for Enfamil, and I have to sit through Buy Buy Baby commercials every time I watch a youtube video. AND youtube won't stop recommending me baby videos! That joke about how writers need to add "looking this up for a story" is so true.

Anyway, please leave comments as always. Next chapter we get introduced to three new characters. Spoiler/hint: two of them are surrogates! The last one is a surprise! :3
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

A very long day where Lucca meets a lot of new people. :3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Are you sure Monty is okay with this?”

Lucca turned to Nicolai, rolling his eyes, before fixing his face as he looked at Milos.

“I asked Monty if we could yesterday, and he was fine with it,” Lucca said for the fifteenth time.
“‘We don’t need to eat them; just decorate them for the kids.’

Milos frowned, walking around their table and shaking his head at the mess of ingredients in front of him. The last few months had been hectic to say the least. Nicolai had his baby—another girl—weeks after Halloween. Lucca’s birthday passed with no incident, and the holidays were full of excited energy for their neighborhood. Their new neighbors moved in, settling in time to attend the New Years party the Kyles hosted. Right before Valentine’s Day, Rudy had his son, and complications had him still hospitalized.

Milos was one of the new neighbors’ surrogates; a boy fresh out of a Center who spoke Russian thanks to growing up with his parents who immigrated to the Nation during the war. He was too skinny and tall, though Jared Langston—the man who bought him—was even taller. Milos was a ball of anxiety, looking at the mess on the table with fear, glancing at the door to the kitchen as if afraid someone would come in and see them.

Chelsea was hosting a welcome party for the new neighbors. Lucca had asked Monty if the surrogates could do something instead of killing time in his room. Ever since Monty punished Lucca, Lucca couldn’t stand the idea of someone in his room; in the days before Rudy had his baby, Lucca would have them crochet in the den. Monty had been kind enough to say that Lucca and the other surrogates could bake cookies in the kitchen as long as they stayed out of the cooks’ way. And so a small table in the front corner was set up for them away from the hustle and bustle of everyone else. They would have to ask someone to put the cookies in the oven, but it was worth it to not have everyone in his room.

The other surrogate, belonging to the Yakubus, was a few years older than Lucca. He already had gone through three pregnancies, having last delivered in the spring. He had mahogany skin, wore his hair in tiny braids that fell just above his shoulders, and sat on the opposite side of Lucca, silently snacking on hors d’oeuvres and fruit he kept sneaking from the cooks’ trays when no one was looking. His childrens’ mother had forced him to introduce himself as Kingsley, and he hadn’t spoken a word since.

Between Milos’s unnerving anxiety and Kingsley’s disturbing silence, Lucca almost wanted to kick them out of the kitchen.

“I can’t wait for Rudy to get out of the hospital,” Eli said as one of the maids brought them a tray
of heart-shaped cookies, and took the drop cookies that needed to bake to the oven. He turned to
the two new guys. “Rudy just had a baby. You might get to meet him at the next party.”

“Well will we be doing this then as well?” Milos asked, his voice sounding just a bit bitter.

Lucca couldn’t hide his glare at him, and Kingsley chuckled at the exchanged. Lucca turned to
glare at him too when he stepped in something wet and his foot slipped. Nicolai was there in an
instant, steadying him before he had a chance to fall. Lucca tried to look down to see what he
stepped in, but his belly blocked his view. God, he was sick of being pregnant. At his last
appointment, his doctor said they were “in the endgame” now. That the baby could come any
minute.

Lucca still had about three weeks left, however.

“What was that?” Lucca said, twisting so he could look down and see what he slipped on. “Did we
drop an egg on the floor?”

Nicolai’s grip on Lucca tightened as he looked down. His face went from confusion to concern and
finally settling on calm before he turned to Lucca. Lucca watched him, fearing the words that were
about to come out of his mouth.

“Lucca, I think your water just broke.”

Everything slowed for a moment, Lucca looking down to see. It was only a small puddle; if his
water did break, it wasn’t at all that dramatic gushing he saw in movies. He didn’t even feel it
happen.

“I’m not due yet,” Lucca said, shaking his head.

“I think the baby just decided you are.”

Lucca turned a glare on Nicolai. “The baby isn’t controlling this. It’s a baby. I’m not due. Something
has to be wrong.”

“Someone needs to go get Monty,” Eli said, standing. “Like, now.”

“I’ll go,” Nicolai said, letting go of Lucca.

Before Lucca could even protest, Nicolai was gone. There was a pause. Lucca didn’t see anyone
else. All he saw was that tiny little puddle on the floor, trying to trick him—trick everyone—into
thinking his water broke. It was too early: this wasn’t happening.

“I’m supposed to get contractions first,” Lucca said, his voice distant. “I don’t feel anything. Is
something wrong?”

“Sometimes your water breaks first,” Eli said, standing next to Lucca and rubbing his back. “My
water broke first with Ron.”

“But I’m not due yet. This is too early.”

“That happens sometime too, Lucca. Due dates are estimations; not exacts. And it’s common for a
baby to come a few weeks earlier than we expect.”

Lucca shook his head. “Something’s wrong.”

“Lucca.”
Lucca snapped his head to the door, watching Monty come in. Chelsea was right behind him, her phone to her ear. Monty walked over to him, glancing at the water on the ground as he took Lucca’s hands. Lucca wished they had the soothing effect he was sure Monty intended, but all he felt was cold.

“Hey,” Monty said, grabbing Lucca’s attention. “How do you feel, sweetheart?”

“They think my water broke,” Lucca said, rather dumbly.

“Yeah, it looks like it.”

“I can’t, Monty. It’s too early.”

“These things happen, Lucca.”

Monty didn’t believe him either. No one believed Lucca. Everything about this felt wrong, and no one was taking this seriously.

“I don’t feel any contractions,” Lucca said, trying again.

Monty nodded, turning to look back at Chelsea. She watched warily, nodding as she listened on the phone.

“He said there’s no contractions yet,” she said.

There was more silence while she listened.

“Okay,” Chelsea said, pulling the phone away. When she spoke again, she was talking to Monty. “Darcy said we should wait to see if the contractions begin on their own. She’s on her way. She said we should at least get him up the stairs now.”

Lucca’s heart dropped.

“Okay,” Monty said, turning to Lucca. “C’mon, love. Let’s get you upstairs.”

“But—”

Lucca didn’t really have a chance to protest. Monty was at his side, snaking an arm around his waist and leading Lucca out of the kitchen. Close to the doors, Lucca saw Nicolai standing next to the Kyles. Marjorie’s lips were moving fast, and Nicolai was looking down. It looked like she was scolding him for something, but Lucca couldn’t imagine what. When she saw Chelsea behind Lucca and Monty, however, she turned with real concern in her face.

“Is everything alright?” she asked.

“Um, yes,” Chelsea said, pausing to talk while Monty guided Lucca to the stairs. “Lucca’s water broke is all. He hasn’t even started having contractions, so it’s likely going to be a long process.”

“Oh my! That’s great, then! Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Well, there’s no need to cut the party short, I don’t feel. Would you mind letting your surrogate sit with him for the time being? We’re sending him upstairs for now, and I’d love if the surrogates were up there to help him. Especially until the midwife gets here.”

“Of course! Nicolai…”
Lucca tuned the rest out, letting Monty take him to his room. It was quiet in this corner of the house; the noise of the party didn’t reach this far. Lucca glanced at his bed, wondering if they would need to change the sheets. The midwife had done most of her talking about how the delivery would go to Monty and Chelsea. Lucca hadn’t even thought to ask about details like this.

“Here we are,” Monty said, walking to the window and opening a curtain. “This way, you’re already here when the contractions start.”

“What if something happens and I need to go to the hospital?” Lucca said, sitting on the edge of his bed.

“I doubt we’ll need to do that, Lucca,” Monty said, smiling at him.

Chelsea walked in then, her phone still in her hand. “Darcy said that it could be a while before the contractions start, but we should wait a couple of hours first before we start to worry.”

“Sounds good. Are the surrogates coming up?”

“Yeah. I gave the Kyles’ one that stopwatch to time the contractions once they start.”

“Wonderful.”

“Oh, we need to get the crib up now, too. Thank God the nursery is ready. Oh my God, the baby’s coming! She’s actually coming!”

Monty chuckled just as Eli shyly knocked on the door, the other surrogates standing behind him. Lucca watched distantly as Chelsea and Monty gave them instructions to keep Lucca company and to notify them as soon as the contractions began so Darcy could assess Lucca. Once they were gone, there was a tense silence in the room as Lucca just stared at the door.

“Still nothing?” Eli said eventually, sitting down next to Lucca on his bed.

Lucca just shook his head.

“Isn’t there anything you can do to, like, move this along?” Milos asked, his voice sounding like a whine.

Lucca turned to look at him, already annoyed. Did the new surrogates have to be here too? Nicolai and Eli being there did make Lucca feel a bit better, but Milos had never been pregnant yet. What help would he be?

“Walking helps move things along.” Eli said absentmindedly as he glanced out the window.

“Where am I going to walk?” Lucca said, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice.

“Why don’t you take a nap, Lucca?” Nicolai suggested. “Once the contractions start, you’re not going to sleep until after the baby’s here. And that could take a long time.”

Lucca turned his incredulous gaze to him. “How can I sleep when something is obviously wrong, and no one seems to give a fuck?”

“Wow, okay,” Nicolai said, nodding his head. “So we’re doing this.”

“Does pregnancy make you act like a jerk?” Milos said, his voice still a whine.

“Milos,” Kingsley said, standing from the table he settled down in to watch the scene from. “Why
don’t you go find some towels? It’s going to get messy in here soon and we’ll need them.”

“Where am I going to get towels?”

“I don’t know, Milos. That’s why I asked you to go find some.”

Milos blinked at Kingsley for a five seconds before nodding as if that logically made sense. He turned and left the room silently, his footsteps echoing down the hall.

“Dumbass,” Nicolai muttered, before turning to look at Kingsley. “That reminds me: we should go get some boiled water, right? I’ll go do that.”

“Nicolai—” Eli started, but Nicolai was already halfway out the door.

“Be right back,” he said as the door shut—loudly—behind him.

“Better?” Kingsley asked Lucca before sitting back down.

“Why did Nicolai leave?” Eli asked aloud, looking at the door in confusion.

“Because Lucca was pissing him off,” Kingsley said, grabbing Lucca’s Bible sitting on the table. “He needed to cool down so he didn’t snap and make the situation worse.”

“I didn’t mean to piss him off,” Lucca said, feeling bad. He really hadn’t meant to. He was just tired of no one listening to him. “But he’s telling me to take a nap when something has to be—”

“Nothing is wrong, Lucca,” Kingsley interrupted, opening the Bible to a page and reading it. “You’re just scared. At the very least, we have to wait until your midwife shows up to access you before you decide the worse is happening. In the meantime, you need to relax.”

“And how do you know nothing is wrong?” Lucca said, snapping this time.

Kingsley paused, glancing up at Lucca before returning to his reading.

“Because I did this five times before and only have three children to show for it. If something really was wrong, I’d corroborate that for you.”

Lucca didn’t have anything to say to that. So he moved to lay on his bed, back to Eli and Kingsley, and closed his eyes. He was tired of dealing with everyone. After a few minutes of pretending to be asleep, Lucca did start to drift off. Maybe he needed a nap after all.

~*~

The first contraction hit Lucca about an hour after he woke up. He slept, it turned out, for five hours. Nicolai had returned, but Milos was still, supposedly, wandering the house looking for towels. According to Nicolai, he had asked Chelsea if she had any towels they could use for the delivery. Chelsea had told him that they only had “good” towels in the house that couldn’t be spared for that. Milos has simply continued his hunt despite that. The story had Lucca laughing.

Eli was in charge of timing his contractions, reporting the distance between them aloud. They seemed to take forever to get less than five minutes apart; Lucca wanted to scream when Eli reported he’d been at this for almost nine hours.
Darcy, the midwife Monty hired to help, checked Lucca twice to make sure he was dilating on schedule. Lucca prayed each time that he wasn’t—that someone would believe that something was wrong and force him to the hospital. But both times, Darcy smiled and said that everything was fine. She checked his vitals, verified Lucca’s blood pressure wasn’t at any dangerous levels, and left the room without a care.

Lucca quickly grew to resent her.

“She said everything’s fine, Lucca,” Eli said when Lucca stopped complaining to breathe through a contraction. “If something was wrong, she’d make Monty take you to a hospital.”

“She doesn’t care,” Lucca said between breaths once the contraction passed. “I could be bleeding out and she’ll say it’s normal.”

“Stop trying to rationalize with him,” Nicolai told Eli. “If you’re not going to humor him, then just drop it.”

Eli glanced at Kingsley, who nodded in agreement, and gave Lucca a sympathetic smile.

“You’re all traitors,” Lucca said, moving so that he was sitting with his legs off the bed. “This is so stupid. Why do I have to do this?”

“You’ll forget the pain,” Nicolai said, matter-of-factly, looking out the window. “I didn’t mind being pregnant again until I went into labor. It wasn’t as bad as it was with the twins, but it made me wish I didn’t have to do it again.”

“You still have to do it at least once more, right?” Eli asked him.

“Yeah. Having the twins made things difficult though, so I’ll probably get to stop after the next one.”

“Lucky. I still have two more to try for. Kingsley, how many are you estimated for?”

Kingsley looked up from the fruit tray Chelsea had brought for them at some point. This guy hadn’t stopped eating since Lucca met him.

“Five,” he said, gathering as many strawberries as he could. “Remy and Sam don’t count, they said.”

Lucca didn’t need to ask who Remy and Sam were. If he wasn’t in the middle of the most painful thing he’d ever felt in his life, he probably would have felt more sympathetic. But all this conversation was making him think about the fact that Monty was going to make him do this five more times. At least. He never wanted to get pregnant again if it meant having to go through all this pain. He didn’t want to do it.

The door opened, and all the surrogates straightened up as Monty walked in. He smiled at them before turning to Lucca. Lucca wanted so badly to punch that smile off his face. Lucca was in pain and it was all Monty’s fault.

“Hey,” he said, kneeling in front of Lucca and grasping his hands. “How do you feel?”

Lucca blinked at him incredulously. As if to prove a point, a contraction hit, forcing Lucca to bend over in pain. He tried to remember his breathing and resist the urge to just tear at his belly and rip this kid out himself.
“What is the time on that?” Monty asked the room.

“Two-point-forty-three,” Eli answered. “He’s been consistently getting closer to the two-minute mark for a while now.”

“Good,” Monty said, turning back to Lucca. “Let’s walk around a bit, Lucca. Help get things moving faster.”

“Do I have to?” Lucca asked, his voice coming out in a whine.

Monty chuckled, but didn’t answer that. Instead, he stood up, grabbing Lucca’s hands and tugging on them to encourage him to stand.

“Do you need help standing?” he asked instead.

Lucca nodded, and let Monty wrap an arm around his back to lift him off the bed. Monty led Lucca out of the room and into the quiet hallway. Lucca looked down the hall, never realizing how long it was to the other side. Why did this house have to be so big?

“It doesn’t have to be too long,” Monty promised as they started down the hall. “Just to my room and back. Okay?”

“Okay,” Lucca muttered, glancing at the door to Monty’s room at the other end. This was going to suck.

They went slow, passing the stairs to the sitting room. Most of the couples had left, though the Kyles and the Yakubus stayed claiming they could help since their surrogates had home deliveries. Eli’s family left him to return home, but promised to return in the morning. Eli ruefully remarked they would be back to make sure he could nurse the baby. Despite the early—or late—hour, Lucca heard laughter drifting up the stairs as Chelsea’s voice rambled on about something probably unimportant.

“You’re doing a great job,” Monty complimented Lucca, right as Lucca had to stop when a contraction hit. Monty stood there silently while Lucca tried to breathe through it, failing and just groaning for a few moments. When it passed, he continued. “I’ve always adored you, Lucca, but you’ve never been more beautiful than you are right now.”

Lucca caught his breath, glancing at Monty incredulously. Was he serious? He was sweaty, his hair was matted against his head, and he was exhausted. Fuck, he was in pain. He was sure he looked a mess. What the fuck was beautiful about that?

“Don’t look at me like that,” Monty said, guiding Lucca along to continue walking. “When your belly started to swell, I thought you’d never look more beautiful than you did with my child inside you. But watching you give birth to my child; I don’t think anything else will top this.”

“Do you get off on my pain?” Lucca asked before he could stop himself. He managed to bite it back enough to not sound like a snap, but he couldn’t help the chagrin that bled into his voice.

Monty chuckled, but didn’t answer. They reached the end of the hallway, and Lucca placed a hand on the door to Monty’s room. It suddenly struck Lucca that he’d never been in Monty’s room, though Monty had been in his plenty of times. Lucca turned to lean against the door, taking a few breaths. He wondered if he would be able to make it back to his room. Everything hurt, from his feet to his back to his head to his stomach. Lucca closed his eyes, exhaustion overtaking him.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” he muttered.
Silence followed, and he was sure Monty was trying to access just what Lucca was referring to. Labor? Being pregnant again? Everything? In that moment, Lucca meant everything. All of it. He never wanted to get pregnant again. He never wanted to be in this amount of pain again.

“Do you know why you’re having this child here?” Monty asked, his voice low.

Lucca nodded, because he’d been there when Monty and Chelsea had discussed it. It was the healthiest option. It was the natural option. It would be better for the baby. And some other things Lucca didn’t care about because it wasn’t like he ever had a choice.

“I meant, rather, the reason I wanted you to have this child at home,” Monty continued. “In the end, Lucca, I decided this because I want you to feel it. I want you to really experience how rough this can be. I want you to know how painful all of this is so you understand what a mercy it is when you have the rest of our children at a hospital with an epidural.”

Lucca opened his eyes. It didn’t surprise him. It didn’t disappoint him. Everything with Monty had to be this way. He was done expecting anything different.

“Okay,” Lucca said. He wasn’t sure what else he should say.

“Are you ready to go back?”

Lucca shook his head right as another contraction hit. Monty let Lucca squeeze his hand through it. Lucca was ready for this baby to get out of him already.

~*~

It would be another hour and a half before the contractions came frequently enough for Lucca to start pushing. All of the surrogates were politely kicked out just as the sun was rising. Monty, Chelsea, and Darcy replaced them. Darcy instructed Monty to help Lucca off the bed and onto the floor in a kneeling position. Lucca was allowed to lean his upper body against the side of the bed, towels Darcy had brought padding the ground beneath him. Darcy claimed this was one of the best positions for Lucca to give birth in, though Lucca felt like he had to poop.

Monty and Chelsea kneeled on other side of Lucca, cheering him on while Darcy instructed Lucca when to push. This went on for another hour, including the few times Lucca needed to take a break. It felt like the baby would never come out. Lucca was sure they would have to go to the hospital; something was obviously wrong.

But Monty just encouraged Lucca to keep pushing while Chelsea counted to ten every time Lucca pushed.

“She won’t come out,” Lucca whined after Darcy told him to stop for another break.

“She’s coming,” Darcy said, rubbing Lucca’s back. “She’s almost here. I can see her.”

Lucca just shook his head, looking up at the rising sun. How long has he been at this?

“We’re going to start again on the next contraction, Lucca,” Darcy said.

Lucca wanted to tell Darcy not to say “we” when she wasn’t doing anything: Lucca was the only one trying to push a baby out of him. But another contraction hit, and he was back to pushing. On the third time, he felt a pain so bad that it felt like he was tearing. Then he heard a tiny gasp from Chelsea.
“The head’s out, Lucca,” Darcy said, her voice excited. “Keep pushing; let’s get her all the way.”

Lucca pushed again, ready for this to be over. The next part was a blur. He heard Darcy announce the baby being out, and all Lucca heard after that was the baby squealing. He sighed, not at all aware of the mess between his legs, nor of someone cutting the umbilical cord. Monty helped Lucca turn so that he was sitting on the floor, before lifting him and placing him on the bed.

After a few moments of getting his bearings, Lucca saw Darcy cleaning the baby off while Chelsea held and cooed at her. There was a pull in his chest as he watched them, Chelsea’s smile wider than Lucca had ever seen it. The baby stopped crying, turning away from Darcy’s attempts to get all the blood and fluid off her.

“She’s beautiful,” Chelsea said, looking up at Monty.

“Six-twenty-two is the birth time,” Darcy said, walking over to her bag to pull out a tablet. “Bring her over here and we can weigh her. Do you have a name for her yet?”

“Gabby,” Chelsea said, rocking side to side, her eyes seeing only the baby. “Gabriella Louise Grayson.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was SOOOOOOOOOO hard to write! Lol. It's funny because despite birth being such a major thing that literally keeps our species going, there is so little information on what birth is like. The amount of forums and articles and pdfs I had to read to try to get an accurate portrayal was overwhelming. And I'm still not sure if I did a good job portraying it. Meh.

Anyway, lots of new people to meet this chapter! Milos, whom I have NO IDEA why I created him tbqh. I think I just wanted someone whiny to annoy Lucca. I do like Kingsley though. He's a fun one. But the biggest person we meet is Gabby! Beautiful, beautiful, Gabby. And before anyone gets nervous, literally NOTHING bad will ever happen to her in this story. So don't leave comments asking if she dies or something lol.

Next three chapters are going to be rocky though; adjusting to a new baby is going to be hard on everyone. But I'll let you all read how that goes.

I saw Spiderman: Far From Home today and that cut away scene had me SHOOK. Have any of you seen it? Ahhh! I'm so obsessed with what's going to happen next. I have to wonder with how things are going if they're going to do the "Death of Spiderman" plot. If this merger with Disney and Fox means that mutants are being introduced to the MCU, then I'm calling that they are doing it. Buuuuuuut, we'll see. Even though I was against another Peter Parker Spiderman reboot when it was announced (introduce Miles Morales to the MCU you cowards!), Tom Holland is easily my favorite Peter Parker. If I have to watch him die, like for real, I will die.

As always, please leave comments!
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Life after a baby requires a lot of adjustment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Weeks before Lucca gave birth, Monty decided that the playroom/nursery attached to Lucca’s room wouldn’t be the baby’s actual nursery. At least not at first. Instead, the baby would sleep in a crib in Chelsea’s room; the room right next to Monty’s down the hall. It was supposed to be a temporary set up: Chelsea would use the first six months or so to bond with the baby and get up with her at night for feedings and changings. Once the baby seemed to understand fully who her “actual” mother was, she would be moved in the nursery next to Lucca’s room.

Chelsea had been all for it, claiming it was difficult to bond with the baby while Lucca carried her, but that she’d love the one-on-one time once the baby was born. Lucca thought he wouldn’t care one way or another, but he quickly realized it was beneficial for him. Lucca hadn’t thought he bonded with the baby at all; in fact, he hated the entire time he was pregnant with her. But seeing the baby with Chelsea seconds after he had pushed her out of him had broken his heart in a way he didn’t expect.

Lucca spent a lot of time after giving birth in bed. Monty let him the first two weeks, claiming it was common for surrogates to need to rest after a baby was born. He didn’t do much resting: sleep evading him most nights since he could somehow always hear the baby cry when she woke up at night. And during the day was the same. So he focused, instead, on watching the late winter snow fall, the days dragging on and on.

That stopped soon, however. One night, Lucca sat in bed, listening to Gabby cry and cry for almost an hour. He had no idea what Chelsea was doing, but it was driving him crazy. He wondered how Monty slept through it. Just as he thought maybe he should investigate—see if Chelsea needed help—his door smashed open. Lucca shot up in bed, blinking to make out the figure in the dark.

Without another word, someone stormed into the room, shoving something into his arm. It took Lucca a second to realize that that something was Gabby and that the person standing over him was Chelsea. He couldn’t make her out, but he could hear the exasperation in her voice once she spoke.

“I can’t get her to stop,” Chelsea said, her voice at an odd octave. “I can’t take it anymore.”

Without another word, Chelsea all but flew out of the room, letting the door shut behind her. Gabby just wailed in his arms, tiny and fragile and so obviously upset. Lucca looked down at her, adjusting her so she was in the crook of his arm. Darcy had taught him how to nurse, so he decided to start there. Gabby took to him just as easily as she did those first few times he tried to nurse her, and she quieted down.

Nursing Gabby was hard. While Lucca knew he would have to nurse her from time to time, it didn’t prepare him for the calm that fell over him when he did. A sense of rightness; a sense that
she belonged there. That was dangerous. That would imply that she was Lucca’s, and that wasn’t the case for a surrogate. He couldn’t have her. He wasn’t supposed to see her as his. Yet it was hard not to while he fed her.

Gabby finished, and fussed a bit. Lucca burped her, then just held her, rocking her a bit and waiting to see what she would do. She started to whine again, and Lucca checked her diaper. She wasn’t wet, and she wasn’t hungry. Lucca put her on the bed, on her stomach, and watched as she failed to lift her head. She looked confused, as if not sure why she was in that position. Lucca chuckled, brushing her tiny curls back.

“Can you turn your head over here?” Lucca said, letting his voice fill the quiet of the room.

Gabby fidgeted, but couldn’t quiet turn her head to look at him. It must have upset her because she started to cry. Lucca moved to adjust her, so she could see him. Well, see him as best as she could in the dark. Thinking of that, Lucca got off his bed to turn the light on. Gabby babbled a bit in response before quieting as Lucca rejoined her on the bed.

“How was he supposed to not see her as his child?

~*~

After that night, Chelsea got in the habit of dumping Gabby on him at night. Lucca, against his best efforts, enjoyed the alone time he got with her. He got into the habit of putting Gabby back in Chelsea’s room an hour or so before Monty woke up and checked on her before he started getting ready for work. As far as he knew, Gabby spent the entire night in Chelsea’s room.

This ruse didn’t bother Lucca until Chelsea started dumping Gabby on Lucca during the day when Monty was gone as well. She would be fine feeding Gabby in the mornings, doing a bit of tummy time before she slept. But as soon as Gabby started crying, Chelsea swooped her up and took her to Lucca’s room. Lucca knew this wasn’t what was supposed to happen. He also knew that Monty would be livid if he knew that Chelsea wasn’t properly bonding with Gabby.

But Lucca couldn’t help but let his imagination run wild, pretending that he was Gabby’s parent and she was truly his child. He nursed her the way a mother would, changed her and played with her and took care of her when Chelsea wouldn’t. He loved her the way a mother would.

This routine prompted Lucca to get out of bed during the day, taking Gabby all over the house to experience new things. This went on for almost two months. On the rare days when it was warm enough take her outside, he would wrap her up and let her see the blue skies and the green trees. When the birds got too close, he would shoo them away. He gave her a stuffed giraffe to hold while he changed her so she wouldn’t cry. He would lie in front of her during tummy time and encourage her to lift her head.
One day, Lucca had Gabby in the playroom. There was a radio Monty bought that would play nursery rhymes; a new thing Lucca started using to keep her calm while he changed her. He hummed along as he finished changing her, putting her back into her dress. He picked her up, turning with the intent to put her in her pack-n-play, and froze when he saw Monty standing there at the door.

“You’re home early,” Lucca said, realizing immediately that he just gave away his guilt.

Monty, of course, just smiled at him, walking up to him and reaching for Gabby. Lucca gave her to him, watching as Monty cooed at her. Gabby loved Monty. Not as much as she loved Lucca, but Monty was obviously as a close second. At the very least, she didn’t stare at him the way she just stared at Chelsea when Chelsea held her. She smiled and reached up at him, babbling as if telling him about her day.

God, she was so cute. An angel, really.

“Why is she in here with you?” Monty asked, his tone casual.

Lucca had no idea what Monty knew, so he wasn’t sure how to play this. He decided to go for a half truth.

“No. Just when Chelsea needs to rest a bit.”

“Hmm,” Monty said, putting Gabby in her pack and play. He put her on the playmat so that she could reach for the toys hanging down. “Come here, Lucca.”

Lucca felt his heart skip as he glanced at Gabby before following Monty into his room. Monty gestured for Lucca to sit on his bed, and Lucca did. He looked up at Monty, waiting.

“I asked one of the maids when I got in where everyone was. Chelsea is in her room, and she said you had the baby in yours. Of course, I know that’s not how things should be, so I asked her if that was common. You having the baby, I mean.”

Lucca nodded, not sure if he was supposed to say anything to that. He decided to just keep waiting instead.

“She didn’t want to answer at first, which was my first warning that I wasn’t going to like the answer. And, eventually, she said that you do often have the baby. She said Chelsea dumps her on you. So I went to Chelsea to explain herself.”

Lucca nodded again. He didn’t want Chelsea to get in trouble. And, as selfish as it was, he didn’t want his time with Gabby taken away. He had to find a way to minimize this. To make it seem like it wasn’t as bad as he thought.

“When I asked Chelsea about it, you know what she told me?”

Lucca didn’t respond.

“She told me that you take the child from her. That every time she tries to feed or change her, you say she’s not doing it right and you take her and do it. She said she got tired of fighting you over it, so she just lets you have your way.”
Now Lucca’s heart was racing. That was a fucking lie. A bold face lie. And she told it to Monty to cover her ass.

“Is that true, Lucca?” Monty asked when Lucca didn’t respond.

Lucca shook his head, not sure what to say. This wouldn’t look good for him. Either he’d snitch on Chelsea and get her in trouble, meaning less time with Gabby and having to deal with Chelsea’s ire when Monty wasn’t around; or he’d take the blame and get in trouble for something he didn’t even do. Both circumstances meant less time with Gabby, and he didn’t want that either. It wasn’t fair.

“Then what is the truth, Lucca?” Monty prompted when Lucca didn’t elaborate. “I want an answer. Now.”

“I,” Lucca started, his mind racing. “I think Chelsea just needs help sometimes is all. I think it’s a lot taking care of the baby alone and sometimes she gets really overwhelmed. When she gets frustrated, I just offer to take over is all. I swear.”

“How often do you offer to take over, Lucca?”

“Only occasionally when she gets agitated. That’s all.”

Monty nodded, looking back at the door to the playroom. Lucca took a few breaths, trying to calm his nerves. Gabby was awful quiet. He wanted to check on her, but he knew Monty wouldn’t let him until this was over.

“So,” Monty said, turning back to Lucca. “So, I have a maid telling me one thing, Chelsea telling me another thing, and your story that is conveniently a mix of their two reports. What am I supposed to believe, Lucca?”

“I don’t know, Monty,” Lucca said, his voice low.

“I don’t believe you, Lucca. And I don’t believe Chelsea. I know how Chelsea is when I’m not here. Or, rather, I have an idea. And I know the wait staff aren’t too fond of her as a result. I also know that you’re alone with her all day when I’m at work, and thus you wouldn’t want to vilify her.

“Still, I know you know better than this, Lucca. Gabby isn’t yours. You’re not her mother and you’re not her father. Your role is simply to support us as we raise her. So I shouldn’t have a maid telling me that you have her more often than her actual mother. And if that was happening, you should have told me.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said, not sure what else he could say.

“No, you’re not. Because you like it, don’t you? I was watching you for a while with Gabby. You didn’t tell me not because you didn’t want to get Chelsea in trouble, but because you didn’t want anyone to take your time with Gabby away from you.”

Lucca didn’t answer. He hated how easy it was for Monty to read him at times. Monty took a deep breath in and out before shaking his head.

“I’m not mad, Lucca. I’ve explained to Chelsea how important it is for her bond with Gabby. And now I need you to understand that you’re just going to make things harder for yourself. Chelsea is her mother. You need to let her be the mother. Okay?”

Lucca wanted to cry. But he nodded instead, ready for this to be over. Monty seemed satisfied,
turning to go back into the playroom. Lucca took a moment to compose himself before Monty returned with Gabby in his arms.

“It’s nice you want to help, Lucca,” Monty said as he headed for the door. “Just remember that anything you do should be just that; nothing more.”

“Yes, Monty,” Lucca said.

And with that, Monty left, taking Gabby with him. Lucca stood up, staring at his door, missing Gabby already.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave comments as always! Thanks for reading!
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

I always tell people to mind the tags, and even though story has a major warning for rape, I just wanted to throw another one at the start of this chapter. Rereading it, I felt like it warrants it.

So if it's difficult for you to read about rape, please take care with this chapter. My feelings are NEVER hurt if you must not read/skip this chapter/stop reading to keep yourself safe. Please always make your own mental wellness a priority over this story.

That said, Chelsea's reaction to Monty laying down the law...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Here. I need a break. Take her.”

Things, it turned out, didn’t really change. In fact, Chelsea seemed almost more determined than before to dump Gabby on Lucca. The only difference now was that Lucca couldn’t enjoy it. If Monty found out, Lucca knew he’d be punished. But he didn’t want to snitch on Chelsea.

None of this was fair.

So Lucca looked up from his crocheting as Chelsea held Gabby out for Lucca to take. In her defense, Chelsea did look exhausted. Chelsea now got up with Gabby at night, so she must have been even more tired than usual. But Lucca didn’t want to get in trouble. He knew if he didn’t stop this, he was the only one who would end up catching heat for it.

“Monty said I can’t,” Lucca said.

“Monty’s not here, is he?” Chelsea sang, as if speaking to a child.

“I know,” Lucca said, just as patiently. “But he found out I was taking her all the time before. He’ll find out again.”

“You’re not taking her ‘all the time.’ Stop exaggerating.”

“I had her earlier today when she wouldn’t stop crying.”

“Yes. Because I don’t know what to do with her when she won’t stop crying.”

“She just wants to be held. Monty said—”

“Since when did you give two shits about what Monty says?” Chelsea snapped. “Just fucking take her, Lucca.”

“Why don’t you act like an actual mother for a change and take care of her yourself?”
It happened so quickly that it took Lucca a second to register it. He heard Chelsea slap him before he felt it. He looked at her, touching his cheek as the stinging started to settle in. Chelsea’s face was red with anger, her eyes heavy and dark. Lucca wasn’t even sure how to respond: Chelsea’s never hit him before.

“If I tell you to do something, you’re supposed to do it,” she said, her voice dangerously low.

“Not if it goes against what Monty told me to do,” Lucca said, feeling oddly embolden after her display of violence.

Chelsea moved again, putting Gabby on her hip while reaching out to grab a fistful of Lucca’s hair. Lucca cried out in shock more than pain, falling out of the chair to his table as Chelsea pulled at him with a strength that didn’t seem to fit her. Lucca’s hands went to where her fist was, trying to free himself from her grasp. Gabby started crying, her voice loud and piercing.

“I’m so sick of your high and mighty attitude,” Chelsea growled, still pulling. “Monty, Monty, Monty. You two both think you can do whatever you want all while having such an unnatural relationship. And now you refuse to do your job? You stuck up little shit!”

Chelsea let go of Lucca’s hair, turning to hit him a few times. Lucca covered his face, waiting for it to be over. She didn’t fight him too long; after a few smacks, she seemed satisfied, turning and walking over to the door. She stopped, looking down at Lucca on the floor.

“Don’t think Monty won’t hear about this,” she threatened.

Lucca sat on the floor, watching her leave with Gabby’s crying echoing down the hall. He wanted to run after her and take Gabby. But he couldn’t get over the shock of what just happened.

~*~

Lucca was sitting at his desk when Monty knocked on his door. That was odd: Monty knocking. He didn’t walk in immediately afterwards, either. Lucca stood up, going over to the door and opening it. Monty stood there, his face blank in that way it was when he was pissed. Lucca still felt like he was in a daze; he wasn’t sure what to expect from this. Monty, surprisingly, did not enter his room. Rather, he stood at the doorway, looking down at Lucca.

“What happened?” he demanded, his voice hard.

Lucca didn’t answer at first. His mind went back to the altercation, trying to pinpoint where it went wrong. He was sure Chelsea had told Monty a wretched story, painting him in a bad light. He wasn’t sure if he cared about protecting Chelsea anymore.

“I asked you a very simple question,” Monty said, taking a step forward. Lucca instinctively took a step back. “I’m so tired of my questions being answered with silence from you.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said, his impulse to diffuse the situation taking over. “I just—the whole thing was just—” Lucca cut himself off and shook his head. “It just happened so fast.”

“What happened, Lucca?” Monty repeated. He wasn’t in the mood for games.

Fine.

“Chelsea hasn’t been taking care of Gabby the way she’s supposed to be,” Lucca said, deciding to confess everything. “She kept passing her off on me. And you were right, Monty. I didn’t say anything because I did like it. But after what you told me, I knew I had to tell her not to. I didn’t
want to, but I knew I couldn’t disobey you. I didn’t want to disobey you. So when she tried to give Gabby to me today, I told her you said I shouldn’t. And she got mad and hit me.”

Monty nodded. He took a few moments to digest Lucca’s words. Lucca felt terrible throwing Chelsea under the bus, but he’d be a fool if he thought Chelsea hadn’t done the same thing to him.

“Chelsea said you called her a bad mom,” Monty said.

Lucca swallowed. Of course she did.

“I didn’t say that,” Lucca said, shaking his head. “We went back and forth a bit, and I was rude with her. I might have crossed a line. I’ll admit that. But I didn’t say that.”

“You understand that no matter what, Chelsea is my wife, and you are to never disrespect her, right?”

“I know. I’m sorry, Monty. I—” Lucca wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Downstairs. Now.”

Monty turned and headed down the hall to the stairs. Lucca paused, not sure why Monty didn’t just punish him right away. He soon followed Monty down the stairs and to the living room. Chelsea was sitting on the couch, her arms baby-free. Lucca wondered where Gabby was. Maybe she was sleeping. Maybe one of the maids had her. Monty gestured for Lucca to sit next to Chelsea. Lucca did, keeping a good distance between them.

“I honestly expected this day to come,” Monty started, looking between the two of them. “I thought it would happen long before we had a baby in the house. Lucca, I know you know better. Any issue you had with Chelsea should have been brought to me to handle. Disrespecting her is not an option. Do you understand?”

Lucca nodded.

“Yes, Monty.”

“I will address this further with you later, but, right now, I’m most disturbed by your actions, Chelsea.”

Lucca blinked, sure he hadn’t heard that right. He was sure that Monty’s biggest issue would be with him. Chelsea was his wife, after all; it was like she could do no wrong. Lucca started to turn to look at Chelsea, to see her reaction, but then caught himself.

“Me?” Chelsea asked incredulously. “What did I do?”

“The same way that Lucca needs to take issues with you to me, any time Lucca disrespects you or crosses a line, you should bring that to me to handle. Disrespecting her is not an option. Do you understand?”

Lucca nodded.

“Yes, Monty.”

“I will address this further with you later, but, right now, I’m most disturbed by your actions, Chelsea.”

Lucca blinked, sure he hadn’t heard that right. He was sure that Monty’s biggest issue would be with him. Chelsea was his wife, after all; it was like she could do no wrong. Lucca started to turn to look at Chelsea, to see her reaction, but then caught himself.

“Me?” Chelsea asked incredulously. “What did I do?”

“The same way that Lucca needs to take issues with you to me, any time Lucca disrespects you or crosses a line, you should bring that to me to handle. It is not your place to punish him.”

“I can’t discipline my own surrogate?”

“Am I not the head of this household, Chelsea?”

“Of course you are, Monty, but—”

“Then the only one who should be disciplining anyone in this household is me. Plain and simple. You’ve forgotten your place.”
“My place?” Chelsea snapped. “Oh, please Monty. Tell me about my place as your beard. You both act so full of it. I could report your unnatural relationship, and—”

“And I could report your little trysts with Lindsay,” Monty said calmly.

Lucca inhaled loudly. So Chelsea was sleeping with Lindsay. Chelsea tensed, and Monty let her stew in his words for a bit.

“We’ve discussed this before,” Monty said after a while. “You chose to marry me and take on everything that would mean. I don’t want to hear your idle threats when I could ruin your world much easier than you could ruin mine, Chelsea. I will not engage in a power struggle with you in my own home. Understood?”

Chelsea crossed her arms over her chest and nodded.

“Good. So, to reiterate, you had no right to punish Lucca. You had no right to hit him. That is not your role; that is not your place. And I’m troubled by the fact that you thought you could do that with no repercussions. I think you’ve forgotten yourself. And I think a punishment will sort you out.”

Lucca’s heart dropped. Punishment? In what way? Was Monty going to hit her? Lucca remembered that day at the cabin, and real fear filled his body. Lucca might be irritated with Chelsea, but he would never wish that on her. Especially when she agreed to this arrangement under the idea that she wouldn’t have to be subjected to something like this. It wasn’t fair to hurt her after all this time.

“Punishment?” Chelsea asked, breaking the silence. “Like, what? You’re going to hit me?”

“Yes.”

“No, Monty, please,” Lucca said, shaking his head. “It was my fault. She only did that because of me. Please. I promise I’ll do better.”

“I didn’t agree to this,” Chelsea said, her voice sounding distance. It must have just hit her what Monty was saying. “This was never part of our agreement.”

“I wasn’t asking permission,” Monty said, his voice calm.

“Monty,” Lucca said, trying again. “Please, Monty—”

“Lucca, you can go to your room now.”

“Monty—”

“Now.”

Lucca knew he would just get in trouble if he disobeyed Monty, but this felt wrong. Monty walked over to Chelsea, holding out a hand. He expected her to just submit to it. Lucca watched as Chelsea just stared at his hand, shaking her head with tears pooling in her eyes.

“I can’t,” she whispered, the tears finally falling.

Monty moved, reaching down to grab Chelsea’s arm.

“You’re being ridiculous,” he said, pulling her to her feet. “The beating will be the easy part for you.”
“What does that mean?” Chelsea asked, her voice dripping with fear. “What does that mean, Monty?”

“I mean you don’t seem to understand what it means to be a wife. I tried to be kind because you understood my situation with Lucca and agreed. But if my kindness means you forget your role, then I will just have to remind you.”

“What does that mean?” Chelsea asked again, her voice sounding a bit hysterical.

Lucca’s mind went back to the cabin. Afterwards, I’m going to fuck you, Lucca. Lucca went cold. Chelsea didn’t agree to that. She only married Monty with the understanding that she would never be expected to submit herself to him in that way.

And Monty knew she didn’t want to do that. It wasn’t about reclaiming her or whatever bullshit he used to justify fucking Lucca that day in the cabin. For Chelsea, it was about humiliating her. Punishing her. Putting her in her place. It was about power and control; a way to tell Chelsea just how kind Monty had been to not fuck her up until this point.

It was cruel. It was cruel in a way that seemed distant to Lucca. Monty’s cruelty to him was misguided love. Lucca knew that. He understood that. He accepted that. But this was something new entirely. It was cruel for the sake of being cruel. There was no real logic behind it; he was doing it just because he could.

Monty had led Chelsea to the stairs, and she was apologizing now. Hysteria had won, and she was even trying to pull her arm out from Monty’s grip. She was scared. Lucca remembered his fear when he saw the cabin; how his imagination went to the worst-case scenario. He stood up, all but running after them.

“Monty, please!” Lucca said, following them up the stairs. “I was wrong! Please! I’m the one who needs to be punished. Please, don’t do this!”

“Lucca, I thought I told you to go to your room.”

Yes, there we go. If he pissed Monty off, maybe he’d forget about Chelsea and punish him instead.

“You can’t do this, Monty. It’s not fair. Please! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

“Let me go,” Chelsea was saying, her pleas falling into a rhythm with Lucca’s. “Please, let me go, Monty. Let me go. I’m sorry. Please!”

Monty ignored them both, leading Chelsea down the hall, past her room, and to his door. He opened it, tossing her inside before turning to look at Lucca. His face was a blank mask, his eyes hard.

“I will deal with you once I’m done here. Go to your room, Lucca.”

Lucca started to argue, but Monty took two steps back, and closed the door in Lucca’s face. Lucca stared at the door for five full seconds before testing the doorknob. Locked. He could hear Chelsea’s muffled pleas getting more and more desperate. Then Lucca heard the first strike. That harsh snap of a belt or strap hitting skin. He heard Chelsea cry out, miserable and wretched.

Lucca banged on the door, his fists pounding as hard as he could.

“Monty, please stop!” Lucca called, hoping Monty could hear him. Lucca heard more strikes, more cries, more pleas. “Please, Monty, don’t do this! Please stop, Monty, please!”
Chelsea was so loud. She screamed with each strike, crying and moaning and begging Monty to stop. Lucca’s own cries stopped, helplessness overwhelming him. Why was Monty like this? Why did he have to be so cruel? He didn’t have to beat Chelsea. He could make his point a hundred different ways. It wasn’t right.

Lucca wasn’t sure how long he’d been standing there, but the strikes slowed and all he could hear was Chelsea crying. It wasn’t over, though. The worst was still to come, and Lucca didn’t want to hear this. But he felt wrong just going to his room, just so he could ignore what was next. He didn’t think he was doing Chelsea any favors by sticking around, but he still felt like he couldn’t leave her.

Chelsea’s pleas started back up again. Lucca fell to his knees, tears he didn’t know were coming spilling down his cheeks. Chelsea sounded truly fearful now; desperate. Monty was quiet through it all, and there was a panicked crescendo of Chelsea begging that tore at Lucca’s heart. He wanted Monty to just stop. None of this was right.

Chelsea let out a desolate wail, loud and long and heartbreaking. Lucca leaned forward, his head hitting the door. He closed his eyes and cried silently, praying that Monty wasn’t hurting Chelsea too badly. He hated that he couldn’t help her. He hated that he was here on his knees while Monty hurt Chelsea the same way he hurt Lucca all the time. He didn’t want this. He never wanted this.

“Please,” he whispered. “Please, just stop.”

Chapter End Notes

The point I wanted to make in this chapter was, mostly, that anyone in Monty's house isn't safe. I think it's easy to think that Monty's actions are isolated towards Lucca, but anyone Monty has legal control over (ie, anyone in his household) will have to be subjected to his shit. This will come up later in the story.

The next chapter will deal with the aftermath of this, which isn't quite as dramatic, surprisingly. I think some people might actually be pleasantly surprised.

I'm going back and forth on whether I will keep uploading daily after Sunday's update. I'm going to be in my best friend's wedding, which is a literal month from now. I love her to death, but between the bachelorette party, finding someone to hem/alter my dress, and other adult stuff (because adulting doesn't pause just because my friend is getting married), I think until this wedding is over, I'm going to need to focus on being an adult so I don't lose my mind. If I have to worry about uploading daily, I'll probably murder someone.

So after this Sunday's wrap up of this posting bomb, I'll likely just go back to my weekly uploads. And then after the wedding, I'll probably just upload daily until the chapters are all out. Ideally, I want to finish uploading before the summer is over, so by early September at the earliest. And this summer is just zooming on by; I've already seen back-to-school set ups at Target and other places! Any of you guys reading who are students, hope you're making the most of summer because it'll be back to school for you lot very soon! Lol. Suffer!

JK. As always, please leave messages! Work has been [I can't say the word because I'll jinx us, but it's the antonym for fast lol], so it's nice when I check on here at work
and see comments! Helps make the day go by faster! Feed my ego please!
Lucca hadn’t thought that Monty would ever beat him again with the same vehemence he used that day in the cabin. He assumed that that beating had been a warning. Emphasized by the fact that Monty’s punishments since then, if they were violent, were simple, embarrassing spankings. The day after Monty punished Chelsea, however, he beat Lucca worse than that day at the cabin. The only solace Lucca was able to take was that Monty obviously wasn’t beating him in a fit of rage.

That still didn’t stop Lucca from developing welts on his thighs and back, nor did it minimize the colorful bruises that littered Lucca’s body as a result. The whole thing had been a blur. Lucca didn’t remember crying out once, and Monty didn’t so much as grunt in exertion during it. Afterwards, Lucca was allowed to cry silently in his room all day, Arielle bringing him his meals.

Lucca spent three days in bed like that. It wasn’t until the evening of the third day, when Arielle advised Lucca that Monty insisted he eat dinner in the dining room, that Lucca learned Chelsea had done the same. Lucca didn’t expect the dinner to be tense, but Chelsea and Monty chatted on as though nothing had changed. Chelsea asked Monty about hiring a photographer to take Easter pictures of Gabby, then got excited about shopping for a new dress for her.

Lucca picked at his food, wondering how Chelsea had it in her to just go on as if everything was okay.

~*~

Lucca woke as soon as Gabby did. He still wasn’t sure how he heard her from Chelsea’s room. He didn’t hear Chelsea move, but heard the moment she opened the door with Gabby and headed down the stairs. Lucca sat up, Gabby’s cries getting further and further away. Chelsea usually kept bottles in her room, and it wasn’t like breastmilk needed to be warmed up.

Lucca slid out of bed, grabbing a robe from his closet, before opening his door and heading down the stairs himself. He didn’t hear Gabby crying, and wasn’t sure which way Chelsea had taken her. Taking a guess, he turned right towards the kitchen. He opened the door, watching Chelsea lean against a table, holding Gabby, as she fed her a bottle. Her eyes were half closed, looking like she might fall asleep any minute.

Lucca considered leaving just as Chelsea looked up at him. The two of them hadn’t really spoken to each other since Chelsea hit on him. Lucca wondered if she hated him. She had to blame him for what Monty did to her. Lucca wouldn’t blame her if she did. He wondered if she would accept an apology if he gave one.

“Why are you just standing there?” Chelsea asked, her voice soft. Tired. “Afraid I’m going to hurt her?”
“No,” Lucca said immediately, because the last thing he needed was for Chelsea to know that he had been. “I just thought you kept milk upstairs is all.”

“I ran out.”

“Oh.”

Chelsea shook her head, turning back to Gabby. When she was finished, Chelsea took the bottle away and placed it down. Gabby started whining again, obviously wanting more. Chelsea sighed, looking around the cupboards for more milk.

“I think she’s going through a growth spurt,” Chelsea said. “She barely slept all day, and she wasn’t even down two hours before waking up. And she’s eating so much.”

Lucca watched as Chelsea went through the last of the cabinets, Gabby’s whine turning to full blown crying. Lucca felt his chest tingle in response, and he wrapped his arms around them. He couldn’t remember the last time he pumped.

“Shit,” Chelsea said, snapping him out of his thoughts. “I think that was the last bottle. We’ll have to use formula. Monty’s not going to like that.”

“I can nurse her,” Lucca said, taking a step forward.

Chelsea looked at Lucca, hesitation in her eyes. She glanced at Gabby, crying and fidgeting in her hands, before nodding. Lucca moved to sit down at one of the tables, taking Gabby when Chelsea offered her. Gabby always latched on quickly, and this time was no different. Lucca breathed out, the familiarity of feeding Gabby pulling at his heart. God, he missed her.

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said, his voice a cautious whisper. He couldn’t look up at Chelsea, but he needed to say it.

“For what?” Chelsea asked, her voice low.

“For what Monty did to you. I—”

“It’s not like you did it.”

Lucca shook his head. It couldn’t be that easy. Chelsea just didn’t want to hear his apology. That had to be it. Lucca looked up, meeting her eyes. He paused when he saw no resentment or hatred in them. Just exhaustion and the vague dejection that reminded Lucca of so many of his surrogate friends from the Center.

“It was my own fault,” Chelsea continued, looking at Gabby. She smiled as she watched her, sitting down next to Lucca at the table. “I wanted this. Her. I wanted to be a mother. She’s my responsibility. I shouldn’t have been pushing everything onto you. I’m sorry.”

Lucca shook his head. This wasn’t at all the response he was expecting.

“That’s not what I meant. I told Monty the truth and he—” Lucca cut himself off. He couldn’t say it.

“He what? He beat me. No, that’s not what you’re apologizing for, is it? What were you going to say? He raped me? Is that what you were going to say? Tell me, Lucca. I’m not an idiot; I know your first time with Monty wasn’t after he moved you in. Did he rape you too?”
“Surrogates can’t be raped,” Lucca recited, noticing Gabby had finished.

She started to whine again, and when he put a finger to her lips, she tried to suck on it. She was still hungry? Lucca moved her, adjusting her so she could latch on to his other nipple. She took immediately and started nursing again.

“Surrogates can’t be raped,” Chelsea repeated. “Neither can a wife be raped by her husband.”

“It wasn’t right,” Lucca insisted. “You only agreed to marry Monty because you believed something like this would never happen.”

“Just because I knew my marriage to Monty would be unconventional, it didn’t mean I still wouldn’t be his wife.”

“But—”

“Like I said, it was my fault. It’s funny because I always thought that I had something over Monty. Something I could use to destroy him if he ever went too far with me. But we had a long talk afterwards, and I couldn’t believe how wrong I was. I lied, Lucca, about the asexual thing. It was what I called it simply because I knew anyone knowing my love for women would destroy me. Not being comfortable with sex is something a woman can deal with in this country. Being a lesbian is a different issue entirely.

“So imagine if I had said something about you two. I’m a wife whose surrogate just gave birth. I spent more time passing Gabby off to you than caring for her. Even without what I am coming into play, I’d already look bad if I accused him of something like that. Like a useless barren bitch jealous of her fertile surrogate; too threatened by her inadequacies that she imagines her husband is in love with him. There’s no way I’d win.”

Lucca hadn’t thought of that. He knew it had to happen from time to time; women who were jealous of what surrogates could do that they couldn’t. But Lucca had no idea if that was common. Besides, the women got to raise the children as their own. The surrogates were the ones who were left to the dust.

“I still think it was wrong what he did,” Lucca said, watching Gabby’s eyes droop as she slowed down. Finally.

“How kind of you to be concerned for me.”

“I—” Lucca started, cutting himself off. He wasn’t sure what he was about to say, but he knew it was going to be wrong. He took a minute before trying again. “Monty has power over us both. I know how it feels, what he did to you.”

Chelsea didn’t answer. Lucca watched Gabby finish up before turning her in his lap and tilting her forward. She burped after a few gentle pats to her back, and she was yawning when Lucca stood to give her back to Chelsea. It was seconds before Gabby’s eyes were closed, her breath evening out. Lucca could watch her all night.

Chelsea moved suddenly, standing to close the distance between Lucca and herself, wrapping an arm around Lucca’s shoulders. It took Lucca a second to realize that she was hugging him, and another second more to wrap his arms around her as well. It was odd: he was pretty sure he never touched Chelsea like this before. And considering how she had hit him just days ago, Lucca hadn’t expected this.

But he welcomed it with open arms.
Chapter End Notes

I hope this chapter brought things in perspective a bit. I don't dislike Chelsea; I always wanted her and Lucca to be allies. It's just very difficult for them considering.

Anyway, I will still be posting tomorrow, and Sunday will end my posting bomb for the time being. As a bit of a warning, chapter 45 is going to be very ROUGH. I will add the warnings at the beginning with more details on why, but I'm just warning y'all. As always, mind the tags and warning and PROTECT YOURSELVES.

And, of course, please leave comments for me to enjoy during the brutally hot day I have to look forward to tomorrow. Ugh lol.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

The return of someone I’m sure you all missed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lucca didn’t learn until almost May that Rudy had gotten really sick while in the hospital. It had started with a blood clot that was caught only because Rudy ended up having to get a C-section. Lindsay had been very blasé about it when she told Chelsea, noting that she and her husband would likely wait a few years before getting another surrogate if something had happened to Rudy. Rudy was then hospitalized with pneumonia for almost a month afterwards, and was only home for a few days before anemia had him hospitalized again.

He was on extensive bed rest for another month, and so Lucca didn’t get a chance to see them until Lindsey’s Memorial Day barbecue. The other surrogates were watching the children; the Yakubs had announced Kingsley’s pregnancy at their Easter Egg hunt party, so he was taking advantage of being allowed to eat more than he probably was normally allowed. Lucca took the time to slip inside the house, remembering the way to Rudy’s room from the few times he’d been over. He wasn’t sure if anyone would reprimand him from going inside, but it would be worth it to see Rudy.

He knocked on Rudy’s door, cracking it open to look inside. The room was bright; the sun was high and came in from large windows that took up the west wall. The walls were a calming blue, with a small table next to the window. That was where Rudy was, the window open and with Rudy sitting on a chair and leaning against the sill as he watched the party outside.

He didn’t look up when Lucca walked in, though his body tensed as Lucca walked closer.

“I’m surprised your windows open,” Lucca said, grabbing his attention. “Mine don’t.”

Rudy snapped around, his eyes wide. Then a sheepish grin climbed his face, and he waved Lucca over.

“It still hurts to walk too much,” he said, hugging Lucca when he was close enough. “God, I almost forgot you existed.”

“We could say that about you,” Lucca said, sitting across the table from him. “Things have been rough?”

Rudy shrugged, gesturing to the balls of yarn at his desk. He also had a couple of crocheting books. That also surprised Lucca; even if surrogates could read, he never heard of a family encouraging it. No matter how small. Lucca picked it up, looking at a few of the designs.

“These are complicated,” he said, idly.

“Some of them,” Rudy said, picking up his current project and turning to it. “I thought if I learned some new patterns and stuff from the book, I could teach you.”
“Did Leo get these for you?”

“Ah, Lindsey did. Leo wasn’t too happy about it, but she’s been great this whole time. And she’s great with Nathan too. Did you meet him yet? He was a lot paler when he came out. I was shocked. But he’s been getting more color as time goes on.”

Lucca didn’t answer that. He knew Rudy would turn the conversation to his baby eventually. Still, Lucca didn’t want to talk about babies. He picked up a ball of green yarn and a needle and started a stich. He kept it loose, figuring he could undo it when he was done so Rudy could reuse it later.

“How are you feeling, Rudy?” Lucca asked as they worked in tandem, the familiarity of crocheting together creating a quiet rhythm.

“Fine,” Rudy said,shrugging. “How have you been? You had your baby too, I heard. Gabriella? How is she?”

“She’s fine,” Lucca said, ignoring how his heart tugged a little. He hadn’t been spending as much time with her; he missed her. “She can lift her head a bit during tummy time. And she really likes listening to Monty’s albums.”

“That’s nice. Are you nursing her?”

“Not too often. I pump and Chelsea feeds her.”

“Oh. That’s more than I can do, then.”

“You don’t even pump?”

“No, since I was at the hospital and things turned out the way they did, I don’t think my milk really came in. I mean, I was leaking a bit those first few weeks, but it stopped quickly.”

“How does Leo feel about the baby not being on breast milk?”

Rudy shrugged, but Lucca saw how he tensed. Obviously Leo wasn’t a fan.

“When did you get out of the hospital?” Lucca asked, keeping the conversation going.

“Um, a few weeks ago? Maybe.”

“Really? Lindsay was over last week and didn’t say anything.”

“I’m not surprised. My doctors keep saying I need to rest, so I pretty much stay right here.”

“That’s gotta be lonely. Do you get to see the baby at all?”

“No, Leo said that since the baby isn’t immunized yet, it’s best we don’t interact much. Just so the baby doesn’t get sick.”

Lucca frowned. Rudy kept his eyes on his crocheting, but he knew that it bothered Rudy to not be able to see the baby. Leo was a piece of shit, Lucca decided. Worse, probably, than Monty.

“You just have to focus on getting healthy,” Lucca said. “Once you’re well again, you can see the baby.”

Rudy’s fingers stopped, and he turned back to the window. The chatter of conversations drifted like white noise through the window. They could also hear birds chirping around. It was relaxing.
Rudy sighed, shaking his head.

“I don’t think I’ll get to see Nathan for a while.”

“Why not?” Lucca demanded.

Rudy shrugged again, then shook his head. He then turned to Lucca, his face falling into misery. It reminded Lucca of the first time he met Rudy, how miserable he was. How heavy the bags under his eyes were, and how sullen his skin looked. He didn’t quite look that bad, but he did look close. Lucca put the yarn down on the table, his undivided attention on Rudy.

“So Leo took me to the doctor a week ago,” Rudy said, fear furrowing his brow. “I thought it was just a normal checkup, but then the doctor started asking about my moods. I know that my hormones have to settle, after everything. But, I don’t know, Leo just said it would be better to get it done now since I’m still recovering from the baby.”

Lucca felt his heart race, sure he knew where this was going. He gripped the yarn in his hand, anger sweeping through his body like fire. If Lucca disliked Leo now, hell wouldn’t compare to the heat of his hatred for him if Rudy said what he thought was coming. Still, it was obvious that Rudy didn’t want to say. So Lucca had to ask.

“Get what done, Rudy?”

Rudy’s eyes turned away, looking down at the yarn on the table. Then he just shrugged, defeated.

“A lobotomy.”

Lucca let the hate soar. Let it burn his body as he gripped the yarn even harder. He looked at it, seeing nothing but red. Leo was such a fucking asshole. Rudy was pregnant with his child twice, and this was how he repaid him? Lucca had thought it before, when Rudy told him how Leo treated him after the miscarriage. Lucca couldn’t imagine that pain didn’t want to even know that pain. And of course Leo, some worthless, waste-of-sperm man, would blame Rudy and punish him with malice.

And Rudy, sweet, helpless Rudy, just took it. Accepted it. Allowed it. Even embraced it. Rudy believed the miscarriage was his fault; that Leo’s disdain was his fault. And he took it all in stride, pretending all would be fine if he could just be good and get pregnant. And he managed to do it: managed to get pregnant and carry it and then give birth and almost die doing so. And this was his reward? A fucking lobotomy?

Lucca glared at the yarn, not seeing it, imagining what he’d do to Leo if he weren’t a surrogate. How he’d make Leo—and men like him—pay for their cruelty. His mind went to violence, went to vengeance, went to blood and fire and everything as red as his anger.

Rudy gasped, snapping Lucca out of his thoughts. He was staring at Lucca’s hands, and Lucca looked, wondering if he’d gripped his hands so hard that he drew blood. But that wasn’t what Rudy was looking at. Lucca untangled his hands from the red yarn—the yarn that had been green just moments ago. He blinked, wondering what had happened.

“Did you do that?” Rudy asked, his voice a whisper.

Lucca shook his head, but immediately felt like that wasn’t true. He swallowed, his throat dry. His body felt hot; which didn’t make sense since the house was air conditioned. He felt like he’d been on fire just seconds ago. And now his green yarn was red. The same color he’d been thinking about in his fit of rage.
The first spell we're taught to do in the city is to change the color of something.

Lucca stood, understanding dawning. He did do this. He changed the color of the yarn. He wasn’t sure why it happened, but it did. And he did it. Lucca looked at Rudy, watching as he untangled the yarn. The rest of the ball had stayed green; only the clump that Lucca had touched had turned red.

“Ah,” Rudy said, looking around the table. He lifted a book and Lucca saw a pair of crafting scissors there. Again, Lucca was surprised at what Rudy was allowed access to. Rudy cut off the yarn where the green and red met. “I don’t really like red. You should have made it a different color.”

“I didn’t do that,” Lucca said, shaking his head. “I mean, I didn’t mean to do that. I mean—”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Rudy said, sitting down and pushing the red yarn aside. “Just, you know, don’t tell Nicolai and Eli about the lobotomy. Please? They’ll try to make me feel okay about it, and I don’t want them to.”

Lucca sat back down, nodding. More secrets they were keeping for each other. Still…

“It’s wrong,” Lucca said, finally. “You don’t deserve that.”

“I think he just wants it to be easier,” Rudy said, shrugging. As if it wasn’t a big deal when it obviously was. “It was hard getting pregnant last time, and I still have a few more to go. He can just say I’m still having health problems. It’s just easier, I guess.”

“We’re not fucking dogs to be spayed and neutered so we behave,” Lucca snapped. He didn’t want to hear any of Rudy’s excuses for Leo. Leo was an ass. “This isn’t right. Leo’s a piece of shit.”

Rudy nodded. “I want to hate him. I want to be mad at him. But more than anything, I just want to be able to see Nathan again. I haven’t held him once since I had him.”

Rudy turned his gaze outside again, probably finding Nathan being passed around from person to person. Lucca shook his head, hesitating before picking up the red yarn. If it was rope, maybe he’d string Leo up with a noose. It would terrify Lucca, how violent his thoughts were turning, if he wasn’t sitting in a small room, watching his best friend try to justify his own lobotomy.

Leo was a piece of shit. Just like all men. Just like the entire Nation.

Chapter End Notes

FUCK THE NATION.

I got over 3000 hits after my last upload. I didn't want to say anything, but I was hoping I would get over 3000 hits before Sunday. But the way my view count was looking, I thought it was impossible, lol. So I was happy to wake up this morning and see I did hit it! Yay!

I try not to get too freaked out over the numbers: I'm grateful that anyone is reading this, AND I'm so happy by a lot of the feedback I've been getting. You guys are so great. Like wonderful. I don't think people realize how much leaving kudos and, especially, a comment, can motivate a person. There's nothing that brightens up my
day more than when I check in the next day after uploading and seeing a few comments and my numbers going (slightly lol) up! Thank you all so much!

That said, please keep the engagement up! I love hearing the feedback and ya'll's opinions!
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Because I said I would, I want to preface this with a trigger warning for suicide and blood.

I will never feel I can stress this enough; if reading about a suicide might negatively impact your mood and/or mental health, DO NOT REACH THIS CHAPTER. The next chapter discusses what happens without the triggering aspect of it, so you won't miss any plot points, really. Always, always, ALWAYS place your mental well being over this story. If things get too heavy, please stop reading. I'd rather someone not read my story for the sake of their mental health than read this and get triggered/upset.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lucca was cleared to get pregnant again in June. By late August, he was. This time, Lucca knew before Monty; he could tell a little over a week after he ovulated, when he felt odd cramps. Lucca, luckily enough, had never gotten cramps with his period in the past. So he knew something was different.

Sure enough, he missed his next period, and a doctor’s visit confirmed it. By October, Chelsea was planning the announcement party. Before that, however, she hosted a murder mystery party two weeks before Halloween since Beth Yakubu had dibs on the actual Halloween party. The night started off with someone pretending to be murdered. Marjorie Kyle was the victim.

Lucca hadn’t given two shits about the party, and so the surrogates were allowed to watch horror movies in the den. Rudy was even over; apparently, getting a lobotomy meant months of intensive therapy and prepping. As such, Rudy was starting to be allowed at neighborhood events, though Leo always emphasized how Rudy needed to take things easy since he was still “recoverying.” Lucca had to fight the urge to jump on Leo and hit him until he drew blood whenever he said that.

“I’m surprised half these movies are still allowed,” Eli said, as he prepped the television for Psycho.

“Recent movies aren’t even that scary,” Nicolai said as he curled on the couch and drew a throw blanket over his legs. “The classics are much better.”

“Are you sure this one isn’t that scary?” Milos asked, for the eightieth time because, of course, he was terrified of horror movies.

“It’s about as scary as the Exorcist,” Nicolai muttered, sarcastically.

“And that was scary!”

“That’s another one I’m surprised they’re letting us watch,” Eli said, backing away from the TV as it loaded. “Isn’t that, like, sacrilegious or something?”

“The Catholic church wins in the end, right?” Nicolai answered.
“By suicide? Isn’t that a huge no-no in the Catholic church?”

“Lucca,” Rudy said next to him while Eli and Nicolai ignored Milos’s pleas for a calmer movie. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

“The killer is outside!” they heard someone yell from upstairs.

The door opened and there was the patter of footsteps leaving the house. Lucca rolled his eyes over the noise these grown-ass adults were making. Lucca straightened up from the corner of the couch he and Rudy claimed.

“Use the one by my room,” Lucca said. “Do you need me to help you?”

“No,” Rudy said, giving a tight smile. “I can manage. Thank you, Lucca. For everything.”

Before Lucca could answer that, he was distracted by Nicolai shaking Kingsley on the other side of him, as he had apparently fallen asleep sometime during the last movie. There was more whining from Milos while Rudy went upstairs to the bathroom, and more arguments on whether Psycho was too scary a movie. The consensus came that Milos needed to get over it, and settle down before he was put outside in the dark by himself. That, finally, shut him up.

Lucca actually found the movie to be rather boring, especially the beginning. Halfway through, he was dozing off a bit, and by the end, he was uninterested. As Eli took his post to replace it with another one, even Milos had to admit it wasn’t that bad. Kingsley had fallen asleep again.

“We need a really scary one, now,” Nicolai said, shaking Kingsley awake again.

“Please stop that,” Kingsley moaned as he woke up.

“Stop falling asleep on us, and I will.”

“Rosemary’s Baby? That’s still allowed?” Eli asked, looking through the movies.

“Is that one—” Milos started again as Lucca realized something.

He looked around, not seeing Rudy anywhere. Concerned, he stood up from the couch.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, heading for the stairs. “I gotta pee.”

“We’re not waiting for you!” Nicolai called after him.

Lucca didn’t mind. The couples were in the kitchen now—Lucca could hear them—and seemed to be coming to the end of their game. Lucca wondered if they would keep drinking and partying. Chelsea had volunteered the wait staff to mind the children in one of the guest rooms, but most of them were sleeping now. Everyone could get as wild as they wanted.

Lucca went straight to his bathroom, opening the door after preparing himself. Since Rudy was gone so long, he worried he’d fallen off the toilet or something. But Rudy was nowhere to be seen. His bathroom was completely empty.

Lucca turned, catching a glimpse of his window through the crack of his open bedroom door. That was weird: he’d shut his door when he left it for the den earlier. He was sure of it. He also had his curtains closed.

Lucca pushed open the door, his eyes on the window. His curtain rod looked as though it was pulled out of the wall on one side. The curtains from that side were missing too. Lucca blinked,
turning towards his closet door. Everything seemed to move slow motion, as if his body knew what he was about to see. By the time Lucca’s eyes finally settled there, his body had already gone cold.

Rudy was laying by the closet door, the curtains cut up next to him with his crafting scissors by his hand. It looked as though he had cut the curtains into a scarf, and wrapped it around his neck. And then wrapped the other end around the handle to his closet. And had fallen asleep like that.

But Lucca wasn’t an idiot: he knew Rudy wasn’t asleep. He knew even without looking at the sallow tinge to his skin or the dark blue tint to his lips. Everything turned blue then. Lucca took a step back, then froze. Ice. That was what he felt. Cold ice. And all he saw was blue. Like winter: a dark night in the middle of winter.

Lucca didn’t know how long he stood there, but he knew it was a while. He felt afraid, in that moment, to move. As if once he did, he would be forced to feel something. He didn’t want to feel anything. He didn’t want to feel what this was going to bring. He wanted time and everything to turn blue. To go cold. To stop.

“Lucca.”

Hands grabbed Lucca’s arm, pulling him away. Lucca kept his eyes on Rudy until the hands moved to wrap around his shoulders and forced him to move away from the scene. Lucca went, not recognizing that it was Monty pulling him until they were in the hallway.

“Hey, Lucca,” Monty said, getting Lucca’s attention. He looked genuinely concerned. “You with me?”

Lucca nodded.

“Can you go downstairs and get Leo for me?”

He was talking to Lucca like a child. The cold winter started to melt away as Lucca’s anger crept in.

“No,” Lucca said.

“Okay,” Monty answered, accepting that. “Can you just stay here for me while I go get him?”

Lucca nodded.

“I’ll be right back, okay, Lucca?”

Lucca nodded again. Monty took off down the hall and down the stairs. Lucca walked over to his door, looking in the room. Rudy was still there, cold and alone. Lucca kept walking, not stopping until he was in front of Rudy. Then he kneeled, taking the noose off the doorknob. He caught Rudy as he slid down, laying him gently on the floor. He was heavy and stiff; not the warm body that had just been sitting next to him, watching the Exorcist.


“Oh, my God.”

Lucca recognized Leo’s voice.

“Lucca!”
That was Monty.

“Monty, I’m so sorry. I had no idea he’d do something like this. And in your home.”

Fucking Leo.

Monty didn’t answer, though he was tugging Lucca’s hands off of Rudy. Lucca fought him at first: he didn’t want to leave Rudy. He was all alone. Rudy didn’t deserve to be alone like that. He didn’t deserve any of this.

“It’s his fault,” Lucca said, his voice small.

“Lucca, stand up for me,” Monty said, ignoring him.

“It’s all that fucking asshole’s fault,” Lucca said, louder.

Monty paused. Lucca looked up at him, the blue melting away completely. Red, now, was what he saw. He looked at Leo, standing by the door with a hand over his mouth. He looked offended. Affronted. But not sorry. Not empathetic. He didn’t care that Rudy was dead; all he cared was how anyone would think of him knowing his surrogated committed suicide in a neighbor’s home.

“What did he ever do to you?” Lucca asked Leo, his voice a snarl. “He wanted so badly to be good for you. He wanted to give you babies, and all you did was make him feel like trash. You’re the fucking reason he did this!”

Leo looked down at Lucca, fury in his eyes. When he spoke, his eyes stayed on Lucca.

“Monty, control your bitch.”

“Like you did?” Lucca snapped back, fear completely forgotten. “Is this how you control your bitches? With cruelty and lobotomies? Would you have us all kill ourselves just to prove how in control you are?”

“Lucca, get up. Now,” Monty said, yanking Lucca off the ground. “I understand that you’re in shock, Lucca, but this does not mean you can disrespect—”

“Someone is dead in my room and you want to preach to me about disrespect?” Lucca demanded, pulling his arm from Monty’s grip, and turning on him. “Do you care so little about us? Is this really more important to you?”

“Stand. Down,” Monty warned.

“Or what, Monty? Are you going to punish me? Beat me? Spank me? Hold a fucking vibrator to my dick so I come until it hurts? Or no, will you just force me to get a lobotomy too? Will that make me easier to—don’t fucking touch him!”

Lucca’s feet were moving before he realized what he was doing when he saw Leo bend over Rudy, his hand reaching out. He wasn’t sure what he planned to do, but Monty caught him around his waist immediately and stopped him. Lucca tried to fight past him, but Monty was stronger. Lucca couldn’t get past him; couldn’t stop Leo from hurting Rudy again. He hated Leo and, Lucca decided to finally admit, he hated Monty too.

And that was the moment Lucca broke. He fell to his knees, his tears hitting the ground faster than he did. He bent over and cried, sobbed and wailed for Rudy. For himself. For Gabby. For Chelsea. For everyone who had to suffer in this wretched country. Monty was by Lucca’s side, trying to
urge him to stand, but Lucca refused. He didn’t want to leave Rudy.

He didn’t want Rudy to leave him.

“Monty, what is—oh my God.”

“Chelsea, can you please get Lindsay for me? I need to get Lucca to my room.”

“Yes, Monty,” Chelsea said, disappearing.

Monty moved, picking Lucca up princess-style and standing. Lucca started to resist, but froze as he watched Leo touch Rudy’s face. He could only see the side of Leo’s face, but he looked regretful. Surprised, even, like he thought his actions wouldn’t lead this. Stupid, worthless, piece of shit. He’s the one who should be dead. Not Rudy. And that thought made Lucca start crying again.

Monty said something to Leo before walking Lucca down the hall. Lucca cried the entire time, thinking of Rudy. Rudy with his seasonal allergies. Rudy with his dark skin that reminded Lucca of his mother. Rudy learning how to crochet, his tongue hanging out as he struggled with it. Rudy teaching Lucca how to read the Bible. Rudy looking out the window for a glimpse of the baby he never got the chance to hold.

By the time Lucca oriented himself, he was sitting on a bed, alone, in Monty’s room. He had made himself angry and then sad three more times again. He saw red, felt rage, and then stinging pain as he realized he’d never get a chance to talk to Rudy again. His stomach ached with his misery, and Lucca welcomed it. Wanted more so he could ignore the aching in his chest. As impossible as Lucca knew that was.

After what felt like a lifetime, Lucca’s tears finally ran dry. His stomach was in absolute chaos, and his heart felt broken. Lucca stood up, looking for something—anything—to make him feel better. He took a step before bending over in pain. His stomach was killing him. And, oddly enough, Lucca felt wet.

Suddenly, understanding dawned on Lucca; he’d forgotten that he was pregnant. He reached into his pants, feeling between his legs, pulling his hand out. He saw red. He was bleeding. His stomach was cramping and he was bleeding. And Rudy was dead in his room.

Lucca wondered if he could die from a miscarriage. If so, he’d welcome it.

Chapter End Notes

I sort of feel bad ending my post bomb like this. Especially since there won't be another update until next week. I really do feel bad. It's just how things worked out though; I didn't plan it. I'm sorry. :;

I also feel bad because early on when Rudy was introduced, someone asked me not to have Rudy lobotomized or commit suicide. I had already wrote this scene by that point, and quite a few chapters after, and couldn't really go back to change it. I felt horrible in that moment; really questioned whether this was the right thing to do.

I've said this before, but this story was mostly an exercise for me. It's not something I would EVER try to get published (I think I did a lot of things wrong here according to
mental health professionals wrt to how Rudy's suicide was portrayed, thus the extensive warning at the beginning of the chapter), and I figured that as long as I'm, like WARNING the FUCK out of people, it won't be that bad that I'm putting this out here. Idk, I just feel like an absolute jerk doing this.

Killing off a character isn't easy on any capacity, but I feel like I needed to fully make it clear just how rough this society is to surrogates and the effects of it.

Maybe I'll upload the next chapter later today just so this isn't what you guys have to go into the new week with. The next chapter isn't that exciting (just some aftermath stuff), but the one after that, I think, is pretty major (and long). I might do that. Someone just remind me to do that lol.

Please leave feedback. Let me know how you all feel about this: just to appease my guilt a bit. Thank you.

Oh, on a lighter not, I've started the outline for the sequel to this. I wasn't sure if I was going to follow through with a sequel (aka, the story I originally wanted to write that led to this extensive prequel lol), but I decided to give it a go. I didn't really plan this story, thus why it's SO FUCKING LONG. For the sequel, I really want to focus on constructing better plots, and focusing my story so that way I can hopefully get this story written within a few months. And not, like over HALF A YEAR like this one took. I likely won't start writing it in earnest until after my friend's wedding, though.

I do, however, want to participate in NaNoWriMo this year too, so planning for that begins in October. I don't think considering where I am with my writing that it's reasonable to think I can write the entire sequel in, like, a month and a half's time. And since I already know what story I want to focus on for NaNoWriMo (ie, it's not the sequel) I guess my point is that I likely won't start posting the sequel until December at the earliest, and early 2020 at the latest. It does depend on how much writing of the sequel I can get done (you all know, or should know, that I like to be quite a few chapters ahead before I start posting so that way when life/writer's block gets in the way, I can still maintain my upload schedule).

If I can bang out at least 12-15 chapters in a month (which I think I can, actually), then I'll start uploading the sequel in December. If life gets in the way and I have less than that, then it might have to wait until next year. Which sucks, but I'd rather have a consistent upload schedule than be one of those people who posts a bunch then disappears for months (or even YEARS) because I don't have any new material. Not to diss those people, but my goal is to build a consistent writing practice so that I can one day successfully write for a living and meet the deadlines given to me. Not all of us can be George RR Martian and not write for 13 years after our last book and think that'll allow for a successful writing career lol.

Just to give some good news after all this junk. >_>
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

A short glimpse at the aftermath...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca had spent three days in the hospital. It wasn’t until someone was called and Rudy was taken out that Monty found Lucca bleeding in his room. Lucca had purposely not gone looking for Monty, hoping to miscarry. He didn’t want this baby to be saved: he wanted to be ruined forever. Fuck, Lucca himself wanted to die.

It didn’t happen though: his health was, for the most part, intact. But the baby didn’t make it. Lucca felt guilty for wishing for the miscarriage, then realized that what he really felt guilty for was still being alive. He considered doing something to change that, but he’d been watched heavily while at the hospital, and Monty made sure he was always with someone when he was brought home.

A week afterwards, Lucca was at the doctor’s office again. His physician, counselor, and gynecologist were all convening to access Lucca’s health. Lucca had suffered through their poking and prodding, and actually was in the mood to talk to his counselor. He was beyond caring about Monty finding out his true thoughts. He was beyond trying to play the game of being honest without getting in trouble. He just wanted to talk.

“So do you blame him?” Dr. Lawson said, her hand scribbling a bunch of notes while they spoke.

“Yes,” Lucca said honestly.

“I wonder if the lobotomy was the trigger though. If Rudy was prone to melancholy, it’s likely postpartum put him a state of depression that caused him to turn to—”

“He didn’t want me to tell anyone,” Lucca said, interrupting her. “Not because he was embarrassed or anything, but because he didn’t want the others trying to make him feel better. That’s what he told me: that he didn’t want them trying to make him feel better. Why would they try to make him feel better about it if he was okay with it? He obviously wasn’t okay with it. So much so that he—”

Lucca cut himself off. It was impossible to say it. Impossible to speak those words aloud. Lucca was sure he would never be able to say it. He turned to look out the window. It was raining. He’d heard from listening in on Chelsea’s conversations with the other wives that Rudy was survived by his mother. She was notified of what happened to him, and had wanted to bury him in Georgia, with the rest of his family. His sisters wanted a chance to say their finale goodbyes. Leo and Lindsay had agreed.

Lucca was happy that Rudy was able to go be with family, but the fact remained that had he been able to stay with family from the start, none of this would have happened. No one could excuse it. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. Rudy should have been free to live his life how he wanted.
They all should.

It struck Lucca, suddenly, how disgusting it was that he was talking to a counselor about the traumatic death of his friend while she tried to justify and minimize what happened to Rudy. If Lucca killed himself, would the other surrogates in the neighborhood have to hear the same thing? That Lucca had tortured himself mentally. That doing so drove him mad, to the point of suicide? Would they listen to lies about him until they believed and accepted what they were told as the truth?

“You’re hacks,” Lucca said suddenly.

“I’m sorry?” Dr. Lawson said. Lucca had cut her off; she’d been rambling about something. Lucca wasn’t listening.

“All of you,” Lucca said, shaking his head. “You and Monty and everyone else who sits us down and pretends to counsel us. Monty has no idea what he’s doing. He’s supposedly doing great things in psychology for the Nation, and his own surrogate is miserable. You tried to tell me that surrogates are loved by the children they bear, but that’s not guaranteed. It’s not true.

“I’ve been telling you people for years how miserable I am. How much I don’t want to do this. How much I hate all of this. I’ve told Monty, I’ve told my counselors at the Center—I’ve fucking told you—and you all just smile at me like I’m a fucking idiot who doesn’t understand my own feelings.”

“Lucca—”

“I’m done,” Lucca decided. “I’m done playing.”

“Lucca, this isn’t a game for any of us,” Dr. Lawson said, frowning. She looked genuinely offended. “We all take our jobs very seriously. We would never do anything to hurt our patients.”

Lucca watched her, taking in the hard set in her jaw and the fire in her eyes.

“You believe that,” Lucca agreed, nodding. “You truly, honestly, and genuinely believe that.”

Dr. Lawson’s face relaxed.

“But forgive me if I just don’t fucking care.”

Dr. Lawson scoffed, shaking her head. Lucca knew he was being a bit belligerent. If he was afraid of Monty opting to give him a lobotomy, he would have censored himself. But he just couldn’t be bothered to care. Not with Rudy gone.

“Lucca,” Dr. Lawson started, still trying. It was almost admirable. “Lucca, I think—”

“I don’t care.”

“Lucca—”

“How long do we have to wait before Monty can try to get me pregnant again?” Lucca asked, titling his head.

“I hardly think now is the time to worry about that, Lucca.”

“I’ve been told that having goals helps so I don’t get depressed.”
“Yes, but—”

“I don’t care about this anymore. I’m done talking about it. I just want to know how long we have to wait so I can make sure I’m ready and take quickly.”

“Lucca, getting pregnant right now—”

“Monty waited a few months after I gave birth, but he doesn’t have to wait that long with this, right?”

Dr. Lawson let out a breath, looking resigned. She wrote something down in her notebook.

“Physically,” she said, shaking her head, “you should be good to go in a few weeks. Six max, according to your physician.”

Lucca nodded.

“Good.”

Chapter End Notes

After rereading this, there was no way I could let you guys wait a week for this. It's pretty short and quick, so this is a good place to take a break imo.

As stated in my last chapter, this is the last of the posting bombs from now. From here on out, at least until I no longer have to be a good friend mid next month, all uploads will be weekly. Stay tuned for when I'll announce the next posting bomb.

Things will speed up from this point until the end. I'll give updates on the planning for the sequel. I kinda can't wait to start writing again.

See you all next week. And, as always, please keep the comments coming!
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

New year, new everything...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca turned twenty, and felt relieved to no longer be a teenager. Not that it mattered: Monty would always treat Lucca like a child. But there was something oddly satisfying about it. Chelsea even hosted a small lunch party for Lucca, inviting the surrogates over. They were all able to come, except Milos who had spent the past few weeks sick to his stomach. Lucca was happy for his absence, and couldn’t muster any sympathy for the obvious reason why.

Christmas passed and Lucca still wasn’t pregnant. So much had been a blur over the past few months: Gabby had started crawling, and was taking tentative steps by Christmas. She’d never do it when Chelsea propped her up to show someone, but she would take them often when it was just Lucca and Chelsea playing with her.

Gabby, however, wasn’t enough to lighten Lucca’s mood. Since Rudy’s death, Lucca felt distant from everything. Drowning in cold water, or maybe even ice, surrounded by blue. He found himself crocheting a lot, making enough small blankets for every baby in the neighborhood and then some. Lucca found himself often thinking of that day in Rudy’s room, when he’d turned Rudy’s yarn red. Every time he touched yarn, he’d try to will it to change again.

It wasn’t until a pretty contentious night when Monty had been rougher with Lucca than necessary, that Lucca managed it again. He’d sat on his bed after Monty left, staring at the blue curtains that had replaced his old ones. Being back in his room was odd: there was talk of moving Lucca to a different room, but Monty decided it was too convenient having the nursery attached to his room.

Lucca didn’t feel haunted in his room as often as he expected. In fact, there was something oddly comforting knowing that Rudy had felt safe enough to do what he did in Lucca’s room. Maybe that was twisted, but Lucca took solace in it. He thought about Rudy’s curly fro, the way it outlined his head like a halo on the ground.

Looking at the blue curtains, Lucca imagined them the same dark brown—almost black—of Rudy’s hair. Quicker than before, they turned. Lucca smiled, imagining them with a curly pattern. This one was harder, but Lucca realized how easy this whole thing was once it turned. The problem was he was trying to will the curtain to change; the second he realized they already were the way he imagined—that he had already changed them and it was a matter of seeing it—did he understand what Anya had tried to tell him.

Lucca changed the curtains back, smiling to himself.

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“You, of course, are well within your rights to do that,” Dr. Lawson said, folding her hands over the notebook in her lap. “I’ve appreciated the time I’ve had helping your family grow.”
“And I thank you for all that help,” Monty said, his perfectly fake smile glued to his face.

“I do hope you reconsider where this path will likely lead,” Dr. Lawson replied, giving Lucca a wary glance. “For the sake of your family’s happiness.”

“I’ll decide what will be best for my family’s happiness.” The polite pretense was gone from Monty’s voice, and he stood up, gesturing for Lucca to follow. “Let’s go, Lucca.”

Lucca sighed, standing and giving Dr. Lawson a sympathetic smile before following Monty. The New Year had begun with declarations and changes; as New Years were ought to do. The first of which was Monty’s declaration that Lucca’s depression had reached a critical level. Lucca hadn’t thought it that bad, but it also led to Monty’s decision to change Lucca’s counselor. And since Lucca was going to be a new patient, it meant it took almost two months before he could see most of his new doctors.

The jarring aspect of it was that Monty decided that Lucca’s counselor would be someone at the local Reprogramming Center. What was even more jarring was the fact that the closest Center was the one in New Jersey that Lucca’s mother had called home for the last decade. That was if they ignored the one in New York, which Monty absolutely refused to entertain: Chelsea told Lucca one day that the New York Reprogramming Center had rejected a lot of Monty’s research, and utilized a lot of “progressive” treatments that Monty disagreed with. The biggest being their refusal to lobotomize their patients.

Lucca was sure that all of this meant that Monty was considering a lobotomy. He wouldn’t say it, but Lucca could feel it in his air. The way Monty instructed Chelsea who to call for his new doctor appointments, the way he forced Lucca to have to report his moods to Chelsea every two hours—which she wrote down in a notebook Lucca wasn’t allowed to see—and the way Monty had gone out of his way to keep Lucca away from Gabby as much as he could.

The latter of which had concerned Lucca the most: he immediately thought of Rudy not allowed near Nathan. It was easier for Lucca, he felt, since Gabby had moved to solids and only need milk to supplement her meals instead of being the primary source. Chelsea had even stopped letting her nurse from Lucca on those rare occasions she was picky, saying that Monty had the waitstaff watching them closer now than ever before. It was then that Lucca realized what Monty had to be intending to do.

Which was why Lucca wasn’t surprised that Monty had scheduled a doctor’s appointment in New Jersey hours after his last meeting with Dr. Lawson. Monty hadn’t told her beforehand that he was switching counselors, though she seemed to expect it. It was obvious she was still annoyed, but there was nothing she could do to stop him.

Just like how Lucca couldn’t stop Monty if he was set on this lobotomy.

“It’s really not that far,” Monty said, getting into the car after Lucca was settled in the passenger seat. “Not even an hour out. And it’s only temporary, Lucca. No need to get down about it.”

Lucca didn’t answer, immediately turning to watch the building as Monty pulled out of the parking lot. Lucca wasn’t particularly down about it, but he didn’t care to fake not being detached from it all. Monty chatted the entire time, talking about how surprising it was that the weather was already warming up and how exciting this summer was going to be with a toddler. Monty talked about taking Gabby to parks she was now big enough to play in them, and about taking a break from work to spend time at the beach house. Lucca couldn’t help but perk up at that: a few weeks at the beach sounded nice.
They hit a bit of traffic crossing state lines, and it took about an hour for them to get into town. Lucca hadn’t been in the area since that day Devon had taken him to see his mother. Lucca turned his thoughts away, not wanting to think of Devon or his mother or that day. By the time Monty had pulled into the parking lot of the Reprogramming Center, Lucca had managed to turn his thoughts to Chelsea’s new gardening project: a vegetable patch grown from scratch. Lucca was sure it was going to be a disaster, but even he had to admit it would be fun to watch her try.

The door opened on Lucca’s right and he jumped. He looked up at Monty, who was giving him a gentle smile.

“Spacing out there?”

Lucca shook his head, climbing out of the car.

“I was thinking about that vegetable garden Chelsea wanted to do in the backyard.”

“Oh, she was saying something like that the other day.”

“She wants to get seeds and try it that way. I told her to buy some vegetable plants that’ve already sprouted, but she doesn’t want to do that.”

Monty hummed, turning to lead Lucca to the building. Lucca looked up at the white building, remember the joy he used to feel being brought here. Back when visits here meant he got to see his mother. Now, all he felt was dread in his stomach. There wasn’t anything good awaiting him inside.

The waiting area was empty. It made sense: it was a Tuesday mid-morning. Most people were at work or out running errands. Lucca wondered if maybe Monty was ashamed of having to bring him here. Maybe that was why he took off work for this. Hardly seemed worth it to Lucca.

“Fifth floor,” the receptionist said, pointing towards the staircase to the left.

“Thank you,” Monty said to her. He turned to Lucca and held out his hand. Lucca stared at it for longer than he should of. “Come, Lucca.”

Lucca glanced at the receptionist, who had turned back to a book she was reading, before taking Monty’s hand. Monty immediately pulled Lucca forward a bit, adjusting his hand so that he was gripping Lucca’s wrist. Hard. Lucca tensed as panic ran through his veins. Monty was making sure he wouldn’t run. Why?

Lucca waited until they were in the quiet safety of the staircase before speaking.

“Monty, that hurts,” he tried, keeping his voice low so it wouldn’t echo up the stairs.

Monty simply hummed again; an acknowledgement that Lucca was heard but no adjustment made to show he cared. Lucca felt sick. There were signs on the stairwell at every floor. The second floor was the intensive care unit. Lucca knew that it was a less threatening way of saying it was for the people who were a danger to themselves. They were high enough so as not to disturb the general counseling happening on the ground level, though not high enough that a dramatic jump out the window would kill them.

Vic had told Lucca that the Reprogramming Centers operated in a way where the higher up you were, the more in danger you were. The third floor was labeled “women’s therapy.” For the women who just needed “reminders,” Vic had said. The fourth floor read “behavioral therapy.” That was the floor Vic had spent a few months at.
Lots of isolation, lots of prayer, and lots of hungry nights. That was what Vic had said about it when Lucca asked. This floor was used to break patients. Tear them down so they could be built up into the perfect broodmares the Nation could ask for. Vic said he did break. Not in a way where he believed what he was being told, but in a way where he realized that fighting wasn’t going to end well for him. Lucca was reminded of Dr. Lawson’s warning.

You’re the only who suffers thinking like that, Lucca.

When they got to the landing of the fifth floor, Lucca jerked back. This was the floor his mother had stayed. He never saw her on this floor, but he knew it because his mother had once complained about having to go up the stairs after seeing him. The sign leading to the door read “family planning.” And the sign pointing an arrow up the last flight of stairs simply read “recovery.”

Family planning basically meant that the Center was giving up on trying to break you, and the process towards a lobotomy began. Recovery was where patients stayed after the lobotomy was performed. These were floors Lucca didn’t want to be on, and yet here he was.

“What’s wrong?” Monty said, pausing with his hand on the door. His grip tightened on Lucca when he stopped moving. “You’ve been behaving so well.”

“Isn’t counseling on the first floor?” Lucca asked. Because his heart was racing and his ears were ringing and he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Monty gave him a patient smile and tilted his head to the side.

“What makes you think that?”

Lucca started to, stupidly, say because that’s what the signs down there had said before remembering that he wasn’t supposed to be able to read. Then he remembered that Rudy wasn’t around anymore to possibly get in trouble for teaching him, and thought to say it anyway. Then Lucca realized that admitting how he learned would mean Monty would take his notebooks and the Bible Derek gave him away. And Lucca didn’t want that.

“Because that’s what my mo—” Lucca started, before remembering he didn’t want to talk about his mother. “I just heard that.”

Monty blinked at him a few times, before taking his hand off the door handle and turning fully towards Lucca. He didn’t loosen his grip on Lucca’s wrist at all.

“Your counseling doesn’t start for some time,” Monty said, his voice sweet. “I actually have a surprise for you up here.”

There was no way that was a good thing.

“Do I have to?” Lucca asked, his voice breaking.

“Don’t be silly, Lucca,” Monty said, turning back to the door and opening it.

The hallway was quiet, despite the doctors and nurses walking around in scrubs. Monty took the lead again, heading right and then turning down a very long hall. Two nurses stopped to greet him, calling him by name. They knew him. And not in the way someone might speak to someone they knew of, but rather in the way of someone they’ve obviously met numerous times before.

Halfway down the hall, Monty stopped at a door and pulled a badge out of his pocket. He pressed the badge against the lock, and it beeped open. Monty had clearance here. Before Lucca thought
about straight fighting, Monty tugged him inside the room.

The room was dark, the lights snapping on as soon as Lucca stepped in. He blinked against the florescent lighting, felt Monty let his wrist go, and then heard the door shut behind him. When he turned, however, Monty wasn’t in the room with him.

Lucca’s heart dropped and terror tore through his body. He knew he didn’t have to try, but he twisted the door knob anyway. It was locked. Lucca was locked in. Monty had brought him here and locked him inside. He was so stunned that panic couldn’t settle in fully. He looked around the room, noting the small bed and the sink in the corner, and the white dresser against the wall. Everything was white: stark white. Sterile white.

Lucca turned back to the door, staring at it. Was this it? Did Monty just condemn Lucca to a lobotomy? This was how it was going to end? Without a warning or a conversation or anything? Just Monty dragging Lucca into a room until it was time for the doctors to come get him?

Lucca knew he was going to freak out once they did. And then they were going to have to sedate him. He hated being sedated. It wasn’t fair. If Monty just told him what was happening, he would have gone. Lucca was so tired of fighting. He didn’t want a lobotomy. But he would have done it if Monty told him that’s what was happening. Why did Monty have to be like this? Why was everything like this?

The door beeped unlock, and Lucca snapped to attention. He hadn’t expected the doctor’s that quick. He took a few steps back, wanting to prepare himself. They must know how anxious he got: they had to be preparing for his panic. They had to—

“Lucca?”

Lucca blinked, seeing not doctors in scrubs and white lab coats, but his mother. She seemed even shorter than she had the last time he saw her, though rounder in the face. Rounder overall, really. She was wearing linen pants and a loose shirt with slippers—all white. Her hair had grown into a large curly afro that seemed well maintained. There were lines under her eyes that Lucca was sure weren’t there before, with bags somehow darker than her skin.

“I never thought I’d see you again,” she said, walking forward and pulling Lucca into a hug.

Lucca was so stunned that he didn’t fight it, going into her arms easily. He looked over her shoulder, seeing Monty smiling at the door. Lucca wanted to kill him: why did he have to freak Lucca out like that if all he was doing was letting him see his mother? Why was Monty such a piece of shit?

After a few minutes of the hugging, Monty cleared his throat. Lucca’s mother pulled away, looking at him.

“We can only stay for a few minutes, Ms. Rutherford,” Monty said, ever polite. It was always jarring hearing Monty call her by his father’s surname. Especially since Lucca’s mother went back to her maiden name after his father’s death. “I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

“Okay, baby,” Lucca’s mother said, turning back to Lucca.

She watched Lucca, hand cupping Lucca’s face. Lucca watched Monty leave, that smug smile pissing him off. Monty thought he was doing Lucca a favor. He was likely proud of himself for this.

“I hate him,” Lucca muttered, his voice low.
“Never thought I’d hear you say that,” Lucca’s mother replied with a small smile.

Lucca looked down at her. Her smile wasn’t the energetic grin he remembered from his childhood; it was small and almost shy. Her eyes had dimmed, no longer bright with enough fire and energy. At the very core, she looked tired. Exhausted. Any anger from their last meeting left Lucca entirely. He thought he would hate her forever for choosing this over him. But now all he could feel was misery for what she was now: a shell of her former self.

“Mama, what did they do to you?” he asked, gingerly touching her face.

“They just cleared me for one more,” she said, tilting her head as if Lucca had asked a silly question. “I hope I can stop after because the last one was pretty rocky.”

Lucca wasn’t sure what she was talking about, and shook his head. She had said his name earlier; he was surprised that she remembered him. Lobotomies were always touch and go, and it was impossible to predict what a person lost with them. But even if she said his name, Monty could have told her before she walked in what it was. She might not still remember him.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked, shaking as he waited for her answer.

“Of course. You’re my baby, Lucca.”

Lucca sighed a breath of relief and tears stung his eyes. His mother patted his hand and nodded.

“I had another baby, but they took her away. Then I had one more. I’m not sure how long ago that was. But it wasn’t too long ago because my chest still hurts.” She dropped her hand to pat her chest, shaking her head. “One more they said. Just one more.”

Lucca didn’t know how to respond to that. He couldn’t even comprehend how long it’d been since he’d seen her. Was it two years? Three? Was that enough time for her to have had two children? Lucca now had siblings? Where were they taken away to? Would he never meet them?

Feeling lost, Lucca glanced behind him at the bed.

“Mama, do you want to sit down?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, baby. My knees hurt a bit.”

Lucca led her to the bed, sitting her down on the edge. He sat next to her, staring at the door. He never thought he’d see his mother again; this was surreal. He wasn’t sure he liked it: Monty wouldn’t do this for no reason. But Lucca had no idea what game he was playing. And he was disgusted that even now, Monty was using Lucca’s mother as a chess piece.

“You’re different, Mama,” Lucca said without thinking. No, he was thinking: just not about his mother. He was thinking of red-hot anger. Of blood.

“You too, baby.”

Lucca looked at her. She was looking at the door as well, tilting her head at it.

“They changed you.”

She nodded, then pointed to the door.

“He changed you.”
“Monty won my bid, Mama.”

“Right. Are you happy now?”

“Why would I be happy?”

“Isn’t that what you two wanted? To be together?”

“I—” Lucca cut himself off.

Their last conversation—argument really—came roaring back to him. He had said a lot of hurtful things to her. Things that, being in this moment with her now, he truly regretted. Maybe he had excused it, believing she wouldn’t remember it after the lobotomy. Wouldn’t remember him. Lucca knew nothing was a guarantee, but he had bet on that. Bet that they would never see each other again. Bet that all she would ever remember were these white rooms and doctors.

“I’ve noticed colors around people,” his mother started, jerking Lucca out of his thoughts. “It started after—I think—after I saw you. Last time. Do you remember last time?”

Lucca swallowed. “Yes.”

“No,” she said, looking up as she thought. “I saw it then too. Maybe I only really noticed it now. Usually, you have this orangey-yellow color around you. Like the sun. Monty’s is like this bluish purple. Yes. He had that even as a child.”

Lucca had no idea what his mother was talking about. Was this the lobotomy? It had her seeing colors around people? Lucca had heard of people losing words after lobotomies. Losing energy. Having difficulty remembering things. But he never heard of them suddenly being able to see colors around people. It sounded mad.

“But that day I saw you, your color was more red. Especially when you got angry at me. When I saw it change, I felt bad because I was the reason it turned. Red is a nice color because it’s life. It’s blood. All life comes from the blood of the womb. All life exists because that blood pumps through our veins.

“But red from anger is different. It robs life; it kills it. We are born of blood, but to bleed is lose life. I turned your bright colors to red; I robbed you of your life.”

“You didn’t do that, Mama,” Lucca said. None of this was making sense, but he wasn’t going to let her think his misery was her fault. “It wasn’t you I was angry with.”

“You said I was the reason you were miserable.”

Lucca’s heart ached. How many times since he last saw her did she replay his words again and again? How many times did she blame herself for his misery? In retrospect, she had probably been told that before Lucca had said it. Once she was found out, she likely had counselors and doctors admonishing her for hiding Lucca. Every time Lucca struggled in class or got a citation for missing meals, they probably bragged to Lucca’s mother about it. They must have told her it was her fault: that had she let them take him earlier, he would be good.

And Lucca had told her that they were right the last time he saw her. He confirmed her worst fears: that she had made a mistake trying to protect him. All she wanted was for Lucca to be happy and free, and he made her feel like a monster for it. Lucca was the real monster.

Lucca felt a hand touching his cheeks, and he jumped. He looked at his mother, her face blurry
from the tears he hadn’t realized were pooling in his eyes and dripping down his face. He moved, wiping them as he tried to will them away.

“Lucca,” she started, “I’m—”

“You were never the reason I was miserable,” Lucca said, shaking his head. “I never should have said that. I didn’t know who to be angry with, and you were just there, Mama. I’m sorry. I never should have said that.”

“You don’t blame me?” she asked, confused. “For everything?”

“No! I just wanted my mother back. But, Mama, they were never going to let that happen. They dangled us in front of each other to keep us in line. If you had given me up earlier, Mama, all that would have happened is we would have had less time together. It was going to turn out this way the moment they could use us as hostages.”

Lucca’s mother blinked, looking even more confused. So instead of answering, she just rubbed Lucca’s back while he cried. And while he cried, Lucca thought about it more, because everything did seem to happen at once. He never understood why his mother’s lobotomy was held off for as long as it was. Didn’t it make more sense to just do it right away so they could get more babies out of her?

But, Lucca realized as he thought of it, his mother had always struggled to get pregnant. She always said Lucca was her miracle child; when Lucca asked about his father years ago, she admitted that Lucca wasn’t conceived naturally. They had been trying, she said, for years to get pregnant and never did. Before his father was deployed, he saved a few sperm samples just in case. It wasn’t until after Lucca’s father had died that his mother turned to invitro. And even then, it had failed four times before she finally got it to catch. And she spent the entire pregnancy sure that she would end up losing him.

“You really are my miracle child,” she had said after patiently answering all of Lucca’s questions about what invitro was.

Lucca assumed that the Nation wanted his mother to have lots the babies, the same way the Nation expected it from him. Maybe they had been trying all that time to get her pregnant and weren’t successful until recently.

No. That wasn’t it. Lucca knew that the Nation wasn’t going to waste too much time and resources with invitro when there were plenty of people who can just get pregnant naturally in large quantities. It was easier to take surrogates away from their homes to be sold off to infertile families. It was easier to push fertile women towards marriage. It was easier place the difficult women and surrogates in Reprogramming Centers until they’ve had enough children to satisfy the Nation.

From what she told Lucca, his mother’s journey with invitro had been a long and arduous process. Lucca knew his mother was a fighter, but if the Nation really thought that she was capable of having a lot of children, they would have lobotomized her when she was younger and get her pregnant immediately. So why wait until she was close to menopause to finally go that route? And was it really a coincidence that it happened right before Lucca turned 18?

No. Lucca didn’t think it was a coincidence at all. And it was realizing that it wasn’t by chance that everything happened at once that Lucca realized the truth.

“Monty did this,” Lucca said. He turned to his mother, his eyes dry now. “Mama, what happened
with the last baby?”

“They took him away,” she said, giving him a sympathetic smile. As if it was Lucca’s baby that had been taken away.

“No. I mean, you said the last one was rocky? Do you mean the last baby?”

“Oh, yes. I was on bed rest pretty early on and my blood pressure got so high that they had to take him out early. I think they said I was barely 30 weeks.”

“When you get pregnant,” Lucca started, pausing because he wasn’t sure how to ask this. It was his mother, after all. “I mean, when they inseminated you—” This was disgusting.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “It was like with you. I told you how, right? The doctor has to get the egg ready and then they put it in me. They took out and froze a lot of my eggs and—”

Lucca stood up, his stomach roiling. She wasn’t being inseminated with donor sperm; she was getting pregnant with invitro. No Reprogramming Center would dedicate the funds to this. Not if they had a normally fertile woman they can easily just inseminate to get pregnant. So why was his mother here? Why was she lobotomized? She wasn’t like him; she wasn’t like the wives on his block who got pregnant without even having to try. So why was the Nation determined to force children out of her?

Unless it was to cover up a lie. Lucca remembered something else he had said to his mother when he saw her last: that she hid him so no one would find out that she was fertile. But she wasn’t; not really. With science and medicine, she managed one miracle. With even more time, she managed two more. It wasn’t necessary: it was a waste of time and money. But there was one person Lucca could think of who would be willing to convince enough people to allow this, all so Lucca believed that lie.

The same person who oddly enough had clearance at a Reprogramming Center he no longer worked at. The same person who benefited off of Lucca hating his mother enough to accept his role. The same person who believed in Reprogramming Centers, and lobotomies.

“I hate him,” Lucca said again, really feeling it this time. “I hate him. I hate him.”

“It’s gone red again,” his mother said, frowning. “Lucca, what’s wrong?”

“Monty is what’s wrong,” Lucca snapped. “Mama, I told him what I was, and he ran and told. He’s the reason they took me from you.”

“He was a child, Lucca.”

“He’s been pitting you against me since. He wanted me to hate you, Mama. He spent years pretending that he had nothing to do with this, but he did this. I blamed you for everything, and he played me like a fucking fiddle so I would turn to him. He beat me and raped me, and I still turned to him, Mama.”

“Why would he do all that, baby?”

Lucca went back to a moment he often wished he could forget. They were playing in Monty’s basement as kids, building a fort that only they were allowed in. Once the fort was finished, they crawled in and created secret words and handshakes so that anyone who didn’t know them couldn’t get inside. And anything said inside the fort stayed there.
It was after those rules were established that Monty told Lucca his secret: that he liked him. Really liked him. Liked him the way the boys at his school liked the girls around them. He said he imagined holding Lucca’s hand, kissing him, and dating him once they got older. Then he started crying, and Lucca had never seen him like that. Lucca didn’t think there was anything wrong with how Monty felt; it wasn’t like Monty was saying he was going to act on it.

But when Lucca tried to console him, Monty went on about how two boys being together was an abomination. That he was going to go to hell for it, and that he didn’t want to betray the Nation. Betray his father who fought in the war for our country. Betray his mother who was so wonderful that he should want to date a girl like her. When Lucca tried to tell him it was alright, Monty asked how Lucca could want to be around someone as disgusting as him.

Lucca had known only Monty growing up. His family helped his mother so much over the years as she struggled to raise Lucca without a man in a world that was increasingly making that difficult. He was Lucca’s only friend. So he told Monty that he wasn’t the only weird one: that Lucca was weird too. Monty was confused until Lucca explained. And then Monty even demanded Lucca pull his pants down to show him.

It was twisted how Monty loved Lucca. Twisted because as a surrogate, he’s not supposed to love Lucca. And yet in that moment, it was a saving grace. In that moment, Lucca had saved him from being what he feared he was: an abomination. And all Lucca had to do was lose his mother, his life, his freedom, his body autonomy—everything—just so Monty wouldn’t feel like a monster.

“He loves me,” Lucca said, understanding fully just how much. Monty didn’t just report Lucca and let the rest work itself out: he went out of his way to manipulate everything that had happened to Lucca since so that he can have his dream life with Lucca. “He loves me, Mama. And he couldn’t have me if I was a boy.”

His mother didn’t respond, her eyes distance as she turned back to look at the door again.

“I always knew that boy was trouble,” she said, her voice soft. For the first time, she sounded like her old self again. “I should have kept you away from him. I thought I was just being paranoid. I’m sorry, baby. And now he has you.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Lucca muttered.

“Lucca, please. They’ll do to you what they did to me if you fight him.”

“I’ve been nothing but good all this time and Monty still wants to give me a lobotomy. I’m damned no matter what I do.”

Lucca’s mother sighed, shaking her head. She was obviously at a loss of what to say. When he’d saw his mother last, she refused to submit. Lucca wondered if his mother understood then that she was damned no matter what she did. If so, now Lucca understood why she chose to go out the way she did. If the end result was going to be the same either way, then why not go out on your terms?

“I didn’t understand then,” Lucca told her, turning back to her. “I’m sorry, Mama. If I understood, I never would have said those things last time.”

“We can’t fault ourselves for what we didn’t know when we didn’t know them,” she said finally pulling her gaze from the door. “I wanted so badly to see you again, Lucca, but now I’m afraid to.”

“You’re not going to see me again.”

His mother nodded. Lucca now knew why Monty had done all of this. To prove a point: his mother
wasn’t as bad as he thought she would be. She was lucid. She had her memories. She could feel. She was still her. Just calmer. A bit slower. Not as angry. And seeing colors around people. But, at her core, still her.

Monty wanted Lucca to see that life after a lobotomy wouldn’t be as bad as he thinks it will be. That also meant that Monty wouldn’t bring Lucca back to see his mother. Lucca knew this was it. This would be the last time he would see her again.

And Lucca felt different than he did he the last time he thought he’d be seeing his mother for the last time. Before, his anger led him to feel happy that he would never see her again. And, in a vindictive way he didn’t want to admit, he hoped she would suffer knowing their last interaction had been so terrible. But all of Lucca’s anger was no longer directed towards her. And so all that was left towards what was going to be their last meeting—towards his mother—was sorrow.

“I had a baby too, Mama,” Lucca said, wishing he could tell her more. Wishing he had more time. “A girl. They named her Gabby. I feel bad because I know what’s going to happen to her, and there’s nothing I can do to help her.”

“Parents always try to save their children before saving themselves. And then wonder why they fail,” she said, her smile sad.

“Mama—”

“I should have been smarter. I just missed Nick so much, and all I could think about was having his baby so he wouldn’t really die. And when I had you, I never wanted to leave you. If I’d played my cards better in the beginning, I wouldn’t have had to rely on the Graysons as much as I did. You never would have met Monty. And then—”

“Mama—”

The door beeped unlock and opened. Monty walked in, a couple of doctors shadowing him from a safe distance. Probably here to collect Lucca’s mother. Lucca’s body went tense as he watched Monty’s shit-eating smile. He paused, watching them both before turning his smile to Lucca.

“It’s time to go now, Lucca,” he said, reaching out his hand to him. “Say your goodbyes.”

Lucca stood up, fury raging through his body. Lucca had thought that day at the cabin had been the worst of Monty’s betrayal; even worse than knowing Monty had turned him in when they were kids. But knowing just how deep that betrayal ran made him want to hurt Monty. Hurt him in all the ways he’d hurt Lucca over all the years. And then some. Lucca was sure that only Monty dying a slow and painful death would appease his anger.

Realizing that no one would deliver it unless he did something, Lucca took a step towards him. And was stopped by his mother’s hand on his wrist. He jerked back towards her, letting her pull him into her arms. It was like he was a kid again, needing his mother to patiently love him through a tantrum. His shoulders relaxed and when he returned his mother’s hug, tears burned his eyes.

“I’ll always love you,” she said in his ear. And Lucca felt that. A glimpse of the woman she’d always been. “I’ll always be thinking of you.”

“Me too!” Lucca said, a sob escaping his chest. “I love you too, Mama. I—”

Monty grabbed Lucca’s arm and pulled him away. Lucca thought to fight him, but the other doctors moved into the room then, surrounding his mother. They spoke to her in hushed tones, and
Lucca feared what they were going to do to her. He twisted towards her, but Monty’s grip held fast. In seconds, Monty had Lucca outside the room.

Lucca turned, his eyes meeting his mother’s one last time before the door shut between them. And only once he could no longer see her did Lucca let the tears fall.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was looooong! Haha. Editing it took forever!

I didn't intend, when I started writing this chapter, to make Monty's betrayal go this deep. Just in case I was being too vague in my writing: Monty convinced the Reprogramming Center to hold off on Lucca's mother's lobotomy. The education system in my world is also vague, but it's not rare for people to start training for careers in their mid-late teens. So instead of a nonsense US college system where you spend two years taking "gen ed" classes that have shit to do with your major, people can go into education programs at like 15/16 and begin training. They often finish around ages 20 (maybe more depending) since they can spend those years focusing on the one subject they're going to have a career in. This happens a lot in fields like technology, science, visual media, and, you guessed it, medicine.

Meaning Monty has been training to be a doctor since he was a teenager. MEANING, while he didn't have the same pull he has now, he was able to convince the Reprogramming Centers to adjust their usual process in the name of "research." His mentors, who were intrigued by his hypothesis, would put in a good word for him until his research garnered enough respect for him to have the pull himself.

Lucca doesn't really know this, but Monty used Lucca as a case study. Part of that was using his mother to "motivate" Lucca to get with the program. IE, it was common for Lucca, when he slipped up, to hear his counselor comment that his mother hiding him for so long "ruined" him, and that was why she was going to be lobotomized. Especially when Lucca was younger, this would make him behave as he hoped his good behavior would prove his mother hadn't "ruined" him. It's a huge reason why he's so anxious; one little mistake, as far as he knew for most of his life, could be the reason his mother would be lobotomized.

When Lucca got a bit older, Monty purposely lied to Lucca to create animosity. Since he was able to put off Lucca's mother's lobotomy, the story became that she was the one fighting the program. That every time it looked like she'd behave, she'd decide to rebel. That she was choosing her lobotomy, essentially. This led up to the anger we see from Lucca early on in the story. Lucca, being young and not understanding, believed that his mother didn't love him enough to fight against her inevitable lobotomy. It felt like she was abandoning him.

I didn't really plan for that to be the case, but I started typing and here we are. I kept thinking of this whenever I'd get comments about how low Monty could get. I think, personally, that pitting a mother and child against each other just so you can f-ck the child is that low. But the next chapter is also a low for Monty, so I'll let you all decide which chapter you think is his lowest.
I will admit that the next few chapters are kinda long and rough. And then it gets a bit, well, I don't even know what after that. Next chapter is really rough. And long. Sooooo....

I'm posting it Wednesday! Lol. I'm not crazy busy this week, so I can manage that. And, since next week will be pretty uneventful, I decided to do another posting bomb, starting Sunday. That will allow for I think another week gap, and then I can do another bomb the week after my friend's wedding. Which, by the way, I just so happen to have off that week! I took vacation, not really paying attention that it's the week after my friend's wedding. But it works out because I can already feel like I'm going to need to recover from it. Ugh.

Yesterday was her bachelorette, and as a real life lesbian, I have to say that it's getting harder and harder for me to be around straight people and not lose my mind. Like, I had fun, but god damn are straight girls just so hard to connect to.

Also, I got my nails done; acrylics for the first time. I don't care how much I paid for them, I'm ready to take them off. I do too much typing with my hands for this to work. I don't know why I thought this was a good idea.

Thankfully, I have you guys to get me through these trying, heteronormative times lol. So please support my oppression by leaving me comments! I really want to see y'all's reaction to this lol.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Part two of the not-so-great-day-that-Lucca-is-having.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Stop that,” Monty told Lucca as he led him down the staircase to the first floor. Despite the harsh order, his tone was gentle and patient. As if he was a fucking saint. “She wasn’t as bad as you thought, was she?”

“That’s the only reason you let me see her,” Lucca snapped as they got to the landing on the third floor.

Monty paused, turning to face Lucca. He had that inquisitive look on his face; the one he used when he was in “doctor mode.” It made Lucca hate him more: he had destroyed Lucca’s entire life and was still treating him like a case study!

“I thought that for all of your good behavior lately, seeing her would cheer you up,” he said. “You used to love seeing her.”

“And you made sure that stopped, didn’t you?” Lucca growled.

“And now you can see that she’s doing well after her lobotomy,” Monty continued as though Lucca hadn’t said a word. “She’s not anywhere as bad as I’m sure you were imagining.”

“Because that’s what this is, right? You’re going to give me a lobotomy and you want me to be okay with it.”

Monty titled his head as though Lucca had said the silliest thing in the world.

“Do you think you need a lobotomy, Lucca?” Monty asked.

“It doesn’t matter Monty! If you want me to get one, then there’s nothing I can do! It doesn’t matter how many people you show me who’ve had one, I don’t want one! I will never want one! So stop trying to make me be okay with this!”

“I miscalculated. It seems your mother is still a source of negativity for you. These outbursts—”

“Fuck you, Monty.”

As soon as Lucca said it, Monty moved, pushing Lucca’s back against the wall. Lucca’s breath was heavy, and he glared up at Monty in defiance. Monty’s patience was wearing thin; it was obvious in the hard set of his jaw and the way his eyes bore into Lucca’s with enough fire to burn the entire building down.

“I’ve warned you before about disrespecting me, Lucca,” Monty said, the threat sending a shiver down Lucca’s spine. “I will discipline you once we are home. Until then, please remember that we
Lucca didn’t respond, just meeting Monty’s glower with his own. Monty didn’t seem to like that answer. He closed the little distance between them, his hand dropping from Lucca’s arm to the front of his pants. The movement surprised Lucca, and he broke their stare down to see what he was doing.

“Maybe you’d prefer I punish you now,” Monty said, his other hand moving to unbutton Lucca’s shirt.

Panic made Lucca reach down to stop Monty’s hand. Anyone could come up and down the stairwell. He didn’t want anyone seeing him get groped like this. Monty would easily get away with it once he let whoever saw them know he was disciplining Lucca. Lucca couldn’t deal with that embarrassment. So he shook his head frantically as he tried to stop Monty.

“Monty, please no,” he said, his shirt halfway off his shoulder. “Please. I’m sorry. I’m sorry!”

Monty’s hands stopped and he took a step back from Lucca. Lucca didn’t move, just trying to breathe and calm his nerves.

“You will not speak again until we’re with your counselor and he addresses you,” Monty declared. “Do you understand, Lucca?”

Lucca nodded, too afraid of breaking Monty’s rule with a verbal affirmation.

“Adjust yourself.”

Lucca quickly moved to rebutton his pants and fix his shirt. When he was finished, Monty pulled out a handkerchief from his back pocket and handed it to Lucca. Lucca obeyed the silent command, using it to wipe his face of his tears. He handed it back to Monty when he was done, keeping his gaze down as he awaited the next instruction.

“Let’s go, Lucca.”

This time, Monty continued down the staircase without grabbing Lucca’s arm. He knew he didn’t have to worry about Lucca disobeying him again. And to prove him right, Lucca quickly followed him.

By the time they made it the ground floor, and down a few halls to the door they were looking for, Lucca had managed to calm himself down. He thought of his mother’s last remark about being smarter. Lucca wasn’t being smart. Even if a lobotomy was coming, he had to play this right. Somehow.

Monty opened the door, gesturing for Lucca to walk in before him. Lucca hesitated, just slightly, before obeying. Lucca came up short, however, when he saw Devon sitting at a desk in the middle of the room. He heard the door shut behind him and knew he was trapped. He felt Monty place a hand on his lower back, trying to push him forward.

“Go sit down, Lucca.”

Lucca couldn’t do this. He wasn’t sure why Monty kept doing this: just like that day at the cabin, he couldn’t let Lucca rest. Couldn’t give Lucca a break. It had to be one thing, then another, then another. Lucca thought back to that day, to his heart breaking over his mother. To getting sedated and waking up in a strange room. Having to spread his legs for Devon like a good bitch.
And that was when Lucca felt his breath come up short.

“No,” he whispered, taking a step back as his chest got tighter and tighter. He couldn’t breathe. “Please, no. I can’t. Please.”

“Lucca, calm down,” Monty said, his voice firm. “Just go—”

“I don’t know what this is, but I can’t,” Lucca said, pulling away from Monty and backing away. He closed his eyes, trying to block it all out. Make it go away. “Please. I can’t. I can’t.”

“Lucca.”

That was Devon. He was close. Lucca’s eyes snapped opened, hating that Devon was right in front of him. He reached out to touch him, and Lucca recoiled against the wall, trapped.

“No,” he moaned, pressing himself against the wall for any level of distance. “Please! Please don’t touch me!”

“Okay,” Devon said, straightening up and held his arms up as if under arrest. There was movement next to him—Monty must have walked closer—and Devon waved his hand before turning back to Lucca. “I won’t touch you, Lucca. Okay? But you need to calm down.”

Lucca shook his head, his head getting light. Why couldn’t he breathe?

“Do me a favor, Lucca,” Devon continued, moving to the side a bit. “Tell me five things you see.”

Lucca recognized the grounding method immediately. And he really didn’t want to play. He felt like he was going to die, run out of air and die right there, and Devon wanted him to count? But Lucca knew, rationally, that this particular technique did help. So he looked around, then let his eyes settle on Devon.


“Monty. I see Monty.”

“Three more things, Lucca.”

“The desk. The window. And—” Lucca’s eyes drifted to the bookshelf behind Devon’s desk. “The Bible.”

“Good. Now give me four things you can feel.”


“Oh,” Devon said, looking up. “The aircon’s on. Very good, Lucca. Can you tell me three things you hear now?”

And they continued like that, Lucca’s breathing slowing as he tried to listen and hear something. He gave his breath, and the ticking clock on the wall and the heels from someone walking by. When it came to what he could smell, he cited Devon’s musky cologne and coffee. And when it came to taste, Devon gave Lucca a piece of chocolate. After Lucca finished it, Devon had Lucca take a few deep breaths in and out, and Lucca felt a bit more human again.
“There we go,” he said, walking over to the desk. Lucca was grateful for the distance. “Lucca, do you mind sitting down? The sooner we get started, the sooner this can be over.”

Lucca wondered what Devon—or Monty—would do if he refused. Or at least asked if he could keep standing. But after his panic attack, Lucca did feel tired. Sitting down felt like a good idea. So he forced his legs to move, stiff as they were, until he could sit down in one of the chairs in front of Devon’s desk. Only then did Monty join him at one of the seats next to him.

“Well, that was rather dramatic,” Devon said, trying to make light of what had just happened. “I take it Monty didn’t explain why you were brought here, then?”

“He said I was getting a new counselor,” Lucca said, lamely.

Devon looked at Monty with a bit of chagrin before addressing Lucca.

“I’m not a counselor, am I?”

No. Devon, Lucca remembered, was a surgeon. When they ran into Anya, she’d mentioned that he was cleared to do C-sections. And before he could even pass that, he had to get his license.

*And in order to get his license, he has to learn how to do lobotomies.*

Lucca took a few deep breaths in and out. Devon sighed, turning to Monty. Monty had been watching them like a hawk, as if preparing for something. He shook his head at Devon.

“I’m deferring to you,” Monty said. “You have more experience with this than I do.”

Lucca blinked. If Monty had said that to anyone else, his voice would have been overly polite to hide the mockery. But there was none of that in his voice: Monty was genuinely admitting that someone knew more than he was. That *Devon* was more knowledgeable than he was. This, Lucca realized, was what Monty sounded like when he actually respected someone.

How odd.

“Monty brought you here,” Devon said, grabbing Lucca’s attention, “because he wants you to get an elective lobotomy.”

Lucca blinked, trying to will his brain not to disassociate. He needed to be present for this. He couldn’t run away.

“Since I have experience with this, he asked that I do it.”

Lucca nodded. “Okay.”

“Lucca,” Monty started, turning to face Lucca.

“Monty,” Devon said, grabbing his attention.

They stared at each other for a moment, communicating silently. Monty turned back into his seat, and Lucca realized that Monty wasn’t going to coddle Lucca through this. Lucca wanted to thank Devon for that: Lucca’s hatred for Monty was too high at the moment to accept his affection calmly. If Lucca had panicked earlier, he would have a full-on meltdown if Monty started his bullshit.

“So,” Devon said, continuing, “this means we have to go through a process. The Nation only likes to use lobotomies in extreme cases, so there’s a lot of assessment that has to be done to deem it
“Okay,” Lucca repeated.

“So we’re going to do the first assessment today. Before my one-on-one with you, Lucca, there are a few things we need to address from your last physical.”

Lucca blinked. His physical had only been a couple weeks ago. His new physician—a man, Lucca had noted—was rough though thorough. He had recommended massages and a chiropractor for Lucca’s tight muscles. Odd, but Monty had scheduled the appointments immediately.

“The most concerning thing was your weight. Patients tend to lose weight during the recovery period, and the last thing we need is you losing even more weight. But I don’t think we’ll need to worry about that considering the results of your pregnancy test.”

Lucca started to disassociate again, but pinched his fingers to stay present.

“I’m pregnant?” he asked.

“Yes. Obviously, you’ll need to see your obstetrician to confirm how far along you are, which will be important to scheduling this. Our goal, Lucca, since you’re pregnant, is to time this so that you can get the lobotomy a few days after you give birth. Since you’ll already be in the hospital for that, it’ll make this whole process easier.”

Lucca wanted to cry. He hated this. He hated having to sit here and listen to this. But there was nothing that he could do. So he just nodded.

“Okay.”

Devon gave him a sympathetic smile. “Good. Monty, if you would mind stepping out while I do Lucca’s assessment?”

Monty raised an eyebrow at him. “Is that necessary?”

“Aside from his—completely justified—panic earlier, he’s been well-behaved. I think it’s safe to say that it’ll be hard to assess him as benefitting from a lobotomy like this. I need to talk to him without him fearing you hearing his responses.”

Monty sighed, but nodded. “I’ll be right outside, Lucca,” he said before leaving the room.

There was a moment of silence between them once the room was empty. Lucca hoped that Devon wasn’t stupid enough to think that Lucca would sing just because Monty wasn’t in the room. Devon finally leaned back in his seat, letting out a heavy breath.

“God, he’s a pain in the ass,” Devon said, pushing his papers to the side and rolling his eyes. “Calling me all the way out here for this shit. The only reason I agreed is because Anya has been worried about you. She told me she saw you last year, but she hasn’t heard from you since. She thought maybe Monty killed you or something.”

Lucca blinked at him. Was he supposed to answer that?

“And I see Monty still coddles you,” Devon continued when Lucca didn’t respond. He shook his head. “I don’t know why he goes through all that trouble. Anya said you were pregnant when she saw you. So you had the baby?”
“A year ago,” Lucca replied lamely.

“And you’re just now getting pregnant again? Monty sure is taking his sweet old time.”

“I had a miscarriage.”

Devon’s shit-eating grin fell off his face and he nodded solemnly.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. “He did say you went through some trauma recently. Wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

“Your file says your neighbor—another surrogate—committed suicide in your room. Dramatic. Surrogates do shit like that then wonder why we treat you like children.”

“He did it because he didn’t want to get a lobotomy.”

“Oh, was that why? Did he tell you that? Do tell.”

“Would it kill you to not be a piece of shit for two seconds?” Lucca snapped.

“There we go,” Devon said, smirking. “Some fire. I knew you had it in you.”

“Is everything a joke to you?”

Devon tilted his head, his face serious as a heart attack. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, it is.”

Lucca blinked at him. “Must be nice to not have a care in the world.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that…”

“I would. And I did. So I assume Monty reached out to you because he knew you’d sign off on this. Did we kill enough time for us to get this over with?”

“I missed that jaded attitude of yours,” Devon said, closing his eyes as if hearing something pleasant. “Reminds me of my Anya.”

“I don’t know what she sees in you,” Lucca said rudely.

Devon opened his eyes, looking up at the ceiling for a moment. The silence was surprising, and so Lucca didn’t say anything to fill it. It didn’t last too long anyway; Devon sat up in his seat, turning his gaze back to Lucca.

“Anya and I are playing,” he said, going into an explanation Lucca didn’t really want to hear; his comment had been rhetorical. “We met years ago in Faust City, actually. I was attending a diplomatic medical conference with my mentor at the time; the sort of thing she had to pull a lot of strings to allow me in considering how young I was at the time. And there was Anya, hosting the event with the grace of a goddess. Afterwards, she admitted to me that she didn’t care much for hosting events with the Nation, but it was her job. We got to talking and exchanged, well, numbers if you will.”

“I don’t care how you two met,” Lucca said, already tired of this story.

“You should. Anya and I play a game here: a game where she’s my pretty little wife and I’m her domineering husband. It’s not real; even without her powers, Anya is a ball of rebellious energy.
She came here with me so she could do something on her own for a change. I gave her that freedom by keeping her secrets. And we play house while none the world is wiser to our lie.”

“So you get off on her sexually dominating you,” Lucca said, bored. “You’re not that special; couples do that all the time. Chelsea says there’s even clubs for it.”

Devon watched Lucca, smirking at him. Lucca could tell he misunderstood something. And Devon thought it was hilarious.

“Domination,” Devon said, “and sadism are two different things. Most men who enjoy one often have the right mindset for the other, but I don’t much care for domination honestly. I don’t get off on making someone break the way Monty does. Rather, I just like watching someone hurt.”

Lucca looked away, trying not to remember how Devon seemed to enjoy hurting him when he fucked him. Lucca assumed it was a thing for all men in the Nation: they got off on being more powerful than women and surrogates and children. They enjoyed being on top and the one in control. Lucca knew that was what Monty enjoyed.

But liking to actually hurt someone was something entirely different to Lucca. Foreign. Monty, and Lucca was sure most men, simply didn’t care if their actions resulted in pain. But indifference to pain as a possible consequence to their actions is different from going out of the way to cause pain to someone.

“And my Anya,” Devon said, seeing Lucca catch on, “loves it when I hurt her.”

“You’re sick,” Lucca said, shaking his head. “The both of you. She wouldn’t love it if it were real.”

“And that’s exactly why she loves it. Because it’s not. And if it ever went too far, she could pack her bags tomorrow and go back home where no one could ever hurt her again.”

Lucca couldn’t help the bit of disdain that blossomed in his chest hearing that.

“Must be nice,” he repeated.

“It is. Unfortunately, it will be coming to an end soon.”

Lucca looked back up at him. “Why? Did you go too far?”

“No. Or maybe I did. I’m not sure who we can really blame for this, though I put it on her. Anya’s pregnant, you see.”

Lucca blinked. Devon made a show of looking for surrogates so he could get close to Lucca. Anya had a job. A career. Her own business. None of which would be possible if Anya were fertile. Lucca took a sharp intake when he realized the implication.

“She’s undocumented.”

Devon spread his hands in a lazy admission.

“Not necessarily undocumented. She has papers; they just might not have her real last name on them. And her fertility status is forged. That’s all.”

“If the Nation finds out she’s pregnant—”

“Yes, thus why I said our little game is coming to an end.”
Lucca sat back in his seat, his mind racing. If the Nation found out, that meant they would take her as soon as the baby was born. Tests would be run to see if the child was a one-time miracle or proof that her documents were falsified. If the latter, she’d become a warden of the state: sent for reprogramming where she’d give birth via insemination. Her marriage to Devon would be annulled, assuming he doesn’t get brought up on charges of forgery. He was a doctor after all, so if anyone had the connections, it would be him.

They were both fucked.

“So what are you going to do?” Lucca asked.

“I’m going to report her,” Devon said. “Conveniently right when I do, Anya will disappear. My tale of being lied to by my foreign wife will serve as a warning to anyone looking to settle down with someone from Faust City, and Anya will go home to her family to raise our child.”

“You’d abandon your child?”

“I will join her in death.”

Lucca felt his brow furrow in confusion. He’d kill himself? That didn’t sound like Devon. But the patient look on his face made Lucca think that wasn’t what he meant. If Anya could fake her fertility documentations, how hard would it be for her to fake a death for a man grieving the loss of his lying wife?

“And you call us surrogates dramatic,” Lucca said.

“I was coming from a place of admiration when I said that.”

“Was there a point to hearing you talk so much?”

Devon smirked again. “It’s a warning, Lucca. We’ve only just now found out. And while Anya will always have her connections here, she’s going home soon. And with this lobotomy Monty wants you to have, you’re about to be out of time on both ends. So if you have any phone calls you need to make, you need to do it fast.”

Lucca blinked. He had almost forgotten about telling Anya he would call her. Lucca wasn’t sure if he wanted to admit it, but having Gabby made him completely throw away any thoughts of leaving. Especially now knowing just how far Monty’s love went. Would it be possible to take her too?

“That’s really,” Devon said, when Lucca didn’t answer, “the only reason I agreed to come. When I told Anya what Monty wanted, she got really upset. You hadn’t called her, and she was worried you wouldn’t be able to soon. She’s on a time limit now, as are you.”

“I can’t leave Gabby,” Lucca said, his mind racing.

“Spiriting away a surrogate—a pregnant surrogate—is going to be no easy feat. We sure as hell wouldn’t be able to smuggle a child as well.”

“You don’t understand. I can’t leave her with Monty. He’s worse than I ever imagined. He’s evil.”

“Eviler than convincing me to rape you? And then lobotomize you years later?”

“He’s done even more than that,” Lucca said, shaking his head as he thought of his mother. “He destroyed everything I had just so he could have me. And he calls it love. He—”
“So he’s a man and you’re upset about it?”

Lucca turned a glare at Devon. Devon wasn’t fazed by it. He raised an eyebrow at Lucca, waiting. Lucca sighed.

“Is that why you’re so horrible? You believe all men are just like this?”

“I believe that any man raised in this society is going to grow up with a certain level of entitlement. And that to expect different from any of us is a waste of time. Sorry kid.”

“I’m not a kid.”

“Oh, please. Lucca—”

“Shut up,” Lucca snapped, waving a hand at Devon, imagining him gagged so he couldn’t speak.

And Lucca was met with silence. He thought for a bit on what Devon said; he couldn’t think that every man was like Monty. Most men weren’t so dedicated to destroying everything someone has just to control them. Sure, they were entitled. But Lucca couldn’t imagine Leo spending his entire life plotting to tear Rudy away from his family just so he could one day own him. There was something more to this. Something barbaric. Something—

Devon slammed his hand down on the desk, grabbing Lucca’s attention. He was glaring at Lucca, gesturing to his throat. Lucca stared at him, wondering what his issue was.

“What?” he asked. “Are you mad I told you to shut up?”

Devon rolled his eyes, gesturing more dramatically to his throat. Understanding dawned on Lucca as he remembered his first meeting with Anya. And then his second. And how he’d been practicing a bit trying to command things around him to change. He’d never tried something like making someone stop talking, but apparently, he just did it.

“Oh,” Lucca said, a shocked chuckle escaping him. “Can you not speak?”

Devon stood, angry. Lucca got up too, meeting his eyes. It was hilarious. He was sure Devon wanted to tell him off. Devon did like listening to himself talk. Lucca laughed, watching as he gestured for Lucca to undo what he’d done.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” Lucca admitted, still grinning. “I didn’t know I could. I—I’m not sure if Anya told you this about when she saw me last. She talked to me about magic, and I wondered if it was possible. I’ve never done this though, so I’m not sure how to reverse it.”

Devon raised his hands up dramatically, drawing another giggle from Lucca. This shouldn’t be as funny as it was.

“Maybe Anya can fix it for you,” Lucca said with another laugh.

Devon was beyond pissed now, walking around the table and coming close to Lucca. He grabbed his upper arm, his grip hard, and gestured to his throat. Lucca just shrugged.

“How would you explain that to Monty? You can’t if you can’t talk, right? Let go of me.”

Devon’s glare intensified, but he did drop his hold. Lucca put a few paces between them, thinking. He thought of his mother, and Monty and Gabby and Chelsea and Anya. He thought of a new life
in a city. He thought of staying and getting a lobotomy. He thought of hurting Monty; the best way to do it. He thought of hurting Devon; the best way to do that. He thought of the child he was currently pregnant with, and all of the possibilities.

And then Lucca made his decision.

“I don’t want to put Anya in danger,” Lucca said, walking back to his chair and sitting down. “Let her know that I hope her pregnancy is more joyful than mine will be.”

Devon narrowed his eyes at Lucca, but nodded. There was something sobering about the idea of Anya leaving. Lucca wanted to rely on her. He wanted her help. But it was as Devon said: they were both out of time. Lucca wasn’t going to put Anya in danger while she was pregnant. He didn’t want a lobotomy either, but he had a plan for that. Monty would give Lucca a lobotomy over his dead body. And in the meantime, Lucca would play around with his newly budding magical abilities.

Devon snapped at Lucca, then gestured to his face again. Lucca tilted his head, sighing. He waved his hand again and Devon jerked, reaching for his neck.

“Fucking Christ,” he muttered, rubbing his throat. “You think you can keep that trick quiet long enough to do this with Monty?”

Lucca shrugged, looking straight ahead.

“It was an accident. I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Well try not to accidently do that in front of him. Because if you do—”

“I know how to handle Monty,” Lucca snapped. “Are we done?”

“Smart-ass,” Devon said, walking to the door.

Lucca heard it open, with a few words exchanged between Devon and Monty. He kept his gaze straight, pretending to be dejected. He was sure Monty would believe it. At the very least, he needed Monty to think he was going to submit to this. At least for now. When Lucca hit twenty weeks, he would make his decision. It would end the same no matter what: it was just a matter of when.

“Over my dead body,” Lucca muttered to himself as Monty and Devon reentered the room to discuss his fate.

Chapter End Notes

Totally forgot I said I would upload a new chapter yesterday. I got caught up in some new moon rituals, so I apologize for the late update. Next update will be on Sunday as planned.

First, a note on this chapter: REMEMBER THAT THIS DOES END ON A HAPPY NOTE. I know that this chapter ends on a low (and the next one will too, ngl). But the dog days are coming to an end for Lucca. Just keep pushing through, everyone! I think the ending will make some of y’all very, VERY happy.
With that said, I created an upload schedule for the rest of this story since I said I wanted to have every chapter posted by the end of this month. For some reason, in my head, I thought there would only be, like, ten chapters after this one instead of, like, twenty. So that meant I have to do another posting bomb asap. Meaning....

NEXT WEEK IS ANOTHER POSTING BOMB! WOOT WOOT! Starting Sunday, I will be posting every day for the whole week. I love posting bombs; I felt like everyone else liked them as well. It's fun spending every day with my story. Now that it's over, it's not in my head as often as it was when I was writing it. So it's easy to feel distant from it. But posting daily really helps make me enjoy the story. It's fun.

Also, I finished my first outline of the sequel. I'm sort of excited to start writing it. I want to start now, but I need to do a few pre-story planning stuff before I can do it. If I can start before my friend's wedding, I think I can get through the first act before I have to slow down for wedding stuff. But, and I can't remember if I said this before, but I took the week after my friend's wedding off from work just to relax. So I'm hoping to get a LOT of writing done that week. That'll put me in a good spot with writing through September, so if I can get at least halfway through the second act by the end of September, I'll start posting the story in December. Reminder that since I plan on participating in NaNoWriMo, it means I'll be taking October and November off from this story to focus on another story.

Ideally, I want to see if I can get through the entire first two acts before I have to focus on NaNoWriMo. If so, then I think I could bang out the third act in December, and have the story done before the year is out. If that happens, that means I'd have written three (assuming I complete my NaNoWriMo project lol) projects in one year! Which is insane! Considering how the one I did this year is significantly more than I've done in past years, this is exciting! If I can say I wrote three stories this year, I might literally die.

From happiness, of course.

As always, please, please, PLEASE leave comments! They make me so happy! I'll see everyone Sunday to kick start our next posting bomb!
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

The final part of Lucca's shitty day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca was tired. He’d been tired on the entire ride home, and he was actually ready for dinner by the time they got home. Chelsea was brushing Gabby’s hair after a bath, it looked like, in the living room when they came home. She looked up as they walked through the door, her eyes immediately landing on Lucca. Lucca saw the sympathy in them; she knew what Monty’s plans were. Lucca didn’t feel betrayed, but he did wish she would stop looking at him like that.

“How did everything go?” she asked, her voice gentle as she picked Gabby up and walked over to them while Lucca and Monty hung up their coats.

“How did everything go?” Monty said, glancing at Lucca. “I need to address it immediately. Go to your room, Lucca.”

Lucca let out a sharp breath, annoyed, before heading for the stairs. As he reached the top, he glanced back down, watching as Monty took Gabby into his arms to greet her. She smiled and laughed as he lifted her over his head, and she looked so much like Monty in that moment that Lucca wanted to cry. How could something as beautiful as she was be created with a demon like Monty?

Lucca headed straight to his room, not wanting to see anymore. He glanced at the curtains, running over his plan again and again. It would be so easy. He could manipulate the curtains to do whatever he wanted now. It wouldn’t take long. He stared at the roof of his room: this would be the hard part. He typically only managed to make magic happen with soft materials. Roofs were unfamiliar, and he wasn’t sure how much practice he could get in the upcoming months.

He heard the door open and turned to watch Monty enter. He was tense, his face hardened and his jawline tight. He was going to punish Lucca, and Lucca wasn’t even sure what he’d done wrong this time. Monty met his gaze, his eyes burning with a silent rage that was Monty’s signature at this point.

“Sit down, Lucca,” Monty said, pointing to Lucca’s desk near his closet. “At your desk.”

Strange. If Monty was going to punish Lucca, it made more sense to do it on his bed. Lucca was sure he wasn’t going to like what was about to happen, but he sat down at his desk anyway, facing the wall. Monty walked up to his side, placing a notebook and pen down on the desk. Lucca stared at it, watching as Monty leaned over and wrote a short sentence.

I can read.

Lucca blinked at the words, his heart speeding up a bit. So Monty had caught his slip up earlier. Fuck.
“Can you read that, Lucca?” Monty asked, his voice deceptively pleasant.

“No,” Lucca lied. “I can’t.”

Monty leaned forward and wrote something else.

_I learned how to read._

“How about that?”

Lucca shook his head.

“No.”

Monty continued.

_I’m lying._

Lucca’s heart dropped.

“How about that, Lucca?”

“No, Monty.”

_I’m a liar._

“How about this?”

“No.”

“Really? Let’s try this then. How about this?”

_Intensive Care Unit._

Lucca blinked, shaking his head.

“Really? Not this either?”

_Women’s Therapy._

“I can’t, Monty.”

_Behavior Therapy._

“Not this either?”

“I can’t read it,” Lucca insisted.

_Family planning_, Monty continued writing.

“I don’t know what it says,” Lucca lied.

Monty nodded, standing up with a shake of his head.

“I’ve given you eight opportunities to tell me the truth and you’ve decided to lie,” Monty said.

Lucca shook his head, staring down at the notebook and all the words he could read. Despite how
terrified he felt, a bit of pride glowed in his chest. He could read the words. Some of them were hard, but he was able to sound them out in his head and understand them. He could read.

And Monty was about to punish him for it.

“Do you want me to punish you, Lucca?” Monty asked, leaning against Lucca’s desk.

Lucca shook his head.

“No.”

“Then why do you insist on lying to me?”

“You’ll punish me if I told you the truth,” Lucca snapped.

“So you’d rather go down with a lie?”

“Go down,’” Lucca repeated with a scoff. “Are you going to just kill me, now, Monty? Or do you just mean to break me? Now, with your child in me?”

“Did I not tell you before that—”

“Yes, yes,” Lucca said standing up. He headed for his closet, opening the door and reaching for the basket with his yarn. “You have no problems beating me even if I’m pregnant. I remember.”

“Watch your mouth, Lucca.”

“I’m already going to be punished,” Lucca said with a shrug as he put the basket down on his desk. “What more do I have to lose?”

Lucca reached into the basket, pulling out balls of yarn. He paused, his fingers touching Anya’s business card. He blinked for a second, slipping it into one of the balls of yarn before tossing that one to the side as well. Monty watched him quietly, analyzing. Always, always, always fucking analyzing. Lucca turned the basket upside down and watched as the notebooks Derek had given him fell on his desk.

“What the fuck is this?” Monty demanded, reaching for a notebook. He opened it, quickly turning through the pages. Lucca watched with satisfaction as Monty’s rage visibly grew more and more as he realized what he was looking at. Monty grabbed another notebook, glancing through it before turning a glare to Lucca. “Who gave this to you?”

Lucca shrugged, enjoying the anger that Monty obviously felt.

“I bet this is related to that Bible I saw you with, isn’t it?” Monty continued, putting the notebooks down to turn to Lucca. “So it was Vic? He gave you all of this?”

“No,” Lucca said, rolling his eyes. “Derek did. It was his going away gift to me.”

Monty didn’t believe that. Not at first anyway. But Lucca saw the moment, right before he opened his mouth to dispute that, where something hit Monty. Lucca hoped it was the connection he was trying to make.

“This was why you went running after him,” Monty said. Right on the nose. “He gave you this and you wanted to thank you, didn’t you?”

“Yup,” Lucca admitted.
“And where is Derek now?” Monty asked, the threat heavy in his voice.

Lucca shrugged. “Spain, I think? The man who won his bid was a diplomat, I believe.”

“How convenient. This would all be a lot to teach yourself.”

“Yeah, it was. Thankfully, Rudy helped me fill in the spots I was missing.”

Monty scoffed. “A dead bitch and a diplomat’s whore,” he said, unkindly. “Two surrogates I conveniently can’t touch. Amazing how that worked out for you.”

“I’m lucky it’s the truth.”

Monty glared at Lucca, and Lucca met his gaze steadily. It was beautiful watching him seethe in anger. Lucca didn’t care how Monty punished him; Monty would not win this in the end. Lucca had already made up his mind: he would take Monty’s dream away from him. It was just a matter of time.

Suddenly, Monty chuckled. He moved, picking up the notebooks and putting them in the basket. Next were the needles, and then the yarn and blanket that Lucca had been working on. Lucca frowned, though he didn’t protest. Crocheting had been one of the few joys he had. He had no right to demand Monty to let him keep it however. Not right now. Still, he felt his chest tighten when he saw Monty pack up the multicolor yarn he hid Anya’s card in.

*You’ve already decided not to call her,* he reminded himself. It was sentiment that made him want to hide the card to begin with. Or, maybe, he just wanted to keep one more secret from Monty. Just so there was *something* he didn’t know about.

“Do you need to go to the bathroom, Lucca?” Monty asked, his voice pleasant again. He straightened up, Lucca’s basket packed neatly on his desk.

“No,” Lucca answered, hesitantly. Why was Monty asking that?

“I think you should at least try.”

Before Lucca could argue, or even ask where this was coming from, Monty grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the room. Lucca fumbled over his feet, only getting his bearings once Monty practically threw him in his bathroom. Lucca watched Monty, who took a post by the door to monitor. Even if Lucca did have to go, there was no way he could with Monty watching him.

Lucca tried to tell Monty that, but he wasn’t having it. He insisted Lucca find a way to go. After what felt like a good hour—though was likely only about five minutes—of that, Lucca managed to relieve himself if only a little. And only after Lucca washed his hands did Monty seem satisfied. Lucca wasn’t sure what Monty had planned for him, but it couldn’t have been good if he thought Lucca needed to take a piss before it began.

“Now that wasn’t too hard, was it?” Monty said, condescension heavy in his voice.

Lucca simply glared at him, moving when Monty gestured for Lucca to return to his room. Since Monty didn’t give another order, Lucca settled into his bed, breathing to calm his pounding heart. He didn’t care, he told himself. He was going to power through whatever Monty had to give him. And if Monty’s beating caused Lucca tomiscarry, that was fine; it would just mean he would be able to act quicker than he thought. Lucca thought maybe it would be better that way, instead of waiting.
Monty walked past Lucca, however, to his desk. He grabbed the basket, before heading back to the door. Without so much as a glance behind him, he left, shutting the door behind him. Immediately after the door closed, Lucca heard the lock click in place. Lucca blinked, wondering if Monty really thought he’d try to run. Lucca wasn’t afraid of what was coming; he welcomed it at this point.

Lucca sighed, turning to look outside the window. It was too dark to make anything out. The weather would be turning soon, and the days would get longer. For now, however, all he had was the dull, red light of the lamps on his nightstands. Lucca wasn’t sure how long he sat on his bed, waiting. There was no clock in his room to check. Lucca wondered if Monty would be too angry if he laid down on his bed to wait. Then he wondered why he should care whether Monty was angry.

At one point, Lucca did lie down. And it was easy then to close his eyes and let his fatigue take over. When he woke up, he was sure only a few hours had passed, but someone was gently shaking his shoulder. Lucca blinked up, seeing Arielle. Her face was distant; a tad bit distressed. When Lucca sat up, she pointed to the small table in his room. There was a plate with a chicken salad and small sandwich.

“I’m not hungry,” Lucca said.

“Mr. Grayson said you’re not allowed to skip meals,” she said, her words devoid of all emotion. As if she was terrified of slipping up somehow. “He said you have to take your vitamins.” She hesitated, her face softening a bit. “I noticed they’re the prenatal ones.”

Lucca blinked at her, not in the mood for any of this.

“I’m not hungry,” he repeated.

“Mr. Grayson said I’m not allowed to leave here until you eat. A chaperone will be here tomorrow morning to attend to you. If he finds you’ve expelled the food in any way, then he said he will fire me.”

Lucca stood, confused. He was still groggy from his nap, but he could tell from the serious look on Arielle’s face that she was scared. Lucca wasn’t sure what job prospects she had, but she had to be making well enough to not want to leave. Right?

“Fine,” Lucca said, walking over to the table. “All he knows is how to threaten people.”

“What did you do?” she asked, wandering over near him. “I’ve never seen him so angry.”

“What? Is he yelling or something?”

“No. He doesn’t yell, does he? He’s just very polite. You know how he gets. Then he makes these threats and it’s scary.”

Lucca nodded, starting with the salad first. He fucking hated salads.

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said between bites.

“He didn’t even want me talking to you,” Arielle said, joining Lucca at the table. “He said you’re not supposed to have any interactions for a while.”

Lucca swallowed. “A while?”

“I think he means to lock you in here.”
Lucca blinked. As far as punishments go, wasn’t that pretty light?

“He doesn’t intend to make this easy for you,” Arielle said, probably gauging Lucca’s thoughts. “For example, I think it might be a while before you’re let out to go to the bathroom again.”

Lucca remembered Monty’s earlier insistence that he relieve himself. Oh. That made sense.

“I won’t crack before he does,” Lucca said, finishing the salad and moving on the to the sandwich.

“I don’t know if it’s about cracking. He said you needed some time alone to reflect.”

“He likes touching me too much. He’ll get over it in a few days and then decide to just beat me to get over all this.”

Arielle nodded, but looked unsure. If Monty really wanted to punish Lucca, he should have just beat him. But Lucca could handle this. Lucca was determined to get the last laugh in the end.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone. Just a reminder that today is day one of this week’s posting bomb! Woot! I love posting bombs. It means getting to check in every day to see how y'all are liking the story!

Don't think that Lucca's isolation will be pleasant just because Monty's not beating him.

Aside from the posting bomb, no new announcements this week. Please leave lots of comments and all that jazz! See everyone tomorrow!
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Isolation can really warp a man's perspective...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca hadn’t left his room in three months. And it wasn’t the walk in the park he had expected. The next morning once his imprisonment began, Lucca had to bang on the door to get someone to open it and let him out to pee. He was sure he would be forced to piss himself before the door opened and a tall man—a chaperone—stood there ready to escort him. Because, of course, he had to be escorted. And watched while he used the toilet. And showered.

He was only allowed out of the chaperone’s eyesight when he was in his room. And even then, the chaperone supervised Lucca’s meals to make sure he didn’t try to skip or make himself sick afterwards. Lucca took all of his meals in his room now, no longer allowed to family dinners downstairs with everyone else. Lucca thought he wouldn’t mind that, but by the third week, he was craving human interaction. Especially since his babysitter didn’t talk.

His doctor, also, started making house calls. Lucca was sure this was unheard of, but it was also Monty. All he had to do was tell his physician that he was in the middle of disciplining Lucca to get the man to check on Lucca at home. And he was even more brusque and brief than he was the first time Lucca saw him.

The days slowly got longer as spring crept in. By April, Lucca was sure he would go insane. And once May hit, Lucca needed out. Monty, however, had a system and stuck with it. Lucca still saw Monty every day. Not at first: Monty stayed away about three weeks before he entered Lucca’s room one night after dinner. Lucca had asked him if he was done with all this, and Monty had simply stared at him before grabbing and manhandling Lucca onto his bed. He fucked Lucca silently and roughly; the combination hitting Lucca harder than he’d expected.

Monty never said a word to Lucca. And Lucca did try to get a reaction. He’d challenge Monty, curse at him, apologize, and even beg after a while. But Monty had zero reaction: he would simply walk in every night, rip Lucca’s pants down, and fuck him like some toy who existed for that one purpose.

Lucca also wasn’t allowed out on Sundays to go to church. At first, Lucca was relieved; however, it eventually deepened the isolation he felt in his chest. It was so weird to see people—the chaperone, Monty, his doctors—still and yet get no interaction from them. It was like he was a ghost, unseen and unheard. Or, rather, an object; created to be whatever Monty wanted of him. Lucca found himself praying to God to move Monty to stop this. How long would Monty take this if Lucca was already nearing his limit?

~*~

Lucca hit his limit sometime around his 15-week mark. He wasn’t sure what pushed him over the limit. Lucca had lost track of the days and just knew that it was a weekend because Monty hadn’t
gone to work. Or, maybe he took off. Lucca had no idea, really. But it was mid-morning when Monty entered his room. Lucca had been kneeling by the side of his bed, praying. When he heard the door click open, he thought the chaperone was coming to escort him to the bathroom. Instead, it was Monty.

Lucca swallowed, watching with chagrin as Monty walked over to him and immediately grabbed his arm. In seconds, Lucca’s torso was thrown on the bed, his hips supported by the bed’s edge. Monty no longer faced Lucca when he fucked him: he always forced Lucca on his stomach, fucking him from behind. This time, however, Lucca couldn’t take it.

As soon as he hit the bed, he was moving to turn himself. Monty wasn’t having it, his hands strong as he forced Lucca back on his stomach and held him down. Lucca tried to push back on him, but couldn’t get any leeway.

“Monty, please,” Lucca started, trying in vain to pull away. “Please! I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I promise I’ll be good.”

Monty ignored him, his dick pressing against Lucca in seconds. *Shit.* Lucca wiggled, struggling to get away from Monty. Monty’s grip tightened on Lucca’s arms, drawing a cry of pain from him. Monty took advantage of it, shoving into Lucca in one rough thrust. Lucca tensed, Monty feeling too big all the sudden. Too much.

Monty was still for a few seconds, as if wanting Lucca to catch his breath. Once he started, however, he was relentless. His rhythm seemed to synch with Lucca’s heart, pounding against him with enough force to shake his entire being. Monty leaned forward, his hands falling by Lucca’s head. Lucca felt so small. His pussy too small to accommodate Monty; too tight to accept him. And on the bed with Monty over him, he felt physically small too.

Everything about him was too small for Monty. It was like Monty existed to overwhelm Lucca; to fill him up with too much. Too much of everything. Lucca panted, looking out the window, watching the white clouds move in the sky. He was so small.

Monty gave a particularly rough thrust and it hurt. And Lucca felt a moan escape his lips. Monty kept going, Lucca finding his hips moving back to meet him. Rough. Hard. Painful. Monty controlled how much this hurt. He could make Lucca feel good; he had in the past. But he could also make Lucca hurt. And Lucca wanted it. He wanted whatever Monty wanted to give him.

His dick twitched at the thought of it: of taking everything Monty had to give him. The good, the bad, the mundane, the exciting. He wanted all of it. He wanted Monty to remind him every day of how small Lucca was. Of how out of control he was. He was at Monty’s mercy, and he wanted to stay that way. In that moment, nothing felt more right.

“Thank you,” Lucca huffed, his voice small as he failed to catch his breath. Still, he had to say it. Again. And again. And again, and again, and again. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

Monty stayed quiet but seemed to react to that. He grabbed Lucca’s hips, pulling him back to meet his thrusts. Lucca relaxed, letting Monty take control. He was hitting Lucca much deeper now. It felt so good. Monty was rocking Lucca up and down his cock, taking only his own pleasure from Lucca. Lucca felt hot and he was hard, thinking only of how nice it was that Monty was taking what was his.

Monty delivered one rough thrust before stilling his hips, his dick filling Lucca up entirely. Monty grunted his completion, giving a few lazy thrusts afterwards before sliding out of Lucca.
completely. Lucca let himself slide off the bed until he was kneeling in front of his bed again, eyes closed as he caught his breath. He was still hard, still horny, still hot, and strangely happy.

Monty kneeled next to him, rubbing Lucca’s back. It was more affection than Lucca had received in months, and he couldn’t help the whimper that escaped his lips. When Monty took it one step forward and kissed Lucca’s forehead, he wanted to melt.

“Why did you thank me, Lucca?” he asked.

Lucca forced himself to sit up, Monty’s cum dripping down his thighs. God, that felt so nice. So right.

“I don’t know,” Lucca said honestly.

“Yes, you do,” Monty challenged, tapping underneath Lucca’s chin until he met his eyes. “Normally, you just apologize to me, or beg me to stop. So why did you thank me today?”

Lucca thought of everything that had happened over the past few weeks. Months. How lonely he’d been. How miserable. He didn’t want to keep doing this. He wanted this to stop.

“For punishing me,” he decided on.

“And why was I punishing you?” Monty asked.

“Because I’m an idiot,” Lucca said, easily. “Because I should have never taught myself to read. I have no right to want to be anything other than what I am. To want to be anywhere outside my place.”

“And where is your place, Lucca?”

“Beneath you. Under you. Smaller than you. Submissive to you. Always with you above me, Monty.”

Monty reached forward, stroking Lucca’s cheek idly. Lucca watched him, willing Monty to believe him. Because in this moment, Lucca believed it his own damn self. He wanted to fight it, but right now, all he wanted was to accept it. Live in it. Love it.

“Okay,” Monty said. He leaned forward and kissed Lucca briefly on his lips. Lucca was sure he would melt. “I love you, Lucca. I always have and I always will.”

Lucca knew that. Monty wouldn’t have punished him like this for so long if he didn’t. So he nodded, smiling.

“I love you too, Monty.”

And he meant it.

Monty finally smiled, nodding his head towards the bed.


Lucca’s smile grew as he climbed on his bed. He didn’t want to question anything right now: he just wanted to obey and be happy.
This was, surprisingly, a pretty short chapter. I don't think I wanted to dwell too much on this, though it is a bit of a breaking point for Lucca. Next chapter might make y'all cry for real. I'm sorry.

As always, please, please, PLEASE leave comments. It gives me life. Nothing helps me start my work days in a good mood than reading them tbqh! You all are awesome.

See you all tomorrow!
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

That's one plan out the door...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca rode the high of no longer being punished for as long as he could. He was still on probation, according to Monty. He was allowed out of his room at mealtimes and to sit in the garden as the weather turned nicer once Monty got home from work. He still hadn’t seen Gabby in the entire time, though. Chelsea had told him at lunch one day—when Monty had been too busy to come home and join them—that Gabby was walking more confidently now.

And she was speaking a bit. Mostly simple words: she called Chelsea “mama” and Monty “dada.” She could also recognize the names of a few of the maids, and could ask for milk or to be put down. And she understood what “no” meant pretty well. It hurt Lucca to hear of all the advancements she was making without him being around to see. But Lucca knew better than to show any emotion other than joy at the news.

Lucca didn’t see any of the surrogates until the Langston’s Memorial Day barbeque. He’d missed a lot: Milos had blown up since Lucca saw him last, and was just starting his third trimester. Which meant he was whiner than usual. Kingsley had apparently miscarried, and was pregnant again. No one was supposed to know about any of it, but apparently the Yukubus were close with the Kyles, so of course Nicolai knew. Nicolai himself had just found out he was pregnant, and was happy that this would likely be his last one. Lucca doubted that considering how easy his last one had been; it was likely he’d been deemed fit enough to have at least one more. Though, of course, Lucca didn’t want to spoil Nicolai’s joy. And Eli had, apparently, been allowed a break since the last one, and wouldn’t have to try again until the next year.

“So are you going to tell us what really happened?” Nicolai asked as Eli flipped Moira on her stomach after changing her.

“I already told you what happened,” Lucca said patiently, helping Tristian take big, foam blocks out of the toy chest in the nursery.

The surrogates were all inside with the children that would likely get hurt if they tried playing with Ron and the other big kids. Aside from Gabby—whom Chelsea only dragged outside so she could show off how well she was walking now—all of the babies and toddlers were with them in the Langston’s nursery.

The Langston’s nursery was much bigger than the one attached to Lucca’s house, though that was because it was really the den. It was also more open, with lots of padding and three huge toy chests filled with every child’s dream toy. There was also a rocking chair in one corner, and a small bookshelf against the wall by the stairs.

Moira was getting into the habit of rolling over to circumvent changings as she wasn’t a fan. Kingsley’s youngest—whom Lucca was surprised to learn was only three months older than
Gabby—was a shy boy who clung to Kingsley and wouldn’t let any of the other surrogates near him without crying. Greg and Natalie Roof’s son, Lance, who was about the same age as Moira now, was drawing on a coloring book with a green crayon. Once Moira was free to roam, she walked over to him, picking up a yellow crayon and joining him.

“You said you were sick,” Nicolai said, watching Moira and Lance from the corner of his eye. “For three months. And you expect us to believe that.”

“I got sick around the time I got pregnant,” Lucca repeated for the fiftieth time. “Monty wanted to be careful.”

“How nice for Monty to be so careful with you.”

“Monty is nice.”

“Now I know you’re lying.”

“Did you miss me that much?” Lucca joked, giving Nicolai a playful smirk.

“I did, actually,” he replied, his face serious as a heart attack. “One of us goes missing like that, who knows what they’ll be like when they come back. If they come back.”

Lucca felt his heart skip. Eli moved, rolling up the diaper and wipes from changing Moira and getting up to throw them out. Nicolai sighed, turning his gaze entirely from the children to look at Lucca. His eyes were heavy with slight bags under them. Lucca told himself they were likely due to how tired he must be this early in his pregnancy.

“Rudy’s gone, and I was just scared that you were next,” Nicolai admitted, his voice low so no one else heard them.

Lucca didn’t really have a response for that. Nor would he lie and say he wouldn’t be. So he just shrugged, rather lamely.

“I’m fine.”

“Lucca—”

“Can I tell you something?” Lucca said, watching as Eli found another coloring book for Moira, because she was about to rip the one Lance was using right from under him. “A little while ago, when I was feeling better, Monty fucked me, and it didn’t feel like it normally did.”

Nicolai raised an eyebrow, unsure.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, usually when he does it, it hurts and all I can think is how much I don’t want to be doing it. But I didn’t feel that way this time. I felt good. Like I liked it.”

Nicolai nodded, his eyes drifting off the side as if thinking of something.

“It hurts less when you stop fighting.”

“I never fought him.”

“Not physically,” Nicolai said, rolling his eyes. “And not him. All of this. When you stop fighting what you are. When you embrace it.”
“Oh,” Lucca said, thinking. “So this is normal?”

“Very.”

Lucca wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Despite how nice things were going, Lucca still had every intention on following through with his plan. He just didn’t feel anxious about it. Maybe there had to be a level of acceptance then. He wouldn’t be preparing for what he was about to do if he didn’t now embrace just what he was. Right?

“When did you stop fighting?” Lucca asked as Eli walked over and resumed his place next to them. Nicolai seemed to think about that, looking up at the ceiling.

“I don’t know. I guess when I got pregnant for the first time. There wasn’t much I could do to fight at that point.”

“You didn’t have to be,” Lucca said, thinking of the right words, “like, broken or anything?”

Nicolai’s eyes snapped to Lucca again, worry darkening his eyes.

“Lucca, what did Monty do to you?”

Lucca looked down, shaking his head.

“He didn’t do anything.”

“So he isolated you,” Eli said, somehow connecting the dots. “Like they do at the Reprogramming Centers.”

“And what would you know about that?” Nicolai asked him.

Eli shrugged. “What sixteen-year-old surrogate hasn’t done a stint in one of those places?”

“Oh,” Lucca said, understanding now. “Monty does work with the centers. That makes sense, then.”

“So what?” Nicolai said, visibly getting upset. “He just locked you in a basement?”

“No. I was in my room.”

“Lucca!”

“I’m fine, Nicolai. Please.”

Nicolai frowned, looking over at Eli for help. Eli just shook his head at him, and Lucca was grateful, as always, for him. Nicolai let out a huff, looking away for a moment. Lucca had to admit that it was nice, really, to see someone care so much about him. To get angry for him. Lucca hadn’t had that in a long time. It reminded him of how he felt when he learned about Rudy getting a lobotomy.

So, this is how it feels on the other end, he thought, bitterly.

Nicolai turned back to him, his face full of heat again.

“It’s not just that, Lucca,” he insisted, not dropping it. “You feel different. Distant. Like Rudy did before he—before he did what he did. If something’s wrong, you gotta talk to us, Lucca. You can’t
leave us like that. You can’t.”

Nicolai’s voice broke at the end, and Lucca had to look away. His gaze fell to Eli, whose sympathetic face matched Nicolai’s. Lucca had only thought of what it was like to love Rudy and lose him. To walk in and see him like that. To be angry for him and to mourn him. He’d forgotten that he wasn’t the only one Rudy had left behind.

And that thought made Lucca’s breath catch as he fought back the tears that were threatening. He shook his head, feeling terrified and alone and smothered and loved all at once. He didn’t want to do this; he didn’t want to share and be open with them. Not really. But it wasn’t fair. How Rudy left wasn’t fair.

Lucca had to throw out his plan: he couldn’t just kill himself like Rudy did. No matter how much he wanted to. He just couldn’t. And this meant he had to face what was going to happen. Because he wasn’t going to be dead before it would happen. And the high from being in Monty’s good graces melted away. It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair. He was so ready to do it. Why did Nicolai have to love him? Why did Eli? Why couldn’t Lucca just be alone so he could do it?

A tear escaped, and he immediately rubbed it away. If he was going to live, then he couldn’t keep this in.

“Monty’s making me have a lobotomy,” he said, his voice low and his words coming out in a miserable whine.

The tears really hit then, and Lucca couldn’t stop them. He scrubbed at both of his eyes, trying to get them to stop. Though he didn’t stand a chance of winning out over them when he felt Nicolai’s arms wrap around him in the tightest hug he’d ever felt. Eli rubbed his back, trying to calm him.

“You’re going to be alright,” Nicolai said in his ear. “No matter what happens, we’re going to be right here, okay? We’ll always be here.”

Lucca cried harder, wrapping his arms around Nicolai’s neck as he cried. Everything was ruined. Everything was wrong. But at the very least, Lucca knew he could believe Nicolai’s words.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t think I made it crazy obvious that Lucca was planning to kill himself. Except now he can't. Being loved is a bitch.

Next chapter is a fun one, but I honestly think Thursday’s is gonna fuck y'all up for real lol.

I’m extremely exhausted, thus why I’m not so chatty. I apologize. Please leave comments! I’m going to bed early so I can be rested enough to reply!
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Idle summer days...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Preeclampsia? Poor thing.”

Lucca leaned back in his chair, placing a hand on his belly. It was taking longer for him to show, so he only had the slightest of bumps. Still, he could feel little movements from the baby, and he was finding it difficult to breathe at times. His doctor had explained why at his last checkup, but Lucca just knew he didn’t have that same issue with Gabby.

It was a nice, summer afternoon. The men were away at their respective jobs, and the women were inside the Kyle’s house, making a get-well basket for Natasha Langston. Milos, just over seven months along, had to be hospitalized for preeclampsia. Chelsea told Lucca that they were trying to keep his blood pressure down as long as possible, but if things got worse, they’d have to perform a C-section. So the women were putting together a basket as though it was Natasha fighting for her life in the hospital.

The surrogates, as a result, were watching the children play in the Langstons’ backyard. It wasn’t baby-proofed yet, but there was a gate around the pool to prevent any issues there. Ron, the twins, and Kinglsey’s two oldest sons were chasing around the Langstons’ shih tzu, while the toddlers drew on the patio ground with chalk. Gabby babbled at Lance incoherently while Nathan napped in Nicolai’s arms.

The rest of the surrogates were using Lucca’s yarn, which Monty had un-confiscated, to knit things for Milos’ baby. It turned out that both Kingsley and Eli knew how to knit, Eli good enough to make shirts and hats and booties. Kingsley was also good at it, and they made the standard blanket Lucca was crocheting look like child’s play.

“He gets excited so easily,” Nicolai said, rocking Nathan a bit as he started to stir. “It’s no wonder his blood pressure got so high.”

“I doubt his nerves were the only issue,” Eli said, his eyes zoned in on the hat he was working on.

“I know, I’m just saying. I feel bad for the kid. It’s a bit traumatizing when your first child comes with complications like that.”

“How many is he supposed to have?”

“I can’t remember what he told us. But I remember thinking it was about as high as Lucca.”

“Poor thing,” Eli repeated. “He’s got a long road ahead of him.”

“What’s that?” Kingsley asked suddenly, grabbing their attention.
Lucca looked up from his blanket, watching as Kingsley picked up the multicolor ball of yarn he was using. Lucca felt his eyes widen; he had totally forgotten that he hid Anya’s card in it. And there it was, peeping through. Lucca blinked, schooling his face into a more neutral position as he watched Kingsley pull the card out. He looked at it, front and back, confusion on his face.

“Why was this in here?”

“What is it?” Lucca asked, playing stupid and reaching across the table. Nicolai leaned forward while Lucca looked at it. “Oh. I forgot about this.”

“Is that a bakery? Why did you have that in there?” Nicolai asked.

“Chelsea asked me to hide it,” Lucca said, shaking his head. “She orders from this woman when she hosts parties, and she said Lindsey was snooping around the kitchen one day looking for a recipe for that pumpkin pie she brought to that Thanksgiving lunch last year. So she asked me to hide it somewhere she wouldn’t think to look.”

“I guess a ball of yarn would do the trick,” Eli said, laughing. “The women take this whole party thing too seriously. Who cares who has the best pie?”

“Seriously,” Nicolai said rolling his eyes.

“That wasn’t the right number, though,” Kingsley said, still looking confused.

Lucca raised an eyebrow at him. How would he know that?

“How do you know?” Eli said, taking the card from Lucca and looking it over.

“We used to live down the street from that bakery,” Kingsley answered. “The number was on the big sign on the front door. I would distract Corey and Jason while we placed orders there by seeing how many of the numbers they knew.”

“A secret number?” Nicolai said, tilting his head. “Is Chelsea having an affair with the guy who owns it? Maybe that’s the real reason she had you hide it, Lucca.”

“A woman runs the bakery,” Lucca said.

“Oh, wow.” Nicolai glanced over his shoulders before leaning in. “That actually makes more sense. I overheard a few of our maids talking a while ago. They heard from a few of the Greysons’ maids that Chelsea and Lindsay used to spend a lot of time together.”

Eli raised his eyebrows, shocked, while Kingsley returned to his knitting, already bored.

“Doubt it,” Kingsley said while he knitted one and pearled two. “If you’d heard her talk, you know she’s crazy about her husband. You’d think the guy shit gold listening to her.”

“Maybe she’s faking it to hide her real attraction. Women do it all the time these days.”

“She’s hiding something, but not that. She’s weird, but not in that way.”

“In what way, then?”

Kingsley paused, shrugging before looking up at Nicolai.

“She doesn’t play by the rules. She feels off.”
Nicolai’s face really lit up at that.

“Like how?”

Kingsley shrugged again but kept going.

“She doesn’t act like other women. She talks over men, and shakes their hands. She’s talkative too, like no man’s ever told her to shut up. Even if she wasn’t born here, her husband should have gotten her out of those habits. But she still does it. I don’t even think she realizes how offensive she can be.”

Nicolai looked confused and turned to Lucca.

“Have you met her? What do you think?”

Lucca blinked, not sure how to play this. He couldn’t let any of them know that he’d first met her in her own home. Not without explaining why. But Monty knew Devon, so it could get weird if he tried to downplay that. Lucca nodded.

“She is kinda weird,” he said. “Monty actually knows her husband. When we went there a while back, he recognized her. She’s very energetic.”

“What’s her husband like? Have you met him?”

Another rock and a hard place. There was likely never going to be a situation where Lucca would have to worry about any of them meeting Devon or Anya. But with Lucca’s luck, he’d lie about meeting Devon and then have all of them somehow run into him. So Lucca had to play this right.

“Yes, actually,” Lucca said, turning back to his blanket. “He’s a surgeon. He’s the one I’ve been seeing to prepare for my lobotomy.”

Lucca got the desired result at that. The table went quiet, and he knew the others were exchanging glances while he idly pretended to ignore them.

“Small world,” Nicolai muttered.

“Not that small,” Kingsley said. “Is he doing your lobotomy as a favor to Monty?”

Lucca winced, glaring up at Kingsley. Why didn’t he just get the hint to drop the topic?

“I don’t know,” Lucca said, “Why?”

“Because that’s a crime,” Kingsley snapped. “That means they’re bypassing—”

“They’re men, Kingsley,” Eli gently interrupted, returning to his knitting. “No one is going to do anything to them about it.”

Kingsley huffed, sitting back in his chair and knitting a few more stitches. Lucca watched him, a bit taken aback. He didn’t know Kingsley as well as he did Eli and Nicolai, but here he was, getting upset on Lucca’s behalf. It hit Lucca again, that feeling of being genuinely cared for. He wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to it now that he saw it on display so consistently.

Kingsley put his knitting down, standing.

“I’m hungry,” he said, heading to the door to go find something to eat inside.
Eli chuckled, giving Lucca back the business card.

“Might be better to just toss that,” he said. “Before Monty finds it and it causes trouble.”

Lucca looked at the card, wondering how long it would take for him to memorize the numbers. He nodded.

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Chapter End Notes

I wonder why Lucca would try to memorize the numbers if he already decided not to ask for help. Hmm....

Another short chapter, but the next one will more than make up for it. A lot of y'all are going to scream when you read it. Hope you're ready!

I feel like this week is zooming by. Wish it would slow down a bit. I feel like I haven't had much chance to chat about the story lol.

Aannnnnnnyways, remember what I said about sleeping last night? Didn't happen. Ugh. Going to go out of my way to put my ass to bed early tonight. I need sleep so bad that my body is screaming for it. "Sleep!" it yells at me. "Sleep you stupid, pathetic, fake-adult! How hard is it to put your stupid ass to sleep?!!!!!??!"

That's also why this update is a little earlier than normal, lol. No waiting until the last minute like usual. :P

Please make sure to leave comments. Granted, this chapter didn't have MUCH going on, so I understand if you don't have anything to say. I'll just wait until tomorrow. Since I'm sure tomorrow's update will garner a lot more attention.

See you all tomorrow!!!!
“She’s in the bathroom,” Monty said, tapping his finger against the examination table.

“Ah, I see,” the doctor said, chewing on the tip of her pen.

Lucca’s usual obstetrician apparently had a family emergency that had him out of town for at least a week. As such, they were stuck with a female doctor, who looked seasoned and capable despite her nervous ticks. She’d been very personable while walking Lucca through his twenty-week checkup. Lucca liked her, but that meant that Monty couldn’t stand her.

And she wasn’t off to a good start refusing to move forward with the results without Chelsea present. Monty allowed the silence to continue for about half a minute before interjecting.

“How about we start with everything else?” he calmly suggested. “This way my wife won’t miss the gender reveal. That’s all she’s mostly worried about.”

“Yes,” the doctor said, though she didn’t seem to like that. “She really needs to be here for that. In that case, Mr. Grayson, Lucca is perfectly healthy. I know his blood pressure got a little higher than we like at his last checkup, so I still want to watch that. But aside from that, he’s in perfect shape.”

Monty blinked at her.

“So his blood pressure is high then?” he asked, as if prompting her to do her job.

“Of course it’s higher than usual, but that’s standard with pregnancy. It’s not nearly as bad as it was last time around, but we should still watch it. His last checkup was about a month ago? That’s not safe. Oh, and it was a home visit? Only people hiding secrets make requests for home visits.”

The doctor laughed at her joke, and Monty was visibly not amused. Lucca smirked, simply because he loved watching how annoyed Monty got when female doctors didn’t take him seriously. He missed having women as doctors, honestly.

The door opened, with Chelsea walking in. Gabby was at her hip, visibly trying to get down so she could stand on her own.

“Will you stop?” Chelsea said, rolling her eyes as she tried to get Gabby to sit on her other hip. “Mommy needs you right here for now. Okay?”

“No!” Gabby declared, twisting until Chelsea was forced to put her down.

Gabby immediately ran to the back windows, reaching up to get a look outside them. Chelsea
looked at Monty, exasperated, before looking at the doctor.

“Sorry about that,” she said, shaking her head. “She’s nearing those terrible twos and already driving us insane.”

“Patience is important at this stage,” the doctor said, nodding as Gabby ran back to push at Monty’s leg. “They’re testing boundaries to see what they can and can’t get away with. It’s important to always keep in mind—”

Monty moved, bending over to pick Gabby up. She laughed, thinking he was playing, but Monty briskly placed her in Lucca’s lap. Lucca wrapped an arm around her, keeping her in place on his lap, feeling a bit out of practice. It’d been so long since he’d last held her, it felt odd. But Gabby calmed down, leaning her head against Lucca’s arm. She was so big now, growing like a weed. He couldn’t help but smile at her.

“So everything’s fine, doctor?” Monty asked, as he straightened up to face the doctor.

Her eyes lingered on Lucca and Gabby for a moment before she shook her head.

“Yes. Lucca is healthy and in good shape. The baby is also growing well, and all vitals seem good. Nothing to worry about there.”

“Were we able to confirm the gender?” Chelsea asked, patiently. Because that was all she cared about.

“Ah, yes. This is why I wanted to wait for you Mrs. Grayson. One moment, let me get the ultrasounds out here. Okay, here we go. So, I’m sure you’re both familiar with these by now. Right here is the head, the arms here and here—well, more of a little hand there—and down here past the torso is a little penis.”

Lucca sighed. A boy. That was a relief. He wasn’t sure how he’d feel having another girl. A boy, however, would be safer in the Nation. He could handle that.

“So, a boy this time,” Chelsea said, smiling as she looked over at Monty.

“Ah, yes,” The doctor said, shaking her head, switching to another ultrasound from a different angle. “There is definitely a penis here, but you can see a lack of testicles, right? So then, when you look at this one. Hold on.” The doctor paused to switch out another picture. “Okay, so when you look at the genital tubercle, you’ll see that it’s in the same direction as the spine. And this angle here confirms that.”

“Meaning what?” Chelsea asked, concerned now. “Is there a problem with the baby?”

“Oh, no, no, no,” the doctor said. “No, it’s just that his structure is very female while he also has a penis. Meaning—”

“He’s a surrogate,” Monty finished.

“Ah, yes,” the doctor said, nodding. “The blood test also came back reading as female, which surrogates often do. The only major way to differentiate them from girls is to see whether or not they’ve developed a penis. Which he definitely has.”

Lucca’s heart dropped. He felt Monty move a little closer, knew he was asking the doctor questions. Lucca couldn’t hear him though. It was like when he found out he was pregnant with Gabby; everything faded away except the white noise of rushing water. He hadn’t planned for this.
For some reason he hadn’t thought of the possibility of him having a child like him.

He thought of Tristian, who would be coming up on two years soon. It wasn’t that long-ago Lucca had first met him, so small and a tiny. And he was going to be taken away in a matter of months. Lucca had, roughly, twenty more weeks of his pregnancy. Did he really have to continue to grow this baby, then nurse him and watch him grow for two years before he’s taken away? Lucca couldn’t do that.

“Lucca?” Monty said, running a hand down Lucca’s back.

Lucca felt his spine stiffen to the touch, reality slamming back at him like a tornado. Lucca kept his gaze straight ahead to the doctor’s clipboard. Chelsea had taken the ultrasounds, looking at them more closely. The doctor was watching Lucca warily, as if worried. Like she had any reason to be worried.

“He’s getting upset,” Monty said, his voice low.

“I’m fine,” Lucca said, blinking a few times before fixing a small smile that he turned to Monty. “I’m fine. The baby’s healthy, so that’s all that matters.”

“Why would he be upset?” Chelsea said, tearing away from the pictures to give Monty and Lucca a look. “I’m the one who’s going to lose a child in all of this.”

Lucca took a deep breath in to keep from scoffing. He’d been getting along with Chelsea lately, but that didn’t mean shit regarding how she viewed him. Some things would never change. No matter how sympathetic they might be towards each other for both being at Monty’s mercy, Chelsea was still Monty’s wife. And the legal mother of any child Lucca had.

For the first time in a while, Lucca was overwhelmed with how disgusting that was. It wasn’t like he chose to be a surrogate. None of this was fair. Why did Chelsea get to claim the children he carried and brought into the world? Being pregnant was terrible, and Lucca wasn’t even close to being done with it. And Chelsea got to keep her figure, keep her sanity, and then keep his baby? Bullshit.

“Well,” the doctor said, fiddling with her clipboard. Lucca focused his gaze back on her. “There are actually options. Actually. Depending. Ah, before that, I forgot to mention. Lucca’s sugar was higher than where we’d like it. At this point, it would be best for me to note that he’s at risk for gestational diabetes, so we need to start watching what he eats.”

“I’m a bit worried about his state mentally,” Monty said, and Lucca could feel his eyes on him. “He’s not reacting well to this at all.”

“Oh, goodness, Montgomery,” Chelsea snapped, rolling her eyes. “He’s fine! He said he’s fine. If anything, you’re just making him self-conscious about his reaction. Which will upset him more.”

And just like that, Chelsea was his ally again. It was like whiplash, really, how quickly Lucca could go from hating her to being grateful to her. Monty moved, pushing back a stray lock of curls out of Lucca’s face. Lucca held still, his gaze straight ahead.

“Look at me, Lucca.”

Lucca closed his eyes, briefly, unsure how to school his expression. He was sure anything he did would be wrong to Monty, so he let his exasperation bleed through a bit before looking up. Monty reached forward, stroking Lucca’s cheek with his knuckles. He was gentle, his eyes searching.
Lucca held his gaze for a while, his blinks the only thing breaking it.

“You understand that this baby isn’t yours, right?” Monty asked.

Lucca felt his heart break, even as he nodded his answering.

“Yes, Monty.”

“Monty!” Chelsea scolded. “Really? He’s not a child. He understands his role in all of this.”

“He’s struggled with this in the past,” Monty said, not turning away from Lucca as he spoke. “I want to make sure he understands.”

“What does it matter? He’s getting a lobotomy right after he has it. Who cares how he feels about it then?”

Lucca broke his gaze then, turning his eyes to the ground at that. And now Chelsea was his enemy again. Whiplash. He felt Monty’s gaze leave him as well, and he was grateful for the reprieve. Now he could be miserable all alone.

“What is wrong with you?” Monty said, his voice getting close to that dangerous calm he took when he was angry. “You know better than to behave like this. Especially in public.”

“Did you think that maybe your wife, this child’s actual mother, could be a bit upset that she just learned her child is going to be taken away?” Chelsea snapped, her voice taken on a slightly hysterical edge. “And did it also cross your mind that maybe, just maybe, your wife is annoyed that her husband seems to care more about the surrogate’s reaction to this news than his own wife?”

Lucca looked up then, his eyes wide at Chelsea. Tears were in her eyes, and she looked rightfully angry. Monty moved immediately, walking towards her and pulling her into a hug. Gabby, who had been uncharacteristically quiet during all of this, started to wiggle herself out of Lucca’s grasp. Lucca let her go, watching as she landed on the ground, and walked over to Chelsea to hug her leg. Chelsea pulled away from Monty when she felt her, bending over to pick Gabby up. Gabby hugged her again, and Monty pulled them both into a sort of group hug.

Lucca watched as he sat on the examination table, alone, at the perfect little family the Graysons made. The perfect little family that Lucca had no real place in. An outsider despite the fact that Gabby came from his womb. Despite the fact that Monty claimed to love him. He was one on the outside. Alone. Unloved. The same fate his unborn child would be resigned to.

He remembered that session with Dr. Lawson, and what she said about surrogates. *Surrogates will find love through the families they create,* she had said. *He may not grow up with a family, but he’ll grow up to create families filled with love.* But being surrounded by love meant nothing if you weren’t able to receive that love. If you weren’t allowed to give some of that love yourself. Here he watched Monty and Chelsea and Gabby love each other. And while he may have helped create it, he wasn’t a part of it.

*I won’t let you suffer like this,* he told his baby quietly, placing a hand on his bump. *I’ll protect you.*

“Ah, yes,” the doctor said suddenly, breaking the moment. “Surrogates, especially the first one, can be a very stressful time for young families. So, as I was saying earlier, there are some options. If you’d like to go over them. Uh—” the doctor cut herself off, glancing at Lucca before continuing. “These are very important choices for parents to make; it’s not really necessary for your
surrogate to hear this.”

“I’ll take him to the waiting room,” Monty said, finally pulling away from Chelsea. “Let’s go, Lucca.”

A childish part in Lucca wanted to remain sitting; to make Monty force him out of the room. But Lucca’s mind was racing, and he’d rather be away from Monty and Chelsea and this bitch of a doctor. So he slid off the examination table, letting Monty grab his arm as he all but dragged Lucca out of the room.

The walk down the hall was excruciatingly long. Especially because Monty was quiet the entire time. Lucca had expected scolding or a lecture. But Monty didn’t speak until he reached the receptionist desk, right next to the waiting room. There were two women waiting there, one with a very pregnant surrogate. The other was reading a book about fertility. There were three nurses at the desk, all chatting about a TV show.

“Howdy,” Monty said to them, flashing his perfect smile. The women all stopped talking to focus on him. “I need someone to watch my surrogate while my wife and I continue speaking with the doctor. I can’t imagine that taking too long.”

“We’ll take care of him,” the oldest of the women said. She couldn’t have been as old as Lucca’s mother.

“Thank you so much,” Monty said, giving Lucca stern “behave” look before turning to walk down the hall.

“Lucca, right?” the woman asked once Monty was gone. She knew damn well what his name was; she was always the one to check Lucca in when he came for his checkups.

But Lucca knew better than to take his frustration out on her. So he just nodded politely.

“Do you want to sit down? We have a tablet you can play some games on.”

Lucca took a deep breath in and out. Why did women have to treat him like a child? “I don’t need a tablet,” Lucca said, smiling at her. “But I’ll go sit down. Thank you.”

“Let us know if you need anything, okay, sweetheart?”

Lucca nodded again, waiting until he turned around completely before letting his façade fall. He found a place in a corner of the waiting room, away from the other women and surrogate, where the nurses wouldn’t be able to see him. The chairs weren’t too comfortable, but Lucca’s mind was spinning too fast for him to care about that.

When he found out Gabby was a girl, he wanted so badly to protect her. But he had been helpless then. Weak. He was still weak now. But he wasn’t helpless. He’d learn how to use a bit of magic since then. He considered his original plan: just killing himself. But he already promised himself that he wouldn’t do that. He needed a new one.

“Shit,” he muttered to himself, closing his eyes as he thought.

What he needed was a phone. But he had no idea how to do that without Monty finding out. Or Chelsea. Or a maid. He thought of Anya, wondering what Devon told her. If she was even still in the country. What if he got his chance to call and the number was disconnected? Or she was already gone and couldn’t help him? What if—
Lucca shook his head. This was what made him weak: worried too much on the wrong what ifs. The real what if he needed to be asking is what would happen if he didn’t exhaust all possibilities? What if he failed and this baby was born here? How could he live with himself if his child had to go through the same thing he did simply because he was too scared to try to make a phone call? How dare he lament over how unloved his child would be when he wouldn’t love him enough to risk everything for him?

He might be weak, but he wasn’t helpless. He wouldn’t fail this baby. Not this one. He refused. So he made his decision and stood up. He looked around the waiting room, looking at the signs that pointed to the bathroom. Good thing his files still said he couldn’t read. He walked over to the nurse’s station, the women carrying on about that tv show again. The youngest girl, who couldn’t have been much older than Lucca, was staring at her phone.

“Excuse me,” Lucca said as he approached them. “I need to use the restroom.”

“Oh, it’s that way,” the oldest woman said, pointing. “Just follow the sign.”

Lucca looked behind him at one of the signs, then turned back.

“Is the bathroom just down this hall?”

“Well, no, sweetheart. It’s down this hall and to the left. Then you—the signs will point you right—”

“Hattie, shush!” the other woman scolded, slapping Hattie’s leg. She nodded at the young girl, who had paused in looking at her phone long enough to laugh at Hattie getting hit. “Surrogates need an escort anyway. Nori, go show Lucca where the bathroom is, please.”

Nori rolled her eyes before standing and walking around the desk. She gestured for Lucca to follow her, and he did. Lucca waited until they were down the hall, through one door that led to a long, white hall that reminded Lucca of the Reprogramming Center. The bathrooms were at the end of that hall, and Lucca could pick out the single-stall “family” bathroom that he would need to use. Lucca walked up to the door, pausing before turning to look at the girl.

“Nori?” he asked.

“Noriko, actually,” the girl said rolling her eyes. “For some reason, the last syllable makes my name too hard for those dumb bitches.”

Lucca smiled. He bit his lip slightly, looking down. He needed her to see how nervous he was. His reaction caught her attention. Lucca waited just long enough for letting out a shaky breath and looking back up at her.

“I know you don’t know me,” he said, letting his voice shake as he spoke, “but can I ask you for a favor?”

Noriko raised an eyebrow at him.

“If it’s to leave this hallway while you’re in there or not check on you in five minutes to make sure you haven’t hurt yourself, then no,” she said. “We all know you’re having a surrogate, so—”

“No,” Lucca said, keeping his annoyance out of his voice. “No, that’s not it. I—I don’t even know how to ask this. I need—I mean, could you possible—no, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t. I don’t want to get you in trouble.”
“Now I’m concerned,” Noriko said. “Is this something I need to report to Monty?”

“No!” Lucca said, wanting to making sure he looked panic. “I’m sorry, but, please, don’t. He’ll be so angry with me. It’s just—it’s my sister.”

“Sister?”

Lucca nodded. He knew that the nurses knew he was taken later than he should have been. He knew they knew how many babies he should have and that he was illiterate and that he was in the process of getting a lobotomy. But he knew they didn’t know the details of his family. Aside from his parents’ medical history, nothing about his family would be relevant.

“Even after I was taken, I’ve been allowed to be in contact with her a bit. And when Monty won my bid, he still let her see me. And she worries about me. She’s not fertile, and so she’s focused on her career—she’s a chef, actually. But she got really upset when she heard Monty wanted to lob— I mean, help me. Because I’ve been struggling. And she said some things to Monty that she shouldn’t have, and I haven’t seen her in so long. She doesn’t even know that I’m pregnant.”

Lucca let the words pick up speed as he spoke, making sure to not sound too desperate or hysterical. Noriko focused on his every word, sympathy and pity filling up her eyes. She probably became a nurse to help people; she probably liked helping people. Lucca took a shaky breath in, looking down. He shook his head.

“I just want to tell her that I’m pregnant and okay and to not worry about me. I’d like to see her before, if possible. But that won’t happen if she doesn’t apologize to Monty. I just want to tell her to apologize before it’s too late. But I can’t call her at home, and—”

Lucca cut himself off, covering his mouth with his hand as if he’d said too much. His breath sounded heavier with his fingers by his nose, and it had the desired effect. Noriko had her phone out in seconds, unlocking the screen. She brought up the numbers to dial, and held it out to him.

“Do you know her number?” she asked.

Lucca nodded, moving to wipe the tears that weren’t even close to forming from his eyes.

“Yes. Are you sure? I don’t want—”

“Go in the bathroom. I can give you five minutes before I’m sure they’ll start looking for us.”

Lucca took it, his fingers hitting the numbers he memorized as Anya’s number. He looked up at Noriko, holding the phone to his chest like it was something precious.

“Thank you so much,” he said.

“Go,” she said, waving him towards the bathroom. “Quick.”

“Thank you,” Lucca said again, going into the bathroom.

The bathroom was pretty spacious, but had no windows or anything to escape with. The toilet was in the far corner, and Lucca went to sit on it as he hit the call button. He closed his eyes, counting the rings. He wasn’t even sure if Anya would pick up. According to Devon, he was too late. She was further along than Lucca, meaning she was definitely showing by now. She must have left the country by now. In that case, this was likely a waste of time. Lucca just put on the best performance of his life for—
“Hello?”

Lucca sucked in a shaky breath, words lost to him. Even with one that word, he could recognize Anya’s voice. She picked up. She actually picked up.

“Anyा,” he said, his voice low.

“Lucca? Lucca, is that you? Can you talk? Are you safe to talk?”

Lucca nodded, then remembered she couldn’t see him.

“Yes,” he said. “But not long. I’m sorry I took so long to call.”

“No, Lucca, no,” Anya said, her voice filled with such relief. “God, no, Lucca. I never gave up on you. I would have waited until I died for you to call me.”

“I thought the number would be disconnected,” Lucca said, because he couldn’t think of anything else to say. Tears were stinging his eyes, threatening to spill.

“Never. This number can’t. But if you don’t have time, I can’t get into that now. Is this it, Lucca? Are you asking me to get you out?”

“Yes. Please, I’m sorry. But it’s just that I’m pregnant.”

“I know. Devon told me.”

“I’m at the doctor’s now. They said the baby is like me, Anya. I—I just can’t. I can’t let him grow up here. I can’t let them take him. I can’t let them do to him what they did to me. I can’t.”

Lucca was crying now.

“It’s okay, Lucca, I know. I had to leave for the same reason. A little girl. Like hell I’d let the Nation have her.”

Lucca chuckled, trying to catch his breath between his tears. There was so much he wanted to ask and say and tell Anya. But they were running out of time.

“Are you even in the Nation?” Lucca asked.

“No,” Anya said, her voice sad. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t help you. I still have contacts in the Nation. And with a little magic, we can pull this miracle off.”

Lucca nodded. He believed her. He knew if anyone could help him, it would be her.

“Okay,” Lucca said. “But how?”

“You let me worry about that. Devon said you managed my trick of shutting him up. So you’ve been practicing?”

“A little. It’s not like I can make people not lie to me or anything.”

“Making someone silent and making someone tell the truth are two different things entirely. The former is definitely easier. But I can help you learn more once you get here.”

“I learned how to read too,” Lucca said, wanting to tell her that for some reason.
“And here you were, so worried about making it here. Lucca, Faust City isn’t a paradise, but you will be free here. And I will help you once you’re here. You won’t be alone. Okay?”

Lucca nodded, wiping at his tears. “Okay.”

“Good. Now in the meantime, I want you to practice using magic as much as possible. Devon told me about what Monty intends for you. Fucking prick. He said that once you hit twenty weeks, he’ll see you a lot as he preps you for the lobotomy. So I’m going to give him little assignments to give you. That way, you can get better. And once I get my ducks in a row with the plan, I’ll have Devon fill you in.”

“Okay,” Lucca said, feeling a little unsure about that. He’d hoped to be able to help out with the plan more than just sit around waiting to be rescued. But beggars couldn’t be choosers. “How will I get in contact with you?”

“We’ll have to use Devon as our main point of contact. I still speak to him every day. Don’t worry, Lucca. I will get you out. You and your baby.”

“Thank you,” Lucca said, the tears starting again. “Thank you.”

There was a bang on the door. Lucca stood up, walking over to the mirror. He splashed his face with water—one-handed—as he talked.

“I have to go,” he said. “Thank you, Anya. I can’t thank you enough for this.”

“I keep my promises, Lucca,” Anya said, and the fierceness of her words made Lucca’s heart skip a beat. “And I’m almost thirty weeks my own damn self. By the time we get you out, I’ll be up and ready to kick the ass of anyone who tries to get in our way.”

Lucca chuckled.

“Thank you, Anya.”

“Don’t thank me again until you’re out. Stay strong, Lucca. You’ve got this. See you later.”

“Thank—okay. Bye, Anya.”

Lucca hung up just as he opened the door. Noriko visibly sighed in the relief, probably getting nervous. Lucca quickly deleted Anya’s number from her call history—just in case—and handed the phone back to her. She took it, gesturing for Lucca to get out of the bathroom.

“Thank you so much, Noriko,” he said to her, following her lead as they headed for the door. “She said she would call Monty and beg his forgiveness.”

“That’s great,” Noriko said, looking at her phone. She paused at the door, her hand on the handle to pull it, her face falling into confusion. “Did you really call? I don’t see the number.”

“I deleted it,” Lucca admitted. “I didn’t want you to get in trouble.”

“Oh, I was going to do that. Guess you think fast…” Noriko’s words trailed off, another thought visibly dawning on her. “I thought you couldn’t read, Lucca. How did you navigate my phone to delete the number?”

Lucca didn’t skip a beat, looking away guiltily.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I could have figured the signs out myself. I just really wanted to call her.
Especially after finding out what I’m having. I’m already halfway through my pregnancy, so I—”

Noriko chuckled, putting her phone away and opening the door.

“Man, everyone underestimates surrogates,” she said, holding it up for Lucca to walk through.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want to manipulate you, or—”

“It’s fine, Lucca. Actually, I have a little brother like you. His bid was just up.” Noriko’s steps slowed as they started down the hall. Lucca matched her gait. “I used to get to see him at least once a month, especially on Sundays for service. But the man who won his bid decided it would be better for Hinata to not see me anymore. So he can focus on his new family. It wasn’t even a year ago.

“We’re Japanese, my family. And the characters for Hinata’s name means ‘a sunny place.’ He was the baby, y’know, and he was so happy and carefree. Even as he got closer and closer for his bid to be up, he was always so positive and cheerful. I wondered if he did it for my sake, but his doctors would tell me that his disposition was perfect for a surrogate. Still, I worry about him, y’know?”

Lucca nodded. He thought of visiting his mother at the Reprogramming Center, and how cheerful he’d try to be around her. She saw through his act, though. Lucca was sure Hinata was acting, but it was possible that he wasn’t quite that miserable about his lot in life. If what Noriko said was true, he probably accepted his fate long ago. So it would have been easier for him.

Still, Lucca felt bad, now, for lying about his situation.

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said. “I feel bad now, crying about not seeing my sister for a few months.”

“No,” Noriko said, turning to him. She smiled. “I just—I’m happy I could help. If your sister can see you before the—well, before, then that’s great. The families of surrogates are at the mercy of the men who buy their bids. Even if they’re taken from us, we still love them. We still miss them. And we still think of them.”

Lucca didn’t have a response to that. Noriko loved her surrogate brother, that much was obvious. And it made Lucca angry. Why did it make sense to tear surrogates away from loving homes? Lucca had cried to Dr. Lawson what felt like a lifetime ago because he knew to be a surrogate was to be unloved. But that wasn’t exactly true.

Lucca’s mother had loved him. Enough so that she kept him a secret from the Nation for as long as possible. Noriko loved her brother, enough to worry about him after not seeing him for so long. Vic’s abuela and mother and father and little siblings loved him enough to write letters to him for every holiday and birthday. And Lucca was sure there were plenty of other surrogates who were taken from loving families.

And for what? Only to become broodmares in homes where the best they had to look forward to being was a glorified nanny. Nothing about it made sense. Nothing about it was fair. Lucca placed a hand on his stomach as they made their way back to the waiting room. Lucca didn’t care what it took: his surrogate child would be raised in a household filled with love. And no one was going to take him away from Lucca.

Chapter End Notes
Y’ALL HAPPY NOW????

Lol. I'm sorry it took soooooooooo long to get here. I felt like I REALLY dragged this out. Oh well.

It happened! It happened! And so the road to escape has begun! Hope y'all are hype for it!

It took me an hour to frigging edit this too btw. And it sucks because I left work late, and then I cooked dinner which took forever. I just want to sleep but I still have to do my night routine! Ugh!

Enough complaining. Rereading this made me so happy. This side of Lucca is so nice to see. He's so impressive when he sets his mind to something. God, I can't wait for, like, y'all to read the last five chapters lol. Still got a ways to go, but we're getting there!

As always, let me know what y'all think! Ngl, my feelings are going to be hurt if I don't get a bunch of y'all just going OFF about this. I hope it wasn't anticlimactic for y'all. Leave comments and I'll see you all tomorrow!
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

A sad one...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tristian’s birthday was in mid-July, on a Tuesday. Lucca was hiding in the kitchen after breakfast, staring out the window facing Calvin and Lizzie’s house. Lucca had no idea how this worked. When he was taken, government officials showed up knocking on the door one day. His mother hadn’t been expecting them. She hesitantly let them inside, and they demanded her to confirm Lucca’s gender. She argued against it; his mother knew her rights. But she lost in the end.

To spare Lucca the trauma of being forced to expose himself, she confessed. Lucca was immediately separated from his mother, placed in the car they arrived in while the men stayed in the house with his mother. Lucca wasn’t sure how long he was in the car alone, but the cops eventually showed up. He didn’t expect them to go in and bring his mother out in handcuffs.

By then, everyone who was home at the time had gathered on their porches to watch what was happening. Mr. Grayson walked over to try to talk to them. Lucca remembered watching him advocate for his mother, his voice loud and commanding. He told them she didn’t have a husband to mediate this. But once they explained her crime, Mr. Grayson had relented. And Lucca didn’t start crying until he watched the car they had put his mother in drive off without him.

Mr. Grayson spoke with the officials and one police officer who stayed behind. After a few minutes, they waved over Mrs. Grayson, who had stayed at the door of their house across the street while her husband investigated. There was more talking, Mrs. Grayson looking horrified the entire time. Eventually, she nodded, walking over to the car and opening door to the back seat.

When she slid in, she immediately pulled Lucca into a hug, telling him that everything would be okay. That she would be right there since his mother couldn’t be. Lucca asked her what was happening. She didn’t say. Eventually the officials got in the car, waiting for Mr. Grayson to cross the street to get in his car. Only then, once Mr. Grayson was ready to follow them, did they pull off.

Lucca knew even without asking the other boys at the Center that the way he was taken was unconventional. For starters, he actually remembered it; few of the other surrogates did. And the ones who did were typically much younger than he was when he got taken. So the memory was hazy at best.

But Lucca remembered that day like it was yesterday. He remembered the cloudy sky, and the heavy humidity of that early summer day; school hadn’t let out yet and so Monty was still gone during the days. Lucca remembered that too, because he’d been waiting for summer to begin so he and Monty could play. He remembered the sunflowers lining the walkway to his house, the ones his mother spent all spring planting. He remembered the mole under the eye of the one official who told him once they pulled off that Lucca was safe now.
The biggest lie Lucca ever heard.

Things had changed since then, however. A few times if he recalled correctly. At one point, babies were taken from the hospital to go to Daycares. Then they’d switch to a few months; once the babies were old enough to start solids. Then it was a year, before going back to the separation occurring at birth again. A clean break was better, Lucca remembered Monty telling him at one point. That had been right before Monty started his training. He was even stupider back then than he was now. If that was believable.

It wasn’t until Lucca met Eli—met Tristian—that he learned it was a two year wait now. Old enough to get through the major milestones, but too young for the baby to remember the trauma of being taken away. Hopefully. At least that’s what Monty said. And, apparently, it was optional.

While two years was the maximum a family can keep their surrogate child, a family could opt to give up the child earlier. There were benefits to that, Lucca was learning. Monty wouldn’t talk to him about it, but Chelsea would. The government rewarded families ready to part with their surrogate children earlier. Financially and with adoption. Since only infertile couples who couldn’t afford to bid on surrogates were allowed to adopt—to prevent the wealthy elite from hogging the joys of parenthood or some shit—any time a woman or surrogate gives birth to a surrogate baby, they are allowed to adopt one child from an orphanage as a replacement.

The thought of that disgusted Lucca, especially when he remembered his own little siblings whom he would never know; the babies his mother was forced to give birth to. They would have been sent to an orphanage, waiting for some hapless couple to adopt them. Babies didn’t stay in orphanages too long. Not these days with fertility rates so low. Even older children orphaned later in life are swept up within a year by desperate families. His siblings were likely already in a new home now. Already loved.

Tristian was loved. If Lizzie had a choice and chose to keep him, she had to have loved him. Even if she kept her distance to protect herself, there had to be some level of love. And Eli loved him enough to give him a secret name. And now Tristian would be removed from that house of love to be taught how to become a baby-making sex doll for the Nation.

“Oh, here you are.”

Lucca looked at the door, watching Arielle walk in. She’d cut her hair to a short afro, deciding to go natural, she said. She said she’d originally wanted to transition a bit longer, but a boy she was seeing told her he liked natural hair better than relaxed, even if it was short. So she chopped it off. She looked good, but Lucca had already heard a few other maids mutter about why she’d want to look like a dyke.

“What are you doing?” she asked, joining him at the window. “Chelsea is looking for you.”

“Just waiting to see when it happens,” Lucca said, turning back.

“When what happens?”

“When they take him.”

Arielle didn’t answer, aside from a heavy breath out. There was a moment of silence, and it felt awkward. Lucca wasn’t used to that; Arielle was often a source of calm for Lucca. Her aura was always familiar. Kind. But since Monty forced her to make Lucca eat when he was locked in his room, she seemed to hesitate more. As if unsure of what to say. Lucca didn’t think it was necessary, but all things considered, he couldn’t stand to assure her he was past it. Some petty part
of him wanted her to feel bad if she was determined to feel some sort of way about it.

"Why?" she finally asked, breaking the silence. "What’s the point in watching them take him?"

"They’ll take this baby," Lucca said. A lie, but it wasn’t like he could tell Arielle he was planning
to escape. "I need to see how it’s done."

"Lucca—"

"Here you are!"

Lucca jumped, turning to watch Chelsea walk into the kitchen. Gabby was on her hip, looking like
she had just woken up. She probably had.

"What are you doing in here? Haven’t we talked about me having to chase you all over this house
looking for you?"

Lucca decided he wasn’t in the mood for Chelsea’s pompous attitude, so he turned back to look at
the house. A car was driving up the street, and Lucca felt his heart drop. He told himself that he
was probably freaking out over nothing; it was likely someone just driving through the
neighborhood. But he knew that wasn’t too common. And so when the car did pull into Calvin and
Lizzie’s driveway, everything seemed to go quiet.

"What are you looking at?" Chelsea asked, moving over to them. She followed his gaze, then her
face dropped. "Oh."

Two officials, like the ones who took Lucca all those years ago, got out of the car. An older woman
also climbed out of the backseat, holding a clipboard. She was wearing a vest that had the local’s
Center name on it. Lucca tilted his head; that was new. The three convened at the sidewalk for a
few moments before walking up to the door.

"It’s pretty early in the day," Chelsea muttered. "Would they take him even if Calvin isn’t home?"

"He is home," Lucca said. "His car is still there."

"Oh. It is. Ah, Monty did mention he’s on leave for a few month."

Lucca nodded. Chelsea was silent as they watched the officials knock on the door. It wasn’t even
five seconds later that Lizzie was opening the door. The officials walked inside, closing the door
behind them. Lucca wondered why they even needed to do that. Why not just have Lizzie bring
Tristian to the door and hand him off?

"This is stupid," Chelsea said after a while. "We shouldn’t be watching like this."

Lucca hummed his response. Chelsea didn’t move though, and they stood in quiet, staring at the
house and waiting. Eventually, the door opened again. The officials walked out first, walking off
the porch and waiting for the woman from the Center who came next. Calvin walked out, holding
Tristian on his hip. Lizzie was next, wiping at her face, and Eli was last with Moira cradled in his
hands.

The woman was talking, saying something, before taking something off of her clipboard and
handing it to Calvin. Calvin nodded before wrapping a hand around Tristian’s head and giving him
a quick side hug. The act surprised Lucca; he’d never seen Calvin show one ounce of affection. His
go-to demeanor was terse and stiff. A true military man; he resembled Monty’s father in that way.
But it was brief, and he was quickly passing Tristian off to Lizzie. She held Tristian tight, rocking back and forth for a while. She then put him down, kneeling down to say something to him. Tristian was calm the entire time, and Lucca wondered how much he understood. She then picked him up again, standing and rocking. Calvin said something, and she nodded.

When she handed Tristian off to the woman, who quickly put him on her hip, Tristian went. He kept his gaze on his parents, however, while the woman said something else to them. Then, she walked off. Lizzie moved first, grabbing Moira from Eli’s arms. Eli let her take her, and Lizzie immediately turned to face the door.

Tristian started reaching for her, his mouth moving though Lucca couldn’t hear what he was saying. As they got closer to the car, however, it was obvious he was calling her. He twisted and turned in the woman’s arms, trying to escape. But the woman held him fast through it. Calvin placed a hand on Lizzie’s shoulder, and Eli just watched, helplessly, while it all happened.

The woman didn’t seem to have any issues getting Tristian in the car, and she was bent over, likely strapping him into a car seat for a minute. Lucca watched Lizzie turn back then, watch her look on as the woman shut the car door, and walked around the other side to get in herself. She gave a kind wave to the family before getting in, the officials quickly getting into the front. It wasn’t long before they pulled out and took off down the road. Lizzie started crying again, turning around; her shaking shoulders visible even from the distance Lucca was watching her.

Calvin move to pull her in a hug, and they stayed like that for at least two minutes. Eventually, though, Calvin started to guide Lizzie inside, opening the door for her and leading her in. He paused at the door to say something to Eli, who simply nodded at him. Calvin disappeared inside, and Eli stood on the porch, staring down the road where they had taken Tristian.

“Horrible,” Chelsea said, pulling away from the scene and walking towards the door. “I can’t do that. I’d rather just let you have it and have them take it away.”

Lucca snapped his head towards her, annoyed.

“You don’t want to spend any time with the baby?” he demanded.

Chelsea didn’t seem to clock his tone, though Lucca caught the way Arielle’s eyes widened as his question. Instead, Chelsea just shook her head.

“No. I want to keep him. Raise him a little. Isn’t that why I agreed to marry Monty? He deserves a few years with us, right?”

“Monty doesn’t want to wait?” Lucca asked, his voice flat.

“No. I want to, but he kept saying it would only break my heart. And if we let them take him at the hospital, we can adopt. It makes sense logically, but I want to keep him. But that is so horrible. I don’t know. I don’t know. Maybe we should do it. God, maybe Monty was right about something.”

No, Lucca thought. Monty’s the same idiot he’s always been. And now Chelsea was showing just what an idiot she was too if she sided with him. Any respect Lucca had for her faded. There was no way he could have any love for a woman who would force him to carry a baby, and then not even have the decency to love that child. Even if it was only temporary.

Chelsea was just as wretched, just as disgusting, as any man in this Nation. He turned back to the house, and watched Eli stand there on the porch. Still. He was leaning against the porch railings,
his eyes still focused down the road. The car was long gone, but Eli couldn’t seem to pull himself away.

“Anyway,” Chelsea said, opening the door and putting Gabby down. Gabby ran through it immediately. “Anyway, Lucca, don’t stay here long. You’re supposed to be napping before your appointment tonight. If you’re not in your room when I check on you again, I’ll make sure Monty punishes you.”

“Okay,” Lucca said, not moving from the window.

He felt Chelsea watch him for a few more moments before leaving with a huff. Arielle shifted next to him, likely unsure if she should encourage Lucca to move or let him be. She opened her mouth to speak after coming to a decision.

“Lucca—”

“Go away, Arielle,” Lucca said to her, leaning against the window.

“But, Chelsea—”

“She said I’ll be punished. Not you.” Lucca cut his eyes at her and raised an eyebrow. “Unless you’re into that sort of thing. In that case, I can put in a good word.”

Arielle scowled at him for that, her face deepening in a blush. She turned on her heel, curt, and left the room without another word. Lucca turned back to the window; back to Eli. He was still there, still watching. Alone. Lizzie had taken Moira for comfort, and Calvin had gone inside to help soothe her too. Everyone would be sympathetic to poor Lizzie, who just lost her baby. But who was going to be there to comfort Eli?

No one. He was alone on that porch, without a single kind word to help him through it. He was the one who carried Tristian for nine months. He was the one who nursed him. He was the one who gave him a name when no one else did. And he was the one who had to pretend he was unaffected by his child—because no matter what the Nation said, Tristian was Eli’s child—being ripped away from him.

And Chelsea and Monty wanted to make Lucca do the same thing. Lucca shook his head. Savages.. He’d spent his life being told he was the abomination, but they were the real pitiful creatures lacking God’s mercy. There was nothing Lucca could do for Tristian or Eli. But Lucca wasn’t going to sit by and let the Nation take his child too.

He refused.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all! Still sleep deprived. I think, if I’m smart, I might be able to get some sleep tomorrow lol.

This was a bit of a long one. I felt like I wanted to have something happen immediately after Lucca called Anya to strengthen his resolve. I had someone note that they felt Lucca was very short-sighted with his actions, and I think that’s a very fair assessment! Up until now, he’s never had the freedom to think long term, so he hasn’t. So he takes
things one moment at a time, and reacts with little thought to the repercussions. I think part of that is his age, but if he really wants to leave, he HAS to be serious about it.

I would say that how Tristian was taken is pretty normal these days for surrogates. While trauma is the excuse used to justify this, there are studies that show that babies can be affected by trauma. Even if they don't remember it, their bodies will. I have a friend from the Caribbean whose island had an active volcano when she was a kid. At one point, they had to evacuate, and she was talking to her older brother about the event. Something she said made him say he thought she was traumatized by that, even though she has hazy memories of it. Even though she was young and her memories have faded, her body remembers and she STILL responds to certain triggers a particular way as a result of that event.

All that to say that if the Nation didn't want to traumatize surrogates, they would leave them the fuck alone.

Anyway, I hope you guys are enjoying the posting bomb. I don't know if I said this, but after next week, there will be another (and final) bomb the following week (of the 18th). I can't wait! I took off that week and I just want to SLEEP all week lol. Maybe, if I'm lucky, I can really work on building some better sleep habits.

I was going to wash my hair today, but I just realized that's stupid. I'm going to bed lol.

As always, please leave comments! I thrive on your feedback! Feed me, please!
“Her notes have been very helpful,” Lucca said, looking over the pocket notebook Devon had given him last week. “It’s more involved than I originally thought this would be. Anya said that energy manipulation is the easiest form of magic because it’s based heavily on emotions and thought.”

Weeks after his twenty-week appointment, Devon signed off on Lucca’s lobotomy. The details were still shaky, but the general plan would have to coincide with Monty’s goal of Lucca getting a lobotomy while Lucca is in the hospital giving birth. How to separate Lucca from Monty while at the hospital was the part they were still working on.

In the meantime, Anya had given Devon a notebook with a general overview of magic. It was small enough for Lucca to hide in his pockets; he was lucky Monty never thought to check if Lucca was ever carrying contraband. Lucca had spent the last couple of weeks going over it, trying to memorize as much as he could. He was surprised to learn that there were different subsets of magic; energy manipulation, botanical magic, elemental magic, light and shadow magic, offensive magic, defensive magic, and even necromancy.

Anya had noted, in the notebook, that it would take Lucca years to get a grasp of it all. Especially since he wasn’t raised in the craft the way Anya and her family were. For now, however, she provided the most information on energy manipulation. It was the basis of all magic; connecting to the energy of the earth, the universe, of all living beings, and using that to create. It would help Lucca learn a few basics of offensive and defensive magic, which would be useful once the plan to get him out of the Nation was underway.

A tapping noise grabbed Lucca’s attention. He looked up, Devon sitting in his usual seat behind his desk. He was glaring at Lucca, tapping his fingers his fingers brusquely against the desk. Lucca watched him for a second, pretending he didn’t know why Devon seemed so irritated with him.

“Oh,” Lucca said, grinning. “I almost forgot.” Lucca looked back at the notebook. “Are you done?”

Devon stopped tapping his fingers. Lucca didn’t look up to see his reaction; he was enjoying the moment of peace. Their meetings were weekly now: soon they would be three times a week. Devon had been teasing Lucca, asking how much practice Lucca was able to get between Monty’s affection. Lucca had decided he wasn’t in the mood, so he used the spell to make him shut up.

Lucca finally shut the notebook, placing it on the desk before waving his hand again. Devon huffed, his hand automatically rubbing his throat. Lucca knew it didn’t hurt him when he was silenced, but he was sure it was still an odd sensation. Devon scowled at Lucca, shaking his head as he grabbed the notebook.
“You’ve gotten a bit too haughty now that my Anya’s shown you a few tricks,” he complained, pocketing the notebook. “Maybe I should learn a bit of magic; then you’d really be in trouble.”

“Doubt it,” Lucca said with a shrug. “You’d struggle with magic. You’d might never get it.”

Devon smirked, obviously happy that Lucca took his bait. He liked to hear himself talk too much. Lucca wondered if it was a trait all men shared, or if Devon was just in a league of his own. Probably a little of both.

“That so? I wouldn’t have to hide it like you do; I’m sure I’d be a pro if I put my mind to it. What makes you think I wouldn’t easily master it?”

“Because you’re a man.”

“Oh! Attacking me for my gender? Don’t you get pissy when I comment on surrogates?”

Lucca rolled his eyes.

“It’s because you’re a man. Especially a Nation raised man. You’re too used to getting your own way all the time. You wouldn’t know how to actually try to create something out of thin air.”

“Well that’s not entirely true. We created this world—”

“A lot of good that did anyone. Except for men, I guess.”

“Babies—”

“Don’t even try it,” Lucca scoffed.

“What? Oh, c’mon, men—”

“Simply fertilize the egg. Meanwhile, the baby is formed, fully created, inside us. Their cells formed from ours. Their nutrients come from us. They are born from us. I literally have a baby growing inside me now; it takes way more out of me than it ever would Monty.”

“Sounds rough. Anya hasn’t left any notes about how to clear up any constipation?”

Lucca waved his hand, silencing Devon again. God, he was so annoying. Lucca couldn’t wait until he didn’t have to see him again. Devon banged on the desk, getting Lucca’s attention. Lucca raised his eyebrows at him.

“I asked you earlier if you were done; apparently you weren’t.”

Devon held up his hands in surrender. Lucca considered just leaving him quiet for the rest of their session. There was at least half an hour left. But Lucca didn’t have Anya’s notebook to distract him, so he waved his hands to let Devon go.

“Okay, okay,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “Point taken.”

“Wonderful,” Lucca said, adjusting in his seat. He was coming up on the third trimester soon; and his belly seemed to be growing every day. He was already getting to a point where it was hard to stay seated for too long. “Any other updates from Anya?”

Devon shook his head.

“You always only ask about her. I’m starting to think you like her more than you like me.”
Lucca raised his chin.

“I thought you were done.”

“Right, right. You make it too easy. Nothing with regards to your escape, if that’s what you mean. Anya, however, just hit thirty-five weeks. Said her family already has the nursery set up.”

Lucca smiled at that. Anya was staying with family back in Faust City. According to Devon, she wasn’t on the best terms with them. Especially after running to the Nation to marry a man they never met. But they’d taken her back happily and easily, and were helping her get readjusted to the city.

Lucca placed a hand over his stomach as he felt the baby shift and turn inside him. Gabby moved a lot at this stage, but it was common for Lucca to go days without feeling the baby move. It freaked him out at first, but it seemed this baby just had a calmer disposition than Gabby. Lucca wondered if Anya’s baby was giving her hell.

“She’s close soon,” Lucca said. He looked up at Devon. “And you’re here.”

“Yeah, I feel a bit bad about that,” Devon said, rather sheepishly.

“You should feel bad about it. It’s not like she needs you, but you did leave her all alone. At least your child won’t have to suffer being disappointed by you.”

Devon was quiet—voluntarily for once. He scowled at Lucca, obviously not amused by his comment. Lucca didn’t care: he was telling the truth. And that’s why Devon didn’t argue. Well, that and he knew Lucca could easily shut him up if he got too aggressive.

“Oh, right,” Devon said, looking away. “I never got the chance to tell you about what happened when Anya disappeared.”

Lucca frowned.

“What do you mean what happened?”

“I guess it was during those months Monty kept you locked away. He told me about that, by the way. The prick. Anyway, I think I mentioned how Anya had to disappear to prevent a deeper investigation. She wrote a sweet letter saying she lied to me all this time before she left. I went to the police in the morning with the letter, telling them my wife was pregnant and missing.

“I didn’t expect the news spectacle honestly. You would have missed that too. It sucked having to do all those press releases, asking for people to keep an eye out for her. Then they started investigating her papers; and then there was the backlash when it was found out they were forged. I think I was accused of killing her at one point, but that didn’t stick. There were no signs of a struggle, so it was obvious she left on her own.”

“Is there a point to this?” Lucca asked. He wasn’t sure why any of this was important.

“My pregnant wife disappears, and we were smart enough to play it as a betrayal,” Devon said, snapping his eyes to Lucca. “A bit of a media circus, but I make it through unscathed. Now imagine if not even a year later, a pregnant surrogate disappears while in my care. At that point, this crazy, chance scenario becomes a pattern.”

“The Nation will start to question your story with Anya,” Lucca finished, catching on. “They’ll investigate you further. Hell, they’ll probably just assume you’re responsible for both of us
“disappearing.”

“Exactly,” Devon said with a nod. “Meaning I can’t stick around when you leave.”

“You’re going to Faust City too, then?”

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

“I am,” Lucca admitted. “I know you love it here.”

“I love Anya more,” Devon said with a casual shrug. Too casual, as if to downplay it. “And even if we weren’t getting you out, I had no intention of letting Anya raise our daughter alone.”

So Anya was having a girl. That felt right. Especially for Anya. Still, Lucca was surprised. Devon always struck him as just selfish enough to let Anya stay in Faust City while he continued his happy life in the Nation. He would have to give up his career, his prestigious role at the hospital, and all the privilege his dick gave him. Lucca was surprised he was willing to give it up. Especially for someone else.

“I would have left earlier, actually,” Devon admitted when Lucca didn’t interject, “had you not grown a pair and called Anya when you did. I had a few family affairs to wrap up before leaving. But no, you had to decide you had enough right when I was ready to get out of dodge. And now I’m stuck here, waiting until we can get you out.”

“You’ll forgive me if I can’t bring myself to feel sorry for you.”

“And if I don’t forgive you?”

“Then you can stay angry and suffer.”

Devon chuckled, obviously amused.

“I will miss this,” he said, his tone as mocking as usual. “It’s a shame Monty can’t appreciate your bite. Why keep you docile when he can have more fun watching you struggle?”

“Where are Anya’s notes for this week?” Lucca asked, lifting a hand to rest under his chin.

Devon glanced at Lucca’s hand, catching the subtle threat. He scoffed, reaching into his other pocket. He pulled out a few pages of paper, folded up. That would be easier to transport—and hide—than the notebook. Lucca stood up, reaching to grab it from him. He half expected Devon to pull it away playfully, like he did with the notebook. But Devon didn’t protest when Lucca took the papers for himself.

He unfolded them, only glancing through them. He rested his hips against Devon’s desk. These notes were more focused on defensive spells: a force field. The last page advised on how to move the force field, which could work offensively in the right circumstances. Lucca stood there in silence, wondering how he would even practice this.

“You look so precious when you’re deep in thought,” Devon said, ruining Lucca’s concentration.

“I guess the unfamiliar is likely to turn you on more than what you’re used to,” Lucca said, looking at him.

“Are you saying my Anya is an idiot?”

“I’m saying you’re an idiot. So someone who actually thinks grabs your attention.”
Devon laughed at that.

“Monty really is a fool.”

Lucca caught Devon’s eye, seeing the hunger in them. Lucca remembered how predatory they seemed to him when he’d first met Devon. They still were, but Lucca’s reaction to it was different. He wasn’t stupid enough to be moved by it, but he found that he didn’t hate it quite as much.

“You’re flattering me,” Lucca said, deciding to call him out on it. “Why?”

“What reason would a man have to flatter anyone?” Devon asked, raising an eyebrow at Lucca.

“You could force me if you really wanted to. So why flatter me?”

“Would you believe me if I said that not having my Anya around to play with may have me projecting?”

“Maybe. A little.”

“Well I do miss her. My Anya.”

Lucca narrowed his eyes at him.

“Do either of you know that you do that?”

“Do what?” Devon asked, raising an eyebrow.

“That possessiveness. ‘My Anya.’ ‘My Devon.’ It’s weird.”

“Does she call me that?” Devon asked, and he looked genuinely surprised. He smiled, looking off to the side. “I’m sure I started that, but I don’t think I’ve ever said that in front of her. I wonder where she got that from, then.”

“Whatever,” Lucca said, rolling his eyes. He folded up the papers, pocketing them. He pushed himself away from the desk, looking over his shoulder at Devon. “You know I’m not fucking you, right?”

“I never asked you to,” Devon said, smirking.

“You want to.”

“And you don’t?”

“I don’t enjoy sex, so no. I don’t.”

Devon sat up straighter, raising his eyebrows.

“Then why are you baiting me?” he asked.

Now it was Lucca’s turn to get a conceited smirk on his face.

“Because you’re not the only one who enjoys our conversations.”

Devon laughed again, genuine and full. Lucca smiled, returning to his seat. He was also getting to the point in his pregnancy when standing for too long made his feet swell. Yeah, he really was getting close to that final trimester. Things would start getting very uncomfortable soon.
“So let me ask you this then,” Devon said once he’d calmed down. “If I said I wanted to fuck you, would you let me?”

Lucca blinked at him.

“Oh, you’d give me a choice?”

“Considering I didn’t last time; I think it’s only fair.”

“Oh, don’t say that. You’re going to ruin the moment.”

“Stop deflecting and answer the question, Lucca.”

Lucca shrugged. He’d already thought about it; he knew Devon’s attraction to him hadn’t faded. And he also could tell Anya wouldn’t get too upset considering the circumstance. At least she wouldn’t get upset with Lucca: Anya could kill Devon over it for all he cared.

“Maybe,” he admitted. “Probably. Only once, though. And sex hurts too much when I’m too far along, so preferably before I’m in the third trimester.”

Lucca leaned back in his seat, waiting. He wanted to know if Devon would pounce on him immediately, or wait. Though, honestly, Lucca already knew the answer.

“So I need to act soon,” Devon said, glancing at his watch. “Unfortunately, our session will be over in less than ten minutes.”

“So?” Lucca asked, keeping his voice as light and innocent as possible. “You didn’t last that long last time.”

Devon’s grin grew, predatory and familiar.

“Oh, yes, I’ll need a lot more time around,” he said. “Next week, then.”

It wasn’t a question; Lucca was sure it was more intended as a promise. Still, it hung in the air, waiting for a response. Lucca just watched Devon, wondering, briefly, why he was entertaining this. He knew he wouldn’t enjoy it, and being wanted as a surrogate wasn’t a big deal. And wasn’t that what the Nation spent his entire life telling him? That seducing men to ruin was as easy as breathing?

Lucca spent his life playing submissive to Monty to appease him. And he cried for Devon last time the way Devon wanted it. Lucca’s reaction to it all was to hate sex. To freak out whenever it felt a little good. To disconnect. To resign himself that being a surrogate meant sex was never going to be something he had any say over.

But if Lucca was going to leave this country, shouldn’t he start rethinking how he viewed things? He wasn’t going to be at Monty’s mercy anymore in a matter of months. His life would be up to him: he’d be the one making all the choices in how he lived. If that was the case, what would sex become for him? Would it stay a source of abject misery for him? Or could it transform into something else?

What would sex even look like on his terms?

He had no idea. But he wanted to learn. So he nodded, holding Devon’s gaze steadily.

“Next week, then.”
Weeeee! I enjoyed writing that. And rereading it lol.

I want to note that considering Lucca and Devon's history and relationship, even if Lucca feels he's consenting, it's not real. Still, considering, I think this was more about Lucca taking the first step to 1) rethink his relationship with sex now that he's going to be free, and 2) imagine his future in Faust City a bit. I'm sorry if he feels very hot and cold, but Lucca's taking the first step to reclaim his freedom. It's going to be messy.

We'll be seeing more of Lucca and Devon's conversations.

I hope everyone is having a great weekend! I've spent all day in bed watching Netflix lol. Not standard, but there’s something nice about giving myself a lazy day to just chill. I never let myself do this, so it's a nice break.

As always, please comment with your thoughts. And see everyone tomorrow!
“You’re pregnant already?”

Eli nodded, smiling down at Milos. Milos rested his head back against the wall, a small smile on his lips. Chelsea and Lizzie were visiting the Langstons. Milos had been home for weeks now, but wasn’t seeing visitors for some time. Milos had come home before the baby could, so it wasn’t until three days prior that the baby was released as well. Milos had a girl that the Langstons named Diana, who was gaining weight quickly based on what Natasha had said when she greeted them at the door.

Milos, however, was the worse for wear. His was pale, which seemed emphasized by his dark hair. Which, Lucca noted, was thinning around his edges. His stomach also had already flattened, which Lucca knew meant he must not be eating well. He had heavy and dark bags under his eyes, and he looked like he could barely keep his eyes open.

He had tried to get up and greet them earlier, but Eli had quickly guided him back to his bed. He’d then apologized for how he looked, saying he would have tried to shower that morning if he knew he’d have guests. There had been a chaperone inside the room with Milos—he stood outside once Lucca and Eli entered, thankfully—so Lucca assumed Milos would have had help getting to the bathroom. Still, it was a silly thing to apologize for; he was still recovering. Anyone who expected him to look perfect was an idiot.

“And when are you due, Lucca?” Milos asked, smiling up at him.

Lucca sat down on the bed, by his legs, and gave him a polite smile.

“October 19th.”

“A fall baby,” Milos said wistfully, closing his eyes. “How sweet. Isn’t your birthday in the fall too?”

“Yup. She’ll be here not even a month beforehand.”

“That’s good. Then you’ll have something to celebrate to take your mind off Rudy.”

Lucca blinked, remembering why he couldn’t stand Milos: he was a whole ass idiot. Lucca had never met someone so determined to always, somehow, say the wrong thing. Lucca glanced at Eli, who gave him an understanding shrug. Lucca pointed his finger at Eli, then dragged his aim to Milos: Eli needed to draw Milos back to a topic that wasn’t going to make Lucca want to tear his hair out.

“So,” Eli said, intervening. “So, how bad was it, really? You hear a lot of stories, but it’s always
best to get it straight from the horse’s mouth.”

Milos opened his eyes, and looked straight ahead. His gaze was distance and he gave a lazy shrug.

“I don’t remember much of it,” he said. “Just them saying my blood pressure wasn’t coming down despite the medicine they were putting me on, and so they needed to induce me. But even that wasn’t fast enough, so they put me under and cut me up. A nurse told me I almost died; that my heart stopped briefly at one point. I don’t know if that’s true.”

“That’s terrible,” Eli said, sympathetically.

Milos shrugged again.

“They should have just let me die.”

Lucca looked up, immediately feeling bad for his earlier irritation. As annoying as Milos was, he didn’t deserve that. He didn’t deserve to feel like that. Eli placed a hand on Milos’ leg.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” Eli said, and his voice sounded genuine.

Milos scoffed.

“You don’t have to lie,” he said. “I know no one likes me. I know I’m no fun. I don’t like scary movies, or sweets. And I’m always afraid of breaking the rules, so I question everything. And I’m talkative and I say too much. And I ramble, like I am now. I don’t mean to be this way, but I am. I hate myself too, but I’m too chicken to do anything about it.”

“Don’t say that,” Lucca said, his voice harsher than he intended. “We’d prefer you to be here with us. Not dead.”

“You’re just saying that,” Milos said, closing his eyes again.

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You hate me, Lucca.”

“I don’t hate you,” Lucca snapped, unable to keep the irritation from his voice. “Have I ever said that? I never have, so don’t put words in my mouth.”

“Everyone just wants to see you healthy again,” Eli interrupted, smiling at Milos. “We were all worried about you.”

Milos opened his eyes, looking straight at Eli. His gaze looked dead and a bit incredulous.

“Worried,” Milos repeated. “Natasha hates me because I almost killed her baby. Jared hates me because I’m not well enough to try for another one. Lucca hates me because I’m annoying. And you hate me because I won’t just believe you right now. Nobody is ‘worried’ about me: everyone just wants me to smile and say that everything is going to be okay. And I hate myself for not being able to be whatever everyone wants me to be, but—”

Milos’ words got cut off when the door opened. Eli stood immediately, Lucca keeping his spot on the bed for the time being. Jared peaked his head in, then walked inside completely. Jared was tall and lanky, with angular features that made Lucca realize suddenly that there was no way he was in the military. So why was he home midday? Admittedly, Lucca hadn’t cared about the Langstons enough to pay attention to what Jared did for a living. It obviously had to be something worthwhile
if he was living in their neighborhood, but Lucca wasn’t sure just what.

“Boys,” Jared said, nodding at Eli and Lucca. He had the slightest of drawls to his words, more Midwest than southern. He looked at Milos, who was watching Jared with his undivided attention. Jared raised his hand, showing off the smartwatch at his wrist. “Your heart rate went up,” he said, matter-of-factly to Milos. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” Milos said, running a hand over his chest absentmindedly. He must have had a few ECG pads under his shirt. “I just got a bit excited when Eli told me he was pregnant.”

Jared tilted his head, obviously not believing him. Eli moved then, turning to help Lucca stand. Lucca didn’t really want to get up, but he figured if Eli thought it was important, he would just move. Once Lucca was on his feet, Eli turned to Jared.

“He’s lying,” Eli told him. Lucca froze next to him, wondering why Eli was selling Milos out. “He’s upset because he thinks everyone hates him.”

Jared sighed, nodding his head as he returned his gaze to Milos. Milos was looking pointedly at the comforter covering his legs. Jared didn’t look angry, Lucca decided while watching him. Rather, he looked a bit tired. Maybe a bit defeated. But something told Lucca that this wasn’t a new conversation for them.

“Um,” Eli said, taking Lucca’s hand in his, “Lucca was actually saying he needed to use the bathroom. Where—”

“It’s right down the hall,” Jared said, glancing at Eli. “Just ask Carl; he’ll show you.”

Eli nodded his thanks before practically dragging Lucca out of the room. The chaperone—whom Lucca assumed was Carl—was still standing across the door at his post. Eli asked him where the bathroom was, and he pointed down the hall, giving curt directions. Eli thanked him before leading Lucca there.

Lucca kept quiet, not speaking until they were far enough away from the chaperone that Lucca felt like he could speak freely.

“What the hell was that?” Lucca demanded, pulling his hand free from Eli.

“I should be asking you that,” Eli said, finding the bathroom door and opening it.

“Me? What did I do?”

“He just got out of the hospital, Lucca. And you’re practically yelling at him.”

“I wasn’t yelling at him, Eli! He was accusing me of saying something I never said!”

“He never said you said that. But you sure do act like you hate him.”

Lucca huffed, following Eli into the bathroom. It was a pretty good size; bigger than Lucca’s and without any huge mirrors. The shower was a modern design with a frosted, glass door, and a separate Victorian tub sat in the far-left corner. The counter tops were also a creamy color that went well with the pale, blue walls. It was actually pretty calming.

“I don’t hate him,” Lucca said once Eli shut the door behind him. “He just, I don’t know—it’s like he’s always saying the wrong things.”
“He’s just awkward, Lucca,” Eli said, his voice softening.

Lucca rolled his eyes.

“It’s more than awkward. Rudy was awkward. He didn’t piss me off.”

“He did that day you first met him,” Eli accused. “I noticed it; he was depressed and mopey, and you would give him these glares when he would say something you didn’t like.”

Lucca frowned. “I don’t remember that.”

“I do. You want to know what I think your issue with Milos is?”

“Not really, but I’m sure you’ll tell me anyway.”

“I think you hate surrogates who get away with expressing how they really feel.”

Lucca’s face really scrunched up at that. “What? We talk about how we feel about stuff all the time, and that never pisses me off.”

“We chat shit the same way I’m sure the women bad-mouth their husbands when it’s just them,” Eli said, leaning against the sink. “The same way I’m sure the men talk about their wives. And about us. That’s normal, Lucca; it’s fair to complain about how the men are a bit rough with us or how catty the women can be at time. But you don’t go deeper than that, do you?”

Lucca didn’t answer right away. He hadn’t noticed that, honestly. At the Center, expressing any dissatisfaction meant long meetings with counselors and subtle threats of reprogramming. So to Lucca, complaining about Monty being rough with him, or Chelsea’s little stunts to remind Lucca that she had more power than he did, was amazing. He came from a space where discussing that sort of thing at all was a hard no. So to have a group of people he could complain to about at all was more than enough for him.

Why would any of them want more?

“I don’t get it,” Lucca finally admitted, shaking his head. “What does any of this have to do with why Milos pisses me off?”

“Because he expresses himself,” Eli repeated. “When he’s scared, he says so. When he’s nervous, he talks about it. If he got angry, he would probably yell. Even now, he feels hated, and he expressed that. And you got mad.”

“We all express how we feel. So what—”

“Lucca, you hide everything from us.”

That brought Lucca up short. Talk about hyperbole.

“No, I don’t,” he said.

“Yes, you do,” Eli insisted. “Monty locked you away for three months, and you had no intention of telling us that. You haven’t said a thing about Rudy—aside from just now—since his death. Monty is going to lobotomize you, and you were going to kill yourself over it. And you weren’t going to tell us! You probably would be dead right now if Nicolai hadn’t called you out!”

“You keep so much from us; I’m not the only who notices it. Nicolai and I talk about this all the time, Lucca. You don’t open up to us. You might complain a bit here and there about the surface
level bullshit, but you don’t tell us the big stuff. Ever.”

Eli turned, facing the door, his back to Lucca as he collected himself. Lucca blinked, realizing only then that there were tears forming in his eyes. Why was everything he did wrong? Monty freaked out over ever little bad emotion Lucca had; he was lobotomizing him over it. And now Lucca was wrong for not expressing those very same emotions Monty punishes him over? It wasn’t fair. None of this was fair. There was no way for Lucca to be perfect for both Monty and Eli.

Eli took a breath in, turning. His face was calm, but Lucca could make out the raging war of emotions in his eyes. He got it: Eli loved him. The same way Nicolai loved him. But this wasn’t fair: Eli wasn’t being fair.

“I get it,” Eli said, his voice gentler. “Sort of. I know what Monty does for a living, and I know that makes it very difficult for you. I know you two were friends growing up, and now he’s—he owns you. I’m sure he’s not the sort of person you can really unload on. And so you had to learn how to hold a lot in. I get it.

“That’s why Milos irritates you. Because he’s allowed to express himself and he doesn’t get in trouble for it. If you had said what he was saying earlier, Lucca, I never would have told Monty that. But I know Jared won’t react like Monty. He does the same thing as Monty, except his approach is different. And I know he’s trying to help Milos through his feelings instead of punishing him for it."

Lucca didn’t know any of this. In retrospect, Monty didn’t seem too partial to Jared; Lucca typically only saw the Langston during parties or when the women met up during the day. Monty didn’t seem to go out of his way to invite Jared and his family over too often. And if Jared was a psychologist too—especially if he was from a more progressive camp who didn’t believe in reprogramming and lobotomies—then it made sense why Monty wasn’t a fan.

Lucca didn’t want to buy it though: that his issue with Milos was about jealousy. Lucca wasn’t jealous of Milos. He didn’t envy anything about his life. Even if Jared was nicer than Monty, he was still a man who saw fit to bid on a surrogate. How different could he really be from Monty?

“Lucca,” Eli started, moving to step closer to him.

“We should head back now,” Lucca interrupted, walking straight to the door. “If we’re gone too long, they’ll start looking for us.”

Eli started to protest, but Lucca was already out the door and making his way down the hall. He didn’t want to think about this anymore. He’d play nice with Milos until Chelsea was ready to go home. It was almost time for Gabby to eat and take a nap anyway, so they’d have to take her home soon at least.

Lucca heard Eli follow him, but as he got closer Milos’ door, he saw Jared standing outside the door with the chaperone. The chaperone moved as they approached, giving them more space in the hall. Lucca did notice, however, that once they settled in front of the door, the chaperone had Lucca and Eli boxed in with nowhere to go unless either he or Jared moved.

“Boys,” Jared said, giving his small nod to them again. “Eli, I’d like you to stay out here for a few minutes, if you would. I need to speak with Lucca and Milos alone.”

Lucca blinked, swallowing against the panic building in his throat. This was highly unprecedented. The sort of thing Lucca should be suspicious of. Milos was Jared’s surrogate; there was no way he’d testify against Jared if this was the set up for something horrible. Lucca took a step back, his
back hitting the wall. He glanced at Eli, who simply nodded at Jared’s request.

Fucking traitor.

Jared’s eyes fell to Lucca then, his gaze softening as he saw Lucca’s hesitation. He moved, opening the door, and holding it open for Lucca to walk through. Lucca glanced at Carl, wondering how likely it would be to get past him. Eli saw him and frowned.

“Lucca,” he gently scolded.

“You’re going to be okay, Lucca,” Jared said, reaching out his hand for Lucca’s. “It’s just a talk.”

Lucca didn’t believe that, but he knew a losing battle when he saw one. So he reached forward, letting Jared grab his hand. And with a strength that surprised him, Jared pulled him inside the room. When the door shut, the panic in Lucca’s throat spread to his chest. He glanced around the room, looking for any doors or windows he could use to escape. The window by Milos’ bed looked like it could open.

“Calm down, Lucca,” Jared said. “You’re not in trouble.”

Lucca didn’t believe that either. He looked at Milos, who was looking out the window instead of at them.

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said, his gaze dancing between Jared and Milos. Milos’s eyes turned to Lucca when he spoke. “I’m sorry. I was being mean earlier, so if I upset you, I’m sorry. I—”

“Lucca, you’re not in trouble,” Jared repeated. He shook his head, going over to Milos’ desk to pull over the chair there. He placed it in front of Milos’ bed and sat, gesturing for Lucca to sit as well.

“Sit down, please. I’m sure your feet must be tired.”

Lucca glanced at Milos, moving to sit on Milos’ bed by his feet. Lucca hated this. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he hated it.

“I’m sorry, Lucca,” Jared began, leaning forward in his chair. “I’m sure I’m making you nervous, so I want to just jump right to the point. I’ve noticed for some time now the tension between you and Milos. When I spoke to Monty about it, he waved it off as some petty, surrogate drama that I shouldn’t involve myself in. But I don’t believe in that, Lucca; that surrogates are innately petty.”

“I don’t hate him,” Lucca said, repeating his earlier point. He looked at Milos, who promptly turned his gaze away. “I don’t hate you.”

“Lucca,” Jared said, grabbing Lucca’s attention, “has Milos ever done anything to annoy you?”

“No,” Lucca said, not sure why he was getting so upset. Why were there tears forming at his eyes? “No. He’s always nice to me.”

“I didn’t ask that. I know Milos is nice, but even the nicest of people can annoy us sometimes. I’m asking if there are times Milos does something that you don’t like.”

Lucca just shook his head. None of this was making sense. How could Jared ask him something like this? Why would Lucca tell him the truth? He was a man. And Milos was his surrogate. And sitting right there. So why would Lucca speak up? It was madness to expect him to.

“I see,” Jared said, sitting a bit straighter. “I’m very familiar with Montgomery’s works you know. He’s highly applauded in our country for his research. I am too; more so than he is, though don’t
tell him that. I hate bragging, but there are many more out there who agree with my methods than
his."

“Okay,” Lucca said, because he had no real answer to that.

“I say that because I can only imagine how Monty is in reality given his theories. And I say that
knowing you’re scheduled for a lobotomy, Lucca. So it must be scary, really, the idea of sharing
your feelings when you’re used to being punished for having them.”

Lucca’s eyes darted to Milos. He’d been watching Lucca, warily. At being caught, he immediately
looked away, but Lucca had already seen it. Seen the sympathy in his eyes. The pity. He was looking
down on Lucca. He felt bad for Lucca. Lucca turned his attention back to Jared.

“What do you want from me, then?” he snapped. “What do you want me to say?”

“It’s not about what I want,” Jared said, his tone patient and kind. “It’s about y—"

“Shut up,” Lucca interrupted. “I have to be good for him. Monty expects me to be happy in this life
he’s created for me. That’s what I have to be for him. So what is the point of all of this? Do you want
me to break down and cry on your shoulder about how horrible Monty is? Do you want me to
name him as some—some what? Abuser? Am I supposed to speak against him?”

Jared let out a heavy breath, but he didn’t say anything. Lucca shook his head, his anger rising.
This was bullshit. First Eli, now Jared and Milos? They weren’t better than him. Jared wasn’t
better than Monty. Lucca scoffed.

“Maybe I am jealous,” he said, more to himself than to any of them. He looked over at Milos, who
didn’t turn away this time. “I don’t get to cry every time I feel bad. I don’t get to whine over every
little inconvenience. I don’t get to say when I’m angry. I don’t get to show that I’m upset or
annoyed or feeling like everyone hates me. So maybe it does piss me off watching you get away
with it all. Because I just don’t get to.”

Lucca snapped back to Jared, angry at him more than he was Milos. He was the one who let Milos
get away with his bad behavior. He’s the one who wanted to preach against Monty’s ways. He was
the one trying to get Lucca to feel things he didn’t want to admit he felt just to prove a point. He’d
probably write some academic paper on this and get more praise. It was all bullshit.

“So what is the point of this?” Lucca asked again. “Why does it matter if I express myself? Why
does any of this matter?”

“Because it was upsetting Milos,” Jared answered honestly.

Lucca came up short, not expecting that. “What?”

“Milos was upset because you two always seem at odds,” Jared repeated. “I wanted him to see that
your hang up with him really had nothing to do with him. To show him that you simply project
your frustrations on to him. This will make it easier for him to not get upset when he feels he’s
irritating you in the future.”

Lucca blinked at him. So this was just to prove a point. He didn’t care about Lucca; he didn’t care
about Lucca expressing himself. He didn’t care that Lucca couldn’t open up given how Monty
was. He didn’t care to change that, or provide Lucca with a space to be freer than he ever could
have been around Monty. This had absolutely nothing to do with Lucca: he was just a means to an
end.
“I see.”

“Lucca—”

“I’m thirsty,” Lucca said, looking around the room. Unlike his own room, Milos’ room wasn’t really set up for hosting. “Is it possible to get something to drink?”

“Lucca,” Jared tried again, “we’re not done here.”

“Yes, we are,” Lucca said, looking Jared straight in his face. “It’s a good place to end anyway; Monty is very particular about how I’m counseled.”

“I wasn’t counseling you,” Jared said, though the look on his face told Lucca that he picked up on the threat.

“Oh? You’re a psychologist, are you not? And this was, essentially, a mediation, right? Then you were counseling us. Plain and simple.”

“Lucca—”

“Monty is going to be annoyed when he hears of this as it is.”

Jared sighed, standing. He nodded, taking the not-so-subtle hint.

“Okay,” he said, admitting defeat. “If you need anything, just call for Carl. The ladies should be finishing up soon.”

Lucca didn’t move, just watching as Jared made his way to the door. Eli walked in once he was gone, looking at the both of them warily.

“You two all good?” he asked, though Lucca could tell the question was more geared towards him.

Lucca flipped him off before turning to Milos. Milos’ fingers played with the edges of his comforter, nervous.

“Just so you know,” Lucca said to him, “I really don’t hate you. And while he may have you fooled, Jared and Monty are the same.”

Milos’ face scrunched in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“He wants to believe that he’s better than Monty. That his method is kinder. Gentler. But it’s the same: they both react every time we feel anything. Your heart rate rises a bit and he’s here for a mini counseling session? If I don’t respond to something perfectly, Monty is on my ass wanting to talk about it too. He might be a bit stricter in his approach, but he won’t give me space to breathe the same way Jared doesn’t give you space either.”

Milos looked off to the side, as if thinking about this. Eli gave Lucca a look, asking for an explanation. Lucca, again, ignored him. He’d get over his irritation with Eli soon, but he was still a bit pissed off at him in the moment.

“You know why you’re so nervous all the time?” Lucca asked Milos.

“Because I worry too much,” Milos said with a shrug.

“You wouldn’t have to worry so much if Jared would get off your back. Monty is the same way. Everything I do, he’s, like, psychoanalyzing it. I can’t react normally to anything because I have to
worry about how he’ll interpret it and respond.”

“Yeah, Jared’s like that too.”

Lucca nodded. “They’re men. They’re all the fucking same.”

Chapter End Notes

Back to some slice of life stuff!

I have to be honest; I don't really like this chapter. Mostly because there was no point to it. I don't know why I wrote it tbqh. I think I wanted someone in story to point out Lucca's beef with Milos. Tbqh, Milos is what Rudy was going to be initially. Except I dropped that because Rudy was so fun. I also wanted to play with Milos' anxiety a bit. Him and Lucca are very similar in that way, but they express themselves differently. And that's 100% because of how the men who own them react to their emotions. I thought that was rather fun to play with.

Anyway, thus ends this posting bomb! I will, however, be posting a new chapter this Wednesday in order to stay on track with my posting schedule. Remember, all chapters will be up before the end of this month! Exciting, non? After Wednesday, Sunday will kick off another posting bomb (and my staycation! Yay!). And then the following week will be the end. So sad to see this end, but I'm excited for you all to see the conclusion!

I was rereading the final sequence leading to the climax, and I'm pretty satisfied with it. I think if I was writing this story with hopes of getting it published, I'd go back and add more. But I think it's fine how it is now. And I think you guys will enjoy it. :3

Anyway, already going to get shit sleep tonight! Woot! Another week of sleep deprivation!

As always, please leave comments and fuel my ego! Thank you so much!
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Magic takes lots of different forms...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ball of light in Lucca’s hand was orange. He wasn’t sure if that was right. Anya’s notes on the force field were specific and exact. Up until this point, most of Anya’s assignments had been on being more aware of the magic that ran through and around Lucca’s body, and harnessing it. Being more exact and specific with his intentions. Visualization.

It had shocked Lucca how much magic existed around him once he learned how to feel it. It was there in his heartbeat, in every breath and in every step. It was in the wind, through the sun’s rays, in the water and in food. It was like a current; a constant tether to everything around him.

It had felt too much at first. Too big for Lucca to be a part of. But then he realized that he was already a part of it. No more or less than anyone else. That was what Anya had meant about anyone being able to access it; it was a matter of feeling that connection, of gently nudging the currents in a different direction. Or, better yet, finding the currents already in the direction you need, and pushing them to create whatever you wanted.

The visualization part was the hard part. Anya had noted in one of her notes that a lot of the basics were shown to her. That meant she only had to visualize what she’d already seen. Lucca, on the other hand, had to visual from scratch. And a lot of what Anya wrote about was just conceptually hard to grasp.

Like the ball of light in his hand. Anya had said it was like holding the sun in her hands; all energy balled in a small sphere. And blue. But Lucca’s miniature sun looked just like that, and he had no way of knowing if he was doing this right or not. Was it going to look different to everyone who tried this, or was it supposed to be blue? If the latter, what did it mean that Lucca’s energy ball was orange?

Lucca decided to just go with it: if it did matter, he could correct it later after confirming with Anya. For now, he then focused on shaping the ball, flattening it like clay in his mind. Then expanding it, making it larger. It was working, the orange light twisting and molding into the shape Lucca envisioned for it. He noticed that the orange seemed to dull the bigger the ball got, as if the ball was actually stretching.

In a few minutes, Lucca had it: a force field. A giant, pale orange circle standing in front of him. He had no way of testing it to make sure that’s what it was, and not just some big circle. He had put the intention of safety into it, so it should work. In theory.

Lucca let it drop, walking over to his desk to look at the rest of Anya’s notes. He skimmed through them before folding them back up and putting them back under the mattress of his bed. It was the only place he could think to hide them these days. He stood up in his room again, taking a few deep breaths as he envisioned the shield again.
No, he told himself. *The ball first. Then the shield.*

So he held out his hand again and started with the ball. It was easier now that he’d seen it before. Then he worked on expanding it. This, too, was easier. The visualization, Lucca was realizing, was the hardest part. It felt impossible to create something he’d never seen before. But once he did, it was always easier after that.

The shield came easier, and Lucca did this exercise a few more times—just as Anya’s notes suggested—before he felt too tired to keep going. He smiled, wiping the sweat that formed above his lip. He was getting there. Slowly but surely. He just needed to test it, to make sure that it would actually work. That was even harder than the visualization; Lucca rarely had the chance to try out a lot of the spells Anya’s notes walked him through. He could be doing this all wrong for all he knew.

There was a knock on his door, and Lucca’s concentration dropped. Thankfully, his spells had the tendency to dissipate once that happened, instead of lingering. So the shield disappeared almost immediately. Not before singeing Lucca’s palm, however. He had to snap his hand into a first to hide it just as Monty walked into his room.

“What were you doing?” Monty asked, looking around the room suspiciously.

He often did this now: looking for signs that Lucca was hiding something. It probably didn’t help that Lucca was, still, hiding something from Monty. Nevertheless, it was rather annoying.

“I feel asleep,” Lucca lied, looking around as if a little lost. “I woke up a little while ago. I figured it’s almost time to leave?”

“It is,” Monty said, giving him a small smile. “Were you having trouble getting out of bed?”

Lucca placed a hand over his stomach. “A little. I forgot how uncomfortable it gets at this stage.”

“Poor thing. Next time just wait for me to come get you. I’ll help you out of bed. Are you ready?”

Lucca nodded, letting Monty grab his hand and lead him out of his room as he tried not to scoff at Monty’s words. If he waited for Monty to help him get out of bed, he’d never leave.

~*~

Lucca had thought about it on the ride to the Reprogramming Center. And it wasn’t until the check in at the beginning of his session—when Monty was there to go over any concerns or issues he wants addressed—that Lucca made his decision. Devon had been agreeable with Monty, though not overly so. And they set the date for the lobotomy: it would be a few days after Lucca’s due date.

Which, Lucca noted, hilariously assumed Lucca would go into labor and have the baby pretty quickly. But, according to Devon, the next available time would be weeks later. And that wouldn’t work for Monty. So he agreed and then finally left Devon and Lucca alone. And it didn’t take long for Devon’s predatory gaze to settle on Lucca.

“Have a nice week, Lucca?” Devon asked, standing from his chair and walking around the desk. He leaned back against the desk, crossing his arms in front of him.
Lucca kept still; he needed Devon to approach him for this to work.

“I did, actually,” Lucca answered, ignoring the way Devon’s eyes darted up and down his body. “Chelsea, Gabby, and I went to pick some peaches on Tuesday. And then—”

“You really think you’re cute,” Devon interrupted, though his tone was playful. “I don’t care about your peaches.”

“Well that’s rude,” Lucca said, fake pouting. “I rather like peaches. When we got home, we—”

Devon moved then, kicking himself off from the desk and walking towards Lucca. Lucca’s heart started to speed up a bit as he waited for Devon to get close enough. Just one more step and then—

Lucca immediately focused, his brain snapping to the shield before the energy ball. He felt the air shift as energy rushed in front of him. Right as Devon reached for him, the shield appeared, slamming into formation like a wall. Devon walked right into it, hard, and was shocked back. He stumbled back, hitting the desk and covering his nose where he hit it. He turned a glare at him while Lucca lowered the shield.

“Seriously?” he snapped. “You were excited to ride my dick last week.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Lucca said, standing. He walked forward, touching Devon’s face and moving his hand from it. Devon might have bumped his nose, but it wasn’t enough to break it or make it bleed. Lucky. Lucca couldn’t hide his smile. “It was hardly excitement.”

“God, you’re such a little shit,” Devon said, rubbing his nose a bit before straightening. “So was last week all a ruse to play me like that?”

“No,” Lucca said, leaning next to Devon against the desk. His feet were already starting to hurt a bit. “I came up with that on the way here. Unless I pissed you off so much you can’t get it up now.”

Devon seemed to consider it. He did look pretty peeved. But then he shook his head, chuckling dryly.

“My Anya will do something like that from time to time,” he admitted. “Just to remind me who’s in charge. It’s weird how you two are alike.”

There he went, talking about Anya again.

“We’re different enough,” Lucca answered.

“I wonder. If you’d been awarded the same freedoms she grew up with, I’d think you’d two would be one and the same.”

“Hmm. Interesting theory. Sit down on the chair.”

“And now you’re bossing me around.”

“Didn’t we just establish who’s in charge here?” Lucca asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

Devon chuckled again, more humorously, and sat down in the chair Lucca had been in. Lucca put an arm down on the desk behind him for support. He would need to sit down soon. In fact, Lucca moved to sit on the edge of the desk. It wasn’t particularly comfortable, but it was enough for him to rest his feet. He tilted his head at Devon, thinking. Since Devon liked power struggles…
“I changed my mind, actually,” Lucca said, shrugging.

Devon raised an eyebrow. “About?”

“About this. I’m not in the mood to fuck you.”

“Oh really?” Devon said, his eyes flashing.

There it was. Exactly what Lucca wanted to see.

“Really. I’m just not feeling it today.”

Devon sighed before standing. Lucca tensed, feeling magic move through him in case he needed to do the force field spell again. He was certain he would. Devon moved, surprising Lucca by walking around his desk instead of directly towards Lucca.

“Fine,” he said. “Maybe next week. Do you want Anya’s notes now?”

Lucca turned—or, rather, struggled to turn—to look at Devon. Devon sat down at the desk, already rummaging through his pocket.

“That’s it?” Lucca asked. “I say no and you’re over it?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Devon said, raising an eyebrow at him. “Were you hoping I’d rape you?”

“You’ve done it before.”

Devon winced at that, taking out a stack of folded up papers from his pocket.

“Isn’t that why I’m doing all of this now?” he said, his tone only slightly defensive. “At great expense to myself, I might add.”

Lucca took the notes from him, shrugging. “I still expected something,” he admitted. “At least a bigger reaction than that.”

“It’s been a very long time since I’d last been with my Anya. I can go a few more months.”

“How admirable,” Lucca said, honestly impressed.

“Yes, well, it’s also something you should get used to,” Devon said, his face looking serious.

Lucca frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that if this all goes well, you’re going to be a free man. That means expecting your body autonomy to be respected. And raising hell if it’s not. Have you thought at all about what your life is going to be like in a few months?”

Lucca shook his head. He honestly hadn’t. He’d spent the last few months thinking he was going to kill himself. It wasn’t until rather recently that he decided against that. And even then, his mind had been focused on practicing magic and the escape plan. What came after was a mystery Lucca felt he didn’t have the luxury to afford to dwell on.

“You should,” Devon said, sitting back in his seat with a sigh. “Faust City is a place of freedoms, but it’s not some utopia. In fact, it’s a lot rougher there than here. It’s referred to as a city of sin for good reason. Sex, drugs, and guns are the biggest markets there. Prostitution is regulated, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t incidences of trafficking. There is honest work, and schooling if you can
afford it. And have a lot of support. Which, considering how you’re going to be a single parent with a baby to raise, I doubt you’d have a lot of that.”

Lucca slipped off the desk, returning to his seat as he thought about that. He’d heard similar things about Faust City here and there. Especially at the Center. Vic shared some stories with Lucca about the city from his conversations with Josiah. Lucca knew it wasn’t a paradise. But he was prepared to do whatever he had to so he could survive. So he could raise his baby away from the Nation. He truly believed that anything was better for his baby than growing up in the Nation.

“I know that Anya intends to help you,” Devon said, tapping a finger against the table. “Her family are, well, it’s an understatement to say they’re powerful. They have money and they have the means to help anyone they can. But it’s just not in their nature to be too giving. It’s not the way Faust City operates.

“So even if Anya can get you a little help, it’ll likely come at a cost. And depending on what that is, it might be better to try to fend for yourself. But being an outsider—especially if you’re raising a child alone—makes it easy for people to prey on you. You’d have to have your wits about you to avoid getting kidnapped or sold off somewhere or dead.”

Lucca blinked at Devon. “Are you trying to scare me away from this?”

“No, I just—” Devon said, sighing. “I just want you to be prepared. The more you are, the easier your transition will be. I’m a doctor, Lucca. I have valuable skills. Once I get there, it will be easy for me to get a good job. Anya might be relying on her family now, but she won’t have to for long. You, however—”

“Have nothing to offer?” Lucca finished.

Devon sighed again. “I don’t mean it like that. Just—”

“I get it,” Lucca interrupted. “It should scare me, hearing this. But it doesn’t. I appreciate the heads up, though.”

“You’re not taking this seriously.”

“Yes, I am,” Lucca snapped, annoyed now. He wasn’t naïve. He wasn’t stupid. And he was tired of everyone acting like he was simply because of what was between his legs. “If I was that worried about how I might struggle, I would be a good surrogate and have this baby and let him be taken and let Monty lobotomize me. I would let Monty keep breeding me until he’s satisfied. And I will smile the entire time because I’ll believe this is better than whatever could await me in the city.

“But that’s not what I’m doing. I will not let Monty, or the Nation, or anyone harm this child. That’s why I called Anya. That’s why I’m doing all her assignments: so I can help as much as I can when the day comes. Even in Faust City, I’m sure not everyone there knows magic. Do they?”

Devon watched him, listening intently. It was surprising, really, to see Devon take this—take Lucca’s words—so seriously. So when Devon shook his head, Lucca let out a breath.

“No,” Devon said. “It’s used in the city, but it’s not like everyone and their mothers can use it.”

“So I already have an advantage over a few people,” Lucca said. “Something I can use to protect myself and this child. I’m taking this very seriously.”

Lucca nodded, sitting back in his chair. He placed a hand on his stomach, the baby still as usual.

“Despite your concern,” Lucca said, looking back up at Devon, “you’ve actually put me in a pissy mood. Which is a shame because I wasn’t being serious earlier, and I was still intending to fuck you.”

“Oh no,” Devon said in his best faux-concern voice. “And now you’re too mad to. How horrible.”

“It is. I actually got a little excited when I almost broke your nose earlier.”

Devon laughed at that; a real, lighthearted laugh. Lucca smiled, turning to glance at the clock above the door. They still had plenty of time…

“I’ve found,” Devon said, once his laughter cooled off, “that a good hate fuck is the best way to get anger out. Good stress relief too. You know, if all of this talk about the future is stressing you out.”

“Really?” Lucca said, standing as he approached the desk. “I’ve never heard that before.”

“Really. Lots of science and stuff back that up. You can read now, so I can send you some articles.”

“Sounds like you’re making it that up.”

“You’ll have to try it yourself to see.”

Lucca chuckled, shaking his head.

Are you sure it’ll help? In your professional opinion?”

“Very,” Devon said, his eyes flashing with hunger again.

“Hmmm. Interesting. It’ll probably work best if I’m on top, right?” Lucca paused, smiling when Devon nodded. “Great. Would you mind, then, assisting me with that?”

Devon smiled that predatory grin that used to make Lucca anxious when he first met Devon. Now, it just made his stomach flutter. Or maybe that was the baby finally moving. It was hard to tell these days. Devon reached out his hand across the desk.

“For you, Lucca,” he said a tad dramatically, “I’d do anything to assist you.”

Lucca laughed, taking Devon’s hand and letting him guide Lucca around the desk to sit on his lap. It took a few minutes of kissing and heavy petting for them to get ready. And it took even less time before Lucca was sitting on Devon properly, moving his hips in small circles as he tried to accommodate him. He’d forgotten that Devon was noticeably bigger than Monty.

It didn’t hurt like it normally did with Monty, but it wasn’t like it was mind-blowingly wonderful. It just was: heat and sweat, a conversation as Lucca stopped and started and tried to figure out a way to do this where it did feel good. That took a while, and Devon was patient through it all. Hell, Lucca was sure he enjoyed most of it. His grip on Lucca’s hips did tend to tighten every time Lucca needed to pause or readjust himself.

In the end, Devon was the only one who really got off. They stopped once Devon was spent; Lucca let him come inside him. Devon offered to jerk Lucca off to completion, but Lucca turned him down. None of this was about that anyway. If Devon was right about Lucca’s future, there was a
good chance Lucca would have sex again. With different people he chose because he liked them.

Devon could have tried to force Lucca. When Lucca said he changed his mind earlier, Devon could have fought him on it. At least argue about it. But he didn’t do that. He simply accepted it. This was what Lucca had done this for: to see what sex would feel like if it was on his terms. Just to get a taste of what it could mean once he left the Nation. To decide when he did it and in which position and whether or not he came.

Lucca had to admit: it was quite intoxicating.

Chapter End Notes

Hi all. Not going to talk much today. My friend's wedding is this afternoon and thanks to a literal worthless, piece of shit dumbass, I didn't get to leave work until an hour after I was supposed to. And now I didn't get to do ANYTHING I needed to do to prep. And I won't be able to do it before the wedding, and I'm literally fucking PISSED.

I didn't even want to post, but I said I would, so I just spent an hour editing this. Don't mean to be so negative, but when I say I'm livid, I'm fucking livid.

Hope you all enjoy. Please leave comments if you did, blah blah blah, y'all know the drill.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

Decisions are made. Without Lucca, of course.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Monty doesn’t want me to tell you this.”

Lucca paused in helping Gabby put her shoes on. They were supposed to be going out for a walk; something Lucca wasn’t particularly in the mood for. Still, his doctor had suggested he get a bit more exercise since his blood pressure was still higher than they’d like, and Lucca would just have to tolerate the foot pain for a couple of hours.

Chelsea stood above him, the stroller out and unfolded. She was messing with the stroller handler, picking at the frayed, pink cover that Monty had bought for it. She didn’t look at Lucca, instead starting down at the stroller as if there was anything interesting in it. Lucca was sure he knew what this was about, so he turned back to finish tying Gabby’s shoelace.

“Tell me what?” he asked casually. As if he didn’t know already.

“What we decided. For the baby. About what to do when he’s born.”

“Oh.” That was all Lucca had to say.

“You don’t sound too interested considering.”

“If you’re hesitating to tell me, it’s because you know I won’t like it.”

Lucca smiled at Gabby, helping her stand up. She immediately ran over to Chelsea, trying to wedge herself between her and the stroller so she could push it. The handle was above her head, and she looked adorable reaching up trying to push it.

Sometimes, Lucca felt like a monster knowing he was planning to leave her in this godforsaken country. He wanted to save her too, but both Anya and Devon had shot that down. It was like Devon said before: getting a pregnant surrogate out would be difficult enough. Getting Gabby out with them would be impossible.

Still, considering how few and far in-between his interactions were with her these days, especially now that she was talking and easily identified Chelsea as her mother, Lucca couldn’t help but mourn losing her. As selfish as it may be, a huge part of him hoped the hole he felt in his heart at the thought of losing her would be filled by the baby he’d get to raise in Faust City.

“I don’t know how you’ll react, honestly,” Chelsea said, stepping back to let Gabby fail at pushing the stroller forward for a bit. “I honestly think you’ll despise any option.”

Lucca took a deep breath in before standing. He was doing that a lot slower these days: summer was coming to an end, and soon would his pregnancy. And, Lucca reminded himself, would all of
this. Playing house with Chelsea and Monty, having to tolerate Monty’s touch, being scolded on every little thing he did or didn’t do: all of it would be over soon. It was surreal. Lucca was sure he wouldn’t fully let himself believe it until it happened.

“We’ve decided to give the baby up right away,” Chelsea said, finally looking up at Lucca. “At the hospital, I mean.”

Lucca nodded. “Okay.”

Chelsea just watched him, her gaze reminding Lucca distantly of Monty. Gabby babbled something, pushing on Chelsea’s legs when she couldn’t get the stroller to move. Chelsea broke her gaze from Lucca, bending down to pick Gabby up. She moved to put Gabby in the stroller, and Gabby struggled.

“No! No! No!” she yelled, trying to twist out of Chelsea’s arms.

Chelsea ignored her, strapping Gabby in. Gabby started to whine and kick, throwing a little tantrum. Chelsea rolled her eyes and stood up, ignoring her. Monty had been very firm on not giving Gabby attention when she tried to pitch a fit. Chelsea, whom Lucca was realizing was getting drained from Gabby’s pre-terrible-twos antics, was finding it rather easy to just ignore Gabby once she got started.

“You’re taking this well,” Chelsea said to Lucca, walking around to the back of Gabby’s stroller.

“How am I supposed to react?” Lucca asked, letting his fatigue drag into his voice.

“I just expected a more emotional reaction is all.”

“Because us surrogates are so emotional.”

Chelsea looked up at him, a touch of annoyance on her face. She then sighed, shaking her head.

“I guess I wanted you to get upset,” she admitted. “I feel horrible doing this. Logically, it’s the right decision. Monty made a good case for it. I won’t know the child; it’s been easy not to get too close to him because of what he is. But I’m also not the one carrying him.”

Lucca walked over to the front door, opening it. He smiled, feeling oddly smug. Maybe it was because he knew no one was going to take his baby his from him. Maybe it was knowing he would be gone soon. That Chelsea’s concern was unnecessary. And so a petty part of himself wished he could lord this over her; let her know how stupid this entire conversation was.

“How sweet,” Lucca said instead, turning to face her as he put his hand on the screen door. “How sweet that you’re concerned for me.”

“I don’t know if it’s concern,” Chelsea stated. “But when Monty disciplined me last year, you got upset for me.”

Lucca blinked at her. Chelsea had never brought it up since that day in the kitchen when she hugged him. Lucca was fine pretending it hadn’t happen. Like that incident in the cabin that felt like a lifetime ago. Lucca had gotten good at forgetting the rotten things Monty did to them. Even now, Lucca focused more on freeing himself from Monty than hating him for all he’s done. Maybe once he’s gone, he’ll be free to hate Monty fully for everything. But for now, Lucca had to keep that hate in check: for his own sanity.

Lucca wasn’t sure how Chelsea did it. Lucca figured Gabby was a pretty good distraction from it
all. Still, Lucca had assumed there was an unspoken thing between them to not talk about how Monty had hurt them. To not try to connect with each other in that way. To pretend they weren’t both at his mercy. And here she was, bringing it up.

“Do you remember what you said to me?” she asked, continuing despite Lucca preferring she’d shut up. “Afterwards, I mean.”

Lucca shrugged. “I remember saying a lot of things.”

Chelsea smiled. “You said that Monty has power over both of us. I honestly don’t want to do this. I don’t want to tear a child away from you before you get a chance to—” Chelsea cut herself off, looking away for a second. She turned back to Lucca, her eyes soft. “I know Lizzy didn’t spend a lot of time with her second child. She didn’t help out a lot. It wasn’t just so she wouldn’t get too close to him—she told me this, by the way. But it was mostly because she wanted Eli to have time with him.”

Lucca turned, facing the screen door. His mind immediately jumped back to that day when he’d found out that Eli’s baby was a surrogate. How angry he got for Eli. And what Eli said to him then: *but he’s here now. I get more time with him.* Lucca then thought of Eli standing on the porch of his house, looking down the street as he watched them take Tristian away. A lot of good Lizzy’s kindness had done him.

“Lucca,” Chelsea said, continuing, “it’s not like we women are completely heartless to what you surrogates have to go through. I talked to Lizzy and a few other women my counselor put me in contact with, and we talk about this a lot. How hard this must be for you all to carry these children and then help raise them without any claim to them. To not have a choice in any of that. I don’t think I could do that. I don’t think I could ever do what you do.”

Lucca had no idea where she was going with this. What was her point?

“I will forever be grateful to the family you’re helping me create, Lucca,” she said. “And there isn’t much I can do to alleviate how difficult this must be. You have a quota, Lucca; I can’t tell them to forgo that. I can’t tell Monty to only lay with you when he’s trying to put a baby in you. I can’t even criticize how Monty treats you.

“And I do try, Lucca. I begged him not to go through with this lobotomy. I told him it would crush you. I asked him to give you a break after your miscarriage. I asked him to let us keep the baby so you could bond with it. But Monty—we can’t go against what Monty wants. I don’t think any of this is fair, Lucca.

“And even though I must be making you miserable right now, I had to tell you what he planned because I couldn’t let him keep you in the dark. It would have broken my heart if you gave birth and watched the baby be taken away while you had no idea it was happening. It would have broken your heart.”

“Are you crying?” Lucca asked.

“I-what?” Chelsea sputtered. “No, I’m not.”

“So,” Lucca said, turning to look back at her. It had sounded like she had been, but her eyes were dry. “So, are we still going on this walk? My feet hurt when I stand too long.”

Chelsea blinked at him, flabbergasted. She opened her mouth and closed it a few times before shaking her head.
“Lucca, please. I—”

“And Gabby finally calmed down,” Lucca interrupted, looking at her pout silently in her stroller. “Can we go now?”

Chelsea took a deep breath in and out before gesturing towards the door. “Yes. Let’s go.”

Lucca nodded, opening the door, and holding it for Chelsea as she rolled the stroller out the door. Gabby immediately started babbling once they got started, and Chelsea was distracted with trying to talk back to her. Lucca kept a safe distance behind them, his feet already getting sore.

~*~

Lucca frowned as he leaned against his door. He couldn’t make sense of Anya’s notes. Lucca had told Devon to tell her about the color of his energy ball. She confirmed in her notes that it was likely different because he wasn’t, well, her. She explained that blue calms her; it’s a color she connects with. As such, it makes sense for her energy to materialize in that color. For Lucca’s to look more orange meant that color resonated with him.

When Lucca read that note, he couldn’t help but think of what his mother had said the last time he saw her. *Usually, you have this orangey-yellow color around you. Like the sun.* Had Lucca just remembered that, and that’s why his orb was that color? Or was his mother not as crazy as he assumed?

Anya’s notes this time around focused on moving the force field Lucca managed to create. He was getting better at that now: instead of thinking of the ball and stretching it, he was able to just think of the shield and watch it materialize. Like he’d done with Devon. Anya left a note stating that was a good sign: it meant he was getting better at visualizing.

At that point, her notes instructed him to try to move the force field. She stated it’s a good basic offensive maneuver because it will essentially protect him from attacks while simultaneously pushing away anyone who might try to stop him during his escape. Stretching the ball into a shield—even materializing the shield immediately—wasn’t the hard part. But moving it from one point in space to another was what Lucca was struggling with.

It wasn’t as easy as just imagining the shield moving; when Lucca tried it, the shield would disappear and then reappear where he wanted it. He wasn’t sure what he was doing wrong: he was visualizing the shield moving from where it materialized to where he wanted it. But it still wouldn’t move.

And the burst of energy from the force field disappearing and then reappearing also kept the shield up longer than Lucca wanted. Typically, Lucca could make the force field disappear as easily as he made it appear. But when the force field jumped, it took even more energy to make it disappear. Lucca sighed with frustration as he reread Anya’s notes for the fiftieth time, and walked over to hide them under his mattress.

Once they were away, Lucca turned to face the door, materializing the force field. As always, it snapped into place as a thin, see-through, orangey circle. He then tried to move it, imagining it against the door. It disappeared and reappeared, stretching to cover the entirety of his door.

Lucca froze. He’d never seen the force field do that before. And it still didn’t do what he was trying to do. Lucca let out a breath, frustrated. He focused on letting the force field down, but it wouldn’t move. Shit. Good thing he still had plenty of time before dinner. Otherwise—
A knock at Lucca’s door made him jump. Lucca’s brain started moving, going a mile a minute.

“Yes?” he said, sure his voice wasn’t loud enough to be heard.

The door handle turned, and Lucca tried to quickly will the force field to come down. It didn’t move, however, and the door didn’t budge thanks to the force field. Lucca went still, his heart pounding.

“Lucca?” Monty’s voice said through the door. “What’s going on? Why can’t I get in?”

_shit, shit, shit, shit, shit._

“I don’t know,” Lucca said, walking over to the door. He placed his hand over the force field, trying to visualize it disappearing. It stayed right where it was. “I’m trying to pull on it, but it won’t open.”

“Do you have something in front of the door, Lucca?” Monty asked, his voice dangerous.

“No!” Lucca said immediately, not sure what to do. Was it possible for the force field to never go away? “I don’t know what’s going on. Monty, let me out!”

“Calm down, Lucca,” Monty said, his voice changing. Lucca sighed; he was believing that Lucca was genuinely stuck. “I’m going to go get the toolbox. I’ll be right back.”

“Wait!” Lucca called out, because he needed to sell this. “Monty, wait! Please let me out!”

“The door’s stuck, Lucca. I need to go get something so I can get you out. Okay? I won’t be gone long, so sit tight.”

Lucca let out a pathetic whine, stepping back from the door. He needed this force field gone before Monty got back. Lucca took a few deep breaths, trying to calm his racing heart. He visualized the shield going back to the shape it was normally: the yellow circle. He waited until the image was in his head before reaching for the buzzing through his body to send it towards the shield.

Slowly but surely, the force field changed back to the shape he was familiar with. Feeling a bit calmer, Lucca thought of the force field disappearing. It didn’t right away, but after he reached out to the buzzing energy surrounding it, it shrank until it was a small ball. Lucca stepped forward, holding out his palm to cradle it. As soon as his hand was under it, it disappeared.

Lucca let out a sigh of relief. At least Monty wouldn’t see it when he got in. Right on cue, Lucca heard Monty return. Something heavy dropped outside his door: likely the toolbox. Lucca backed away from the door, sitting on his bed. He listened to the sound of the power drill start and stop a bit. He had no idea what Monty was doing: he was sure Monty barely had any idea what he was doing.

Lucca waited, rubbing at his eyes until they were irritated and biting his lip. The drill turned off and Lucca heard Monty turn the doorknob again. This time, the door opened with ease. Monty walked in, looking worried. He quickly looked over Lucca, and Lucca looked up at him with the right amount of unease. He knew that Monty would see Lucca’s red eyes and worried lip and believe just about anything Lucca told him.

“What happened?” Monty asked, glancing back at the door.

“I don’t know,” Lucca said, pretending to be trying to keep the whine out of his voice. “I was taking a nap and I only woke up a little bit ago. My heart was racing a bit, so I stayed in bed before
I tried to get up. But then you came, and you couldn’t open the door, and I was stuck a—"

“Shhh,” Monty said, walking over to Lucca and pulling him on his feet. Lucca went, letting Monty wrap his arms around him in a hug. “It’s okay. The lock probably got stuck or something. Just don’t close your door fully until we can get someone out here to fix it, okay?”

Lucca nodded, hugging Monty tighter. They stayed like that for a while, Lucca enjoying the quiet. It was so rare when Monty was around. But, eventually, Monty did pull away. And he immediately sat down on Lucca’s bed, tugging on Lucca’s hand to join him. Lucca did, his previously racing heart slowing down a bit.

“Chelsea told me she had a talk with you today,” Monty started. “About the baby.”

Lucca blinked at Monty, then looked down as if just realizing what he was referring to. Why couldn’t Chelsea keep her big mouth shut?

“It’s fine,” Lucca said, though he already knew Monty wouldn’t believe him.

“Is it?” Monty, of course, asked. “I told her specifically not to mention it because I knew this would upset you.”

“I’m fine. As long as you’re sure…”

Lucca let his voice drift off, already tired of playing this game. Lucca had become quite the actor in recent months: since his reaction to most things was a calm “this won’t matter soon,” Lucca had to go out of his way to pretend to react to things normally. It was a bit of a challenge considering he’d disappear from Monty’s life soon. Still, Lucca hadn’t been caught yet.

“It’s okay to talk about it,” Monty said. “Do you want me to tell you why I decided this?”

Lucca really didn’t give a fuck. But he shook his head instead of verbalizing that. Not that it would do any good: Monty would tell him anyway. He wanted to remind Lucca of how much power he had over him. Lucca wasn’t going to be able to stop him from this.

“I did it,” Monty continued, ignoring Lucca’s response, “because I wanted to make this easier for you. Your blood pressure has been causing your doctors’ concern, and I didn’t want you upsetting yourself over this.”

“Okay,” Lucca said, keeping his eyes on the floor. It was the only way to prevent himself from rolling them.

Monty was quiet for a while, not saying anything. That was surprising: Lucca was sure that Monty would push this. Lucca realized over the last few months just how much Monty purposely set Lucca up to react drastically to something. It was only once Lucca felt no need to react—none of this would matter soon anyway—that he noticed the way Monty seemed to deflate when Lucca was calm at the upsetting things Monty did and said. The way Monty’s eyes would flash with disappointment if Lucca kept his wits about him.

It was disturbing when Lucca noticed it. But when he paused to think about it, it did make sense. Monty did, after all, set Lucca up to be raped by Devon. He purposely kept Lucca away from his mother, knowing it would upset him. He then told Devon to give Lucca an offer he couldn’t refuse. An offer he wanted Lucca to take. Just so he had a reason to punish Lucca.

Because, Lucca concluded, Monty liked punishing Lucca. It was more than just wanting control over Lucca; he had that easily. Monty put so much pressure on Lucca to be perfect because he
wanted Lucca to fall short. He wanted to have to bring Lucca in line; to discipline him. Lucca couldn’t understand why: he always assumed Monty controlling him would be enough.

But when Lucca was good, truly good, that bored Monty. It disappointed him. He liked chastising Lucca. He liked scolding Lucca. He liked threatening Lucca. And he liked following through on those threats. In the end, like every other man in the Nation, Monty was a sadist.

“What’s wrong, Lucca?” Monty finally said when the hush between them went on for far too long. “You’ve been very detached lately.”

Lucca shrugged. There was no way to answer that. Another setup.

“It must be depression,” Monty answered in lieu of Lucca’s silence. He reached to push a lock of Lucca’s hair behind his ear. “Or are you really upset about it?”

“The baby is going to be here soon,” Lucca said, his voice sounding stronger than he intended. “It’s not like I have long to be upset about it.”

“So you are upset.”

“I just feel like it’s a waste,” Lucca said, looking up at Monty. “Chelsea said she doesn’t want to, and it just seems like a waste.”

“A waste of what? We’ll be allowed to adopt. We’d only miss the first few weeks of our new baby’s life.”

That disgusted Lucca. His baby wasn’t something that could just be replaced. And yet that’s how he was already being treated. Replaceable. All because he was born the wrong gender. It took a bit out of Lucca to not react to that, but he managed to just nod at Monty’s words.

“Okay,” he said. “You’re right.”

Monty went quiet again, though a lot shorter this time. Lucca was sure Monty was watching him like a hawk, looking for the slightest break. Lucca wouldn’t give it to him. He had to remain calm.

“Your mother is pregnant again,” Monty said.

Lucca went still, already having a bad feeling about where this was going.

“I believe she’s almost twelve weeks now. Or maybe thirteen? Either way, I thought it was quite the coincidence. Blood tests came back a boy. We still have to wait a few more weeks to confirm it with an ultrasound, but I have no doubts that she’s having a boy.”

Lucca nodded, keeping his eyes down. He hated Monty. And he repeated that mantra in his head again and again and again. He hated Monty. He hated Monty. He hated Monty.

“Considering my connections with the Reprogramming Center, I think I can make it happen. I thought you’d like that: having your little brother here.”

Lucca stood up. Monty reacted quickly, grabbing Lucca’s wrist so he couldn’t go too far. Lucca took a deep breath in before turning to him.

“What?” Lucca asked. “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to be honest,” Monty said, his voice dropping to that octave that let Lucca know he was walking on thin ice.
“I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel about this, Monty,” Lucca lied. “The baby’s coming soon. And my feet hurt, and everyone keeps talking about my blood pressure, and this pregnancy has been harder than the last one, and now everyone keeps telling me he’s going to be taken away and I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do with all of this.”

Lucca’s rant got the desired affect: Monty shushed Lucca gently, pulling him in so Lucca was forced to stand closer to him. He slid his hands up and down Lucca’s arms as if trying to calm him.

“I just want you to be honest, Lucca,” Monty repeated. “This is why I get so upset. You’re always trying to hide how you feel. And once it overwhelms you, it puts you in this state and I’m the one who has to bring you down from it.”

“You’re going to give me a lobotomy soon, so what does it matter?” Lucca snapped before he could stop himself.

_Fuck._

“Is that what all of this is about?” Monty asked, his eyebrows rising as if he was shocked. Was he shocked? “You’re still upset about that?”

_No._

“I don’t know,” Lucca said, looking away. “Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t like it.”

“Do you still think I’m being unfair?”

_Yes._

“No. Not really.”

“So you understand why I’ve made this decision?”

_Fuck off._

“Yes.”

“Then what is the problem?”

“I don’t like it,” Lucca repeated. “I don’t want to do it, and you’re making me anyway.”

“I’m sure I’ve made you do a lot of things, yet you’re never reacted like this before.”

Lucca took a deep breath in and out. He was so tired from this conversation. He just wanted it over. He looked over Monty’s head, looking out the window to the gray sky. They’d been getting a lot of rain lately: fall was coming. The baby was coming.

And Lucca would be leaving.

“You’re doing to me what they did to my mother,” Lucca said, knowing Monty would believe this. “I hate what they did to her, Monty. I hate it. So, yes, it’s upsetting that you want to do the same thing to me.”

Monty tugged on Lucca’s arms again, pulling him even closer. Lucca let Monty lead them both a bit further on the bed so that Lucca could comfortably sit on Monty’s lap. Monty was going to fuck him when this conversation was over: Lucca knew that as soon as Monty entered. At least he was going to let Lucca on top: it was too hard being on bottom these days with his pregnant belly.
Monty rested his hands on Lucca’s stomach, the baby not reacting at all to the touch. Lucca waited, trying to prepare for whatever bullshit was about to happen next.

“You’ve seen your mother,” Monty said, his voice gentle. “You know she’s not some mindless zombie, Lucca.”

“She wasn’t herself,” Lucca insisted.

“She was fine and happy.”

“She was confused and disoriented.”

“Disoriented,” Monty repeated, his eyes hardening. “Did you read that word somewhere?”

Lucca just blinked at him. “No. I just—I know what ‘disoriented’ means.”

“Hmmm. Did she know who you were, Lucca?”

“Yes. But—”

“I left you with her for a while. Were you able to talk to her?”

“Yes.”

“Was she lucid? Could you understand her?”

“Yes, Monty. Bu—”

“So, she was fine. And you will be too.”

Lucca just sighed, shaking his head. He wasn’t sure why he was indulging this argument. This went beyond the acting he wanted to do: this was real. Lucca’s mother was a trigger: Monty knew that and was using her to get a rise out of him. Lucca had to keep that in mind.

“Okay,” he finally said.

“There you go again,” Monty chastised. “Hiding how you feel instead of being honest.”

“What do you want from me?” Lucca snapped, angry now. “I say how I feel, and you tell me I’m wrong. I accept what you say, and that’s wrong. Tell me what is the right way to feel about this, Monty. Tell me and I’ll feel it right now. Tell me and I’ll do it!”

“You need to calm down,” Monty said, sitting up straighter and gripping Lucca’s chin to get his attention. “It’s not about how I want you to feel, Lucca. It’s an exercise, remember? When your thoughts become overwhelmed with emotion, you need to talk them down. Remind yourself that your worries and fears aren’t rational. That’s all I’m trying to help you do.”

“That’s not how it feels,” Lucca insisted. “It feels like you’re telling me I’m wrong.”

“Irrational thoughts aren’t right.”

That was a nice roundabout way of saying Lucca was wrong. But Lucca just turned away, as if thinking about it. He needed to get a grip or else this was going to go on forever.

“Okay,” Lucca said. “Maybe I’m more worried than I need to be.”
“You don’t need to be scared about this, Lucca,” Monty said, rubbing Lucca’s arm again. “I would never agree to this if I thought it would somehow ruin you.”

Lucca nodded. “Okay. I-I trust you, then.”

Monty watched Lucca for a bit, probably trying to determine if Lucca meant that or was just saying it to shut him up. It should have been obvious which one it was. Monty did eventually let out a labored breath, however, and gave Lucca a gentle smile.

“Still don’t like it, huh?” he asked.

Lucca shook his head.

“But you trust me, right Lucca?”

Lucca met Monty’s eyes, counting to ten in his head. He needed to pause for just the right amount of time. Once he was done counting, he took a deep breath in and out before nodding. Monty fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Lucca could tell from the way his face softened and his smile grew at Lucca’s answer.

“Good,” he said, reaching up and resting his hand on Lucca’s neck. “And when you feel stressed, you know you can always come to me for a little relief.”

Lucca played stupid until Monty pulled him down into a kiss. Lucca sucked in a breath—as if shocked—and let Monty lead the kiss. Another performance pulled off brilliantly.

Chapter End Notes

First off, I want to apologize for my bad attitude on Wednesday. I was just annoyed at the time because of some things I had no control over, and in true Gemini fashion, I had to be mad for a bit before I could get over it.

That said, my friend's wedding was yesterday! It was lovely and fun and I can't believe she's married! My first close friend to be married! Insane! And I reconnected with a guy friend from hs I haven't seen in almost ten years (he's also technically my ex, from before I realized I was a lesbian), and that was really fun. He's a nut still lol. I was absolutely crying during the ceremony. Whoever told my friend it was okay for her to walk down the isle to Kina Grannis' cover of Can't Help Falling in Love should be shot because I was SOBBING! Ugh. Ruined my makeup more than the humidity did lol.

But, now that it's over and that stress is DONE with, guess what that means? You know it: ANOTHER POSTING BOMB!

Also helped by the fact that I'm on a staycation! Woot! Lol.

This chapter was pretty long, and the next one is gonna have you crying just like I was at my friend's wedding. And then after that chapter, the final sequence begins! Ahhh, I can't WAIT! Not only for it to almost be over, but the fact that you guys are finally going to read it. Idk, I just feel like you all are going to LOVE it.

I will admit that I've been going back and forth on whether to expand the ending a bit. I don't think I will, but it's tempting. Maybe I'll do a few one shot filler/aftermath stories
just to give a little more. And to maybe prep for the next story. I'll admit that I haven't been working much on the next story. I thought about dropping the idea of working on it from now until October when I switch gears for NaNoWriMo. I felt like I just needed a break from all the pressure I was putting myself under tbqh.

Now that the wedding is over and I have this week to relax, however, I'm hoping to just recharge, rest, and then get started. I did originally plan to write all week, but I have other things I want to do that I often don't take the time to do, so I want this week to really be about recharging and resting. Giving myself a break for once. So we'll see.

Anyway, hope you all enjoyed the update! Please, as always, let me know what you think! And I hope you guys prepare yourselves for all the craziness this week of posting will bring!
“So, they’re leaving?”

Nicolai nodded, focused on the tiny hat he was trying to knit. He really wasn’t that good at this, but Lucca was still barely able to crotchet more than a blanket, so he couldn’t judge. Eli, however, was finishing up a tiny green and blue sweater to go along with small mittens and booties that he’d made.

The families were out with the children at an apple picking event at a local farm. Someone decided it would be a good idea to have the surrogates stay in Lucca’s room until they got back to make candied apples with the children. Lucca knew the real reason was because Milos had fallen into a melancholy recently, and the Langstons were too lazy to hire a chaperone to watch him. He was currently sleeping in Lucca’s bed while Kingsley sat next to him, reading a book that Lucca knew without asking Kingsley had stolen from the Yakubus’ library.

Nicolai had just revealed that Leo and Lindsay were moving to Tennessee. Hearing that pissed Lucca off for some reason; as if Leo was running away from the blood on his hands. But Nicolai had shaken his head when Lucca wondered aloud if Rudy was the reason for this choice.

“No,” he said, pausing to stretch out his fingers. “Marjorie said Leo got stationed out there. I guess he’s getting deployed early next year, so he has to go for training.”

“He could go for training and Lindsay could stay here,” Eli said, frowning as he looked up from his sweater. “He doesn’t have to move all the way out there.”

“Yes, he does,” Nicolai said, looking up at him. “You know how Lindsay went missing all those months after—afterward? The story was she was visiting her sick mother. Marjorie said that’s a lie. She was sent for reprogramming.”

Lucca looked up at that. It usually took a lot for a wife to be reprogrammed. Especially an infertile one. Lucca caught Nicolai’s eye. Nicolai raised an eyebrow, communicating something. It took a minute for understanding to dawn on him. Any woman, no matter her fertility status, would be sent to reprogramming for homosexual inclinations.

“So, Leo found out,” Lucca said.

“That’s what Marjorie thinks,” Nicolai said, returning to his hat.

“Monty knew about it. I don’t think he cared.”

“Monty’s fucking weird,” Nicolai said, pausing to look guiltily at Lucca. “Sorry. I know we shouldn’t talk about others’ families. But Monty isn’t like other guys.”
“He’s not,” Eli agreed. “Like that stunt he pulled the other day you were telling us about. Why does he care how you feel about what they’re going to do with the baby? Doesn’t make sense to me.”

Lucca smiled, looking over at his bed at Kingsley.

“Do you have an opinion on Monty?” Lucca asked him. “Since everyone’s sharing?”

Kingsley paused in his reading, looking up at them. He shrugged, then seemed to think about it.

“He does seem off, I guess. He’s definitely an academic.”

“What does that mean?” Nicolai asked him.

“It’s very cut and dry with the military men,” Kingsley continued, returning to his book. “How they treat us is, well, just what you’d expect. Malik knows I take his books and doesn’t care as long as I don’t make it known how much I read. He doesn’t care about my thoughts or feelings on anything; I’m here to give him and Rachel children. Then I’m here to help raise them. It’s not more complicated than that.”

“Yes, that’s it!” Nicolai said, turning to Lucca. “That’s exactly it! Monty cares too much. Why does he care? It’s weird.”

“And if he knew about Lindsay and Chelsea,” Eli said, thinking more into it now, “why doesn’t he care about that? Most men would have a bigger problem with their wives cheating on them—especially with a woman—than they would over how their surrogate feels about the baby they’re about to have being taken away.”

“Right? It’s weird. It’s like he’s not worried about the right things.”

“Or he’s in love with the wrong person.”

Nicolai’s head jerk back to Lucca at that, his eyes wide.

“Is that what that is?” he asked, disgust heavy in his voice. “He loves you?”

Lucca felt put on the spot suddenly. He glanced over at Kingsley, and saw that he’d paused in his reading again to watch him. Fuck. Lucca turned back to Nicolai and shrugged.

“I don’t know,” he lied. “I mean, we were childhood friends. I’m sure that has something to do with it.”

“So, he fell in love with you,” Nicolai said, a devious smile crawling up his lips. “Before he even knew what you were, right? And he still loves you. Or—”

“That sounds like the plot to a terrible romance novel,” Kingsley said from the bed, returning to his book.

“Hmm, I guess,” Nicolai said, shrugging. He returned to his hat, finishing it up entirely. “Maybe it’s just guilt, then? Or maybe he feels bad for you, so he wants to make you happy. Ew. That’s so lame.”

Eli laughed, reaching for the craft scissors he’d brought that were sitting on the table, and cutting the end of his yarn. He finished up the sweater, holding it up. It looked good: like something store bought.
“Done,” he said, satisfied. He looked over at Nicolai while he grabbed the mittens and booties to go with it. He folded up the sweater and put them on top. “Are you done?”

“Almost,” Nicolai said, his hands moving quickly. “I’m not as good at this as you are.”

“You just have less years of practice,” Eli said patiently.

“At least you guys are making something useful,” Lucca said, chuckling as he continued with his basic blanket. “All I can do are blankets.”

“Done,” Nicolai declared, handing the hat to Eli. He looked at Lucca. “We know; you suck at this.”

“I don’t suck,” Lucca laughed. “I just—”

“It’s fine,” Eli said, putting the hat on top of the clothes and then pushing them over to Lucca. “We can make them for you.”

Lucca paused, looking at the clothes. They were the perfect size for a newborn baby; the sweater in particular was big enough to allow for a few months of growth. Lucca raised his gaze to them, at the expecting look on their faces. Nicolai’s grin was so wide that Lucca wondered distantly if it hurt.

“You’re giving these to me?” Lucca asked, putting his own needle and yarn down. “Why?”

“Well, think of it like a small baby shower,” Nicolai said. “I know Chelsea and Monty aren’t doing anything since they’re giving him up. And even if he never gets to use them, you can use them for the baby they’ll adopt. Or the next one if he’s too big. It was Eli’s idea.”

“I—” Eli said, obviously not expecting Nicolai to throw that out there. He shrugged, shyly. “Even if they’re not going to acknowledge this baby, you’re still carrying him. You still, I don’t know, connect with him. He’s still yours.”

The way Eli said the last part broke Lucca’s heart. Lucca felt like the biggest fraud. How long did it take them to knit all these clothes for Lucca? For a baby they thought he was mourning? How could Lucca accept these clothes like he wasn’t just weeks away from attempting to take his unborn baby out of the Nation?

And when Lucca thought that, his thoughts spiraled. He wasn’t mourning because he was leaving. And by leaving, Eli and Nicolai and even Kingsley and Milos would remain stuck here. They were knitting him baby clothes in attempt to make him feel better when he was about to be free. How could he do this? How could he keep lying to them like this?

Unsure of what else to do, Lucca stood up abruptly. He caught himself on the edge of the table, Nicolai rising as well.

“Lucca?” he asked, reaching out to him. “Are you okay?”

Lucca just shook his head, turning and rushing out of the room. He didn’t have anywhere to go. He went to the first place he could think of: the bathroom. He shut the door, leaning against it as he tried to catch his breath. Tears were stinging his eyes, his own selfishness hitting him like a ton of bricks. He’d been so focused on getting his baby out—getting himself out—that he’d completely forgotten what he’d be leaving behind.

It was selfish. Lucca had this huge secret: he was leaving. He knew someone who could sneak him
out. Someone who might be able to sneak them all out. Maybe. Lucca hadn’t asked. Because he hadn’t thought of them. He’d been selfish about this entire thing. Eli just watched his son be taken away, and all he could do was knit baby clothes to help Lucca cope with that same experience. Meanwhile, Lucca knew he wouldn’t have to go through that.

A knock on the door made Lucca jump. He didn’t move, keeping his weight on the door to keep anyone out.

“Lucca,” Eli said through the door. “Can we come in? Please?”

Lucca wanted to say no. He knew that if he did, they’d leave him alone. Give him the space. But that was him being selfish again. Everything Lucca was doing was unfair. Why was he so selfish? Why couldn’t he be thoughtful like Eli and Nicolai?

“Lucca?” Eli tried again. “Can you at least say something so—”

Lucca turned, opening the door and moving so they could walk in. He wiped his face as he shut the door after them, keeping his face hidden. He couldn’t face them knowing he was keeping this from them.

“What’s wrong?” Nicolai asked. “It’s not like you to get that sentimental.”

“Was it because of what I said about them taking the baby?” Eli asked. “I didn’t mean to up—”

“That’s not it,” Lucca said, because he couldn’t let Eli think that.

“Then what it is? You said you’d be open with us, Lucca.”

Lucca froze at that. He did promise that. But he couldn’t tell them this. It would put them in danger if he dared to explain what was really upsetting him. Would they hate him? Would they rat him out? Would he blame them if they did? He was terrified because he had no idea what the right thing to do was. He hated keeping this from them, but he couldn’t tell them if they ruined his chance of saving his baby.

He would choose his baby over them a million times if he had to.

“Did Monty do something again?” Nicolai asked. “C’mon, Lucca, you’re scaring us.”

“I can’t say,” Lucca said, shaking his head.

“Why not?”

“Because if you say something to anyone, you’ll ruin everything. And I can’t…” Lucca was at a loss for words.

“We’re not going to narc on you, Lucca,” Nicolai snapped.

“It wouldn’t be fair to ask you to keep this,” Lucca insisted. “You’d have to tell.”

“I don’t care if you fucking killed someone, Lucca. If you tell me to take it to my grave, I will. If you told me you had a coat hanger hidden in here that you planned on using tonight, I wouldn’t say a goddamn word if you asked me not to. Do you really not trust us?”

“Lucca,” Eli said, stepping in because it was obvious that Nicolai was getting upset. “Lucca, in order for this to work—in order for us to be there for each other the way we agreed—you have to believe that we will keep whatever secret you’re hiding. How can we be there for each other if we
“Can’t trust each other?”

“What if I said I was going to kill myself?” Lucca said, turning around.

Lucca caught it immediately; the hurt that spread on Nicolai’s face. Eli looked resigned; as if maybe he suspected this. But Nicolai looked like he’d been punched in the gut.

“You promised, Lucca,” he said, his voice shaking. “You swore that you—”

“Would you tell?” Lucca demanded, fixing his face on him. “Would you tell if it wasn’t a coat hanger I have hidden here, but a huge bottle of bleach or something that I planned on guzzling tonight? If I begged you not to tell, would you really not say anything knowing what I was going to do?”

“That’s not fair, Lucca,” Eli said, calmly. “If you’re going to hurt yourself, we have the right to try to protect you.”

“So you would tell? I can’t tell you this then, because my baby—” Lucca cut himself off then, looking away.

“What about your baby?” Eli asked, still calm. How was he still calm through all this?

Lucca just shook his head. “I have to do this for him.” Lucca’s voice was small; who was he trying to convince here? “I have to do this for him. So, if it means not trusting you, hurting you even, and keeping this secret to myself, then I have to do this. I have to choose him. I’m sorry. I have to.”

There was a moment of silence between them. Lucca was too terrified to look at them to try to gauge their reaction. They must be pissed. They’ll probably never want to talk to him again. Maybe it was better like this, then. Better that Lucca burns this bridge now so that it’s easier for him to move on, and act when the time came.

“This thing,” Eli asked, breaking the silence. “You’re not going to hurt yourself, right?”

Lucca shook his head.

“So that’s not the secret you’re asking us to keep. This one would put your baby at risk if we told?” Lucca nodded.

“It’s not the same thing, then, Lucca. Asking us to not tell when you’re saying you’re going to hurt yourself isn’t the same as asking us to keep a secret so your baby is safe and okay.”

Lucca swallowed. That actually made sense.

“Even if this secret is the worst thing you could do, if it meant you’re safe and your baby will be safe, I would die before I speak of it.”

Lucca looked up, meeting Eli’s eyes. Not that Lucca needed to do that to verify that Eli was telling the truth: Lucca could hear it in his voice. But Lucca could see the conviction in Eli’s eyes. The way he was almost begging Lucca to believe him with his face. And Lucca did believe him. It still felt like the wrong thing to do, but maybe it was a risk worth taking. He took a deep breath in and out, looking between Eli and Nicolai.

“You can’t tell anyone,” he said. “Not even Kingsley and Milos. Especially not them. I’m serious; you can’t tell a soul. No matter what.”
“We won’t,” Nicolai said.

Lucca nodded. He believed Nicolai too. He took a few deep breaths, terror ripping the words from his lips. He could trust them with this. He was sure of it.

“I got upset,” Lucca said, looking at the space between them instead of at them, “because you’re so concerned about me losing my baby. And how I’ll feel about it. And I felt horrible because I’m not going to lose my baby. I—I’m leaving.”

“Leaving?” Nicolai asked. “Leaving where?”

“Here. The Nation, I mean. Before I give birth, I’m going to leave. To Faust City.”

There was a moment of silence again. Lucca looked up, saw Nicolai and Eli look at each other in confusion. They didn’t understand. Eli turned to Lucca first.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Does Monty approve of this?”

“Monty doesn’t know,” Lucca said. “I—what I mean is—it’s a long story. You know my doctor who I’ve been seeing for my lobotomy? His wife is from Faust City.”

“Wait,” Eli said, scrunching his eyebrows as he thought. “That story I heard a while ago about the doctor whose pregnant wife lied about her identity and ran off to Faust City was his wife?”

“Whoa, what?” Nicolai asked. “I didn’t hear about that. What are you talking about?”

“This doctor’s wife went missing right after she told him she was pregnant. I know they suspected him of doing something at first, but then they found out that she was originally from Faust City and lied about her identity so she could pretend she was infertile. They think she’s back in Faust City now.”

“She is,” Lucca said. “Monty knows Devon, and I ended up meeting her. She offered to help me leave, so I took her up on that.”

“Why?” Nicolai asked, his eyes narrowing. He was suspicious. “Why would she to help you?”

Lucca hesitated. He didn’t want to talk about this. This wasn’t the point. He shook his head.

“Because a while ago, Devon—he did something to me and I guess she felt bad about it. So, she offered to help me leave.”

“Your doctor—her husband is helping you too?” Eli asked.

Lucca nodded. Eli and Nicolai went silent for a while, each looking around the bathroom as they processed this. Lucca held his breath, his body tense. Even if it was hard to wrap their minds around it, they had to keep this secret. Lucca wasn’t sure what he’d do if they threatened to tell.

“How long have you known about this?” Eli asked as Nicolai walked over to the tub and sat down on the edge. “How long have you known you were leaving?”

Tears started stinging his eyes, trying to think of how to say this. How to go through the logic of what made him decide to call Anya. He didn’t want them to blame themselves; it wasn’t their faults.

“Since my twenty-week checkup,” Lucca said. “That’s when I reached out to her. I might have known before then, though. When you guys told me I had to open up.”
Nicolai’s head snapped up. “So we pushed you to it? By asking you to not fucking kill yourself?”

Lucca shook his head. “No. That’s not what I meant. I—”

Lucca cut himself off. Nicolai was making this hard. Lucca knew out of the two of them, Nicolai would be the one to challenge him. Eli was always the calm one. The mature one. Nicolai was the one with the attitude. He was the one who always called Lucca out. And he knew that about himself: that when his emotions ran high, he couldn’t help but snark and snap. That was why he took a walk when Lucca was in labor with Gabby: so he wouldn’t go off on Lucca unfairly.

Nicolai felt his emotions and expressed it. Not in the whiny way that Milos expressed his emotions. Nicolai expressed it at the right time, away from any men or wives who would be offended. He expressed it with just enough bite to sting, but never too damaging. He expressed it with anger, with laughter, and with tears. Lucca had no idea how he could manage to stay so human in all this. Lucca had always admired Nicolai for that.

That was why Lucca wanted to get this right.

“I did plan on killing myself,” Lucca admitted. He had never said that out loud before. It felt weird saying something like that so casually. “After Monty told me he planned on giving me a lobotomy, I planned on doing it. I was going to wait because I rationalized in my head that I needed to hear what I was having. That if I was going to have a girl, I’d kill myself right away. But if it was a boy, I’d wait and kill myself after giving birth, but before the lobotomy. Somehow. It doesn’t make sense now, but it did then.

“So when you asked me to be open and everything, I felt lost. I didn’t want to stay alive and let Monty do that to me, but I didn’t—I couldn’t do what I was planning. And then at my twenty-week, when I heard I was having a surrogate, I got really scared. I thought about how I was taken from my mother, and all the surrogates I knew at the Center, and I thought about Tristian—”

Lucca’s voice trailed off there, the air tensing a bit. Lucca glanced at Eli, saw the way his jaw tensed at Tristian’s name. No one really called Tristian by his name aloud before. Lucca was sure few people knew the name Eli gave his surrogate child. But under the pain, Eli’s eyes were trained on Lucca. Sympathetic and kind. He was listening. He wanted to understand.

And that was Eli’s gift: it was why he was so mature. He didn’t ask questions just to get a response, nor did he speak just to make noise. He always wanted to understand those around him. And he adjusts as he realizes where others’ limits are. He was gentle with Milos, but he could shit talk with Nicolai easily. He didn’t feel uncomfortable in Kingsley’s silence, nor did he ever balk at Lucca’s chaotic emotions. He’d been patient with Rudy all through his melancholy. Lucca had always admired Eli for that.

That was why Lucca wanted to help him understand.

“I couldn’t let them do that,” Lucca continued. “I couldn’t let them take him and hurt him the way they hurt us. I knew Anya would help me if I asked, so I reached out to her. But if I’m honest, I don’t think the gender would have mattered once I decided to live. When I was planning to die, it mattered for some reason. If I was going to die, I think I would have killed myself before having a surrogate baby.

“But since I was planning to stay alive, I had to do something. I just had to do something. And when I found out what he was, even before Chelsea told me they were giving him up right away, I just had to do something.”
“Why did the clothes upset you, then?” Eli asked, his voice gentle. His face was still scrunched up a bit in confusion. “Shouldn’t you be happy if you’re leaving?”

“Because it’s selfish,” Lucca said, the tears slipping then. He tried to wipe them away, but they kept pouring anyway. “I’m leaving everyone just to save myself and one baby. I’m leaving Gabby. I’m leaving Chelsea. And I’m leaving you guys. And then you guys made me those clothes to try to make me feel better about something that wasn’t even happening. And it made me feel like the most selfish person in the world.”

“It is,” Nicolai snapped, standing. He walked over to Lucca until he was standing right in front of him, his face red. “I didn’t want you to kill yourself because I wanted you here, Lucca. With us. And now you’re just leaving. And you’ve known this for months, and you’re only just now telling us? It’s very fucking selfish.”

The tears really started to pour now, a sob escaping Lucca’s lips. Maybe this was the real reason he didn’t want to say anything; maybe he just didn’t want to admit how selfish he was being. How cruel he was being. How many people he’d hurt by leaving. It was easier to move forward when he didn’t have to worry about all that. And it was nice to push through his days without thinking of it.

But it would have been crueler, Lucca decided, to have left Eli and Nicolai without telling them what was happening. To just disappear and have them assume the worst. To have them mourn him when he was off living a new life. A free life. Wouldn’t that have been more selfish?

Lucca really wasn’t sure. Both options sounded selfish. Leaving was selfish, even if it was the only thing he could do to save his baby. He brought his palms to his face, scrubbing at his eyes until they hurt.

Lucca felt a hand at his shoulder, and he looked up just as Nicolai pulled him into a hug. The gesture surprised him: wasn’t Nicolai mad at him? But Nicolai’s embrace was strong. Fierce. Lucca would be a fool to not feel all the love permeating from it. And it made Lucca cry again, even as he hugged Nicolai back.

Nicolai hugged him the entire time he cried.

“It must have been hard keeping this to yourself,” Eli said once Lucca got a bit of control over his sobs. “It’s not an easy secret to tell.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nicolai responded in his blasé way to blow off Eli’s words. “I’m not blaming him. It’s just—I don’t want him to go.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said, his voice sounding more like a small wail than anything else.

“Shut up,” Nicolai said, detangling them from each other. He held on to Lucca’s arms, at his elbow, his eyes shining as he looked down at Lucca. “I’m just surprised. And maybe even a little jealous.”

Lucca let out a bitter chuckle. Nicolai smiled too, shaking his head.

“When is this happening?” Eli asked. “You’re due pretty soon. You’ll have to leave before then, right?”

Lucca nodded. “Kinda. When I go to the hospital to have the baby is when we’re going to do it.”

“Isn’t that cutting it close?”
“Yeah. But it’s the best shot we have. I’m already going to be there longer to get a lobotomy too, so it’s just a matter of delaying my labor and getting me out.”

Eli nodded, thinking on that. Then, he stepped forward and pulled Lucca into a hug as well. Nicolai was forced to let go of him, his hands lingering as long as he could. Lucca felt so terrible accepting their hugs. Their kindness. He didn’t deserve it.

“It’s going to be dangerous,” Eli said to him when he finally let him go. “If you’re going to do this, make sure you really get out.”

Lucca looked up at him, confused. “You’re not mad at me for running away?”

“Of course not. How could we be?”

“Shouldn’t I just suck it up and get with the program?”

“It’s different for you,” Nicolai answered. “You’ve always been different from us. It was like we were just saying: Monty loves you, doesn’t he?”

Lucca hesitated, not sure if he wanted to answer that. They’d been joking earlier. But how often were their jokes simply thinly veiled truths? How often did they have to dance around what they really meant with each other? It was a dance they were all familiar with by now. So Lucca nodded his answer.

“That’s why he’s like that,” Nicolai said with a heavy sigh. “It’s easier for us because there’s always that wall between us and the men. We’re there to provide a service. It’s easy to compartmentalize all of that. We don’t have to pretend to love them over all the shit they do to us.”

“Shouldn’t it be easier then?” Lucca asked, his voice coming out as a half sob. “If he loves me, shouldn’t this be easier? Shouldn’t I want to stay?”

“Monty’s love conflicts with your duties,” Eli said. “You can’t be his broodmare and his wife. At best, you end up his whore. It just doesn’t work like that, Lucca. You two were doomed the second he decided he loved you.”

Lucca nodded. He knew that. He’d always known that. He knew it was impossible for Monty to own Lucca and then try to love him. Knew it would turn out like this. Maybe he didn’t realize just how horrible it would turn, but Lucca always knew. The familiarity Monty brought didn’t overpower the horror a future with Monty was in reality. Lucca was a fool to believe nostalgia over the truth.

Lucca remembered that day in the cabin: that was the truth he realized then. It dangled in front of him all these years. At moments, he turned to it, letting it house the hatred that had been growing in his heart. It was hard to put it in words: that he and Monty were doomed together. There was never a chance of them being happy together. Lucca realized that truth back then. Monty was the only one still desperate to believe in the fantasy.

“I have to leave,” Lucca said, more to himself than to them. “I can’t stay here with him. I have a chance and—”

“Then go,” Nicolai said, his hand back on Lucca’s arm. Comforting. “Lucca, if you have a chance to escape, then go.”

“It’s still selfish,” Lucca muttered.
One last plea for someone to tell him not to do this.

“It is,” Nicolai repeated. “But Lucca, I’d rather you be selfish and alive for it than to give up this chance just for us.”

“But Gabby—”

“Isn’t yours,” Eli reminded him. “But this baby, if you can get out, will be.”

“And please don’t even try to act like you’ll stay for Chelsea,” Nicolai said with a roll of his eyes.

Lucca chuckled, the tears starting up again. He hadn’t expected this. He didn’t feel like he was worthy of their approval. But at the same time, the thought of leaving had never felt wrong. Sure, Lucca felt guilty. And there were times where his guilt felt too loud for him to think. But in the end, it never felt like the wrong decision. And now Eli and Nicolai were confirming that it wasn’t.

How could he back out now?

“I’m going to miss you guys,” Lucca admitted. He had no idea if he’d be able to make friends like this in Faust City. “I still feel like I’m fucking you over.”

“Oh, my god,” Nicolai said, dramatically. “Stop being so selfish; this isn’t about you. You want to do something for us? Those clothes I spent all summer slaving over—”

“You made one hat,” Eli interrupted with a smile.

“One hat that took me all summer to make,” Nicolai corrected. He turned back to Lucca, his eyes serious. “Take them with you. Let your little angel wear them.”

Lucca nodded. He was sure he could manage that. Somehow.

“I’m serious. No matter what, don’t lose them or get them stolen or sell them. Take them and have him wear them. And when he’s too big for them, keep them long enough that you can show them to him. So he’ll know that we all just wanted him safe and happy.”

“And free,” Eli finished.

Lucca nodded. “Okay. I will.”

And because he couldn’t contain himself anymore, he grabbed them both and pulled them into a hug. They immediately returned it, and Lucca had never felt more support than he did in this moment.

“Thank you,” he said, holding back his tears. They didn’t want his tears in this moment: they wanted his resolve. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Did you guys cry? Did anyone cry? Or was that just me?

Gah, writing this hurt!

I hope this answered some questions regarding what would be happening with Gabby
and the other surrogates. There was just no way to work it that Lucca could get Gabby out, too. I know you guys hate that, but it's just the hard truth. You'll see next chapter (or the one after that?????) that Gabby wouldn't even be in the hospital.

With that in mind, I humbly ask you guys to keep in mind that this is a story about Lucca. What I mean by that is this is a story about how the Nation has impacted him personally. It's not a Hunger Games "take down the government" story. In fact, I think Hunger Games was strongest when the story was about a girl trying to survive in an unfair system. While it's standard for dystopians to be about some small resistance group taking down the big, bad government, that wasn't the focus of this story when I started. And I don't know if that would be a good place to take this story.

That being said, I'm very up in the air about how the third story will go in this; I mostly just know what characters I'll be working with, but I'm not sure what the plot and focus will be. So there is time for me to make the last story more like that. Just know it will not be happening in this story, nor in the next one (though civil war does almost break out in the next one lol).

There's more I want to say on this, but I can't at this point without spoiling things.

Next chapter will be slower, I'll admit, but Wednesday's and Thursday's chapters are going to have you on the edge of your seats ngl. I'll try to get them out earlier in the day. The only reason this one was so late is because my computer was doing that thing where it was acting stupid so I'd update it instead of putting it off further. So I did, but the update took, like, three hours! Rude! Like I wasn't in the middle of something! Lol.

Anyway, hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. This is the last we'll see of the surrogates, unfortunately. It's a bit bitter sweet, but the plot must, FINALLY, come to a close. -sigh-

Leave comments as always! Thanks guys!
Chapter 60

Chapter Summary

The calm before the storm...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Five more days,” Devon said, filling out the final assessment form. He paused to throw Lucca a small grin. “Excited?”

“I thought I was going to go early again,” Lucca said, placing a hand on his stomach. “This morning, I had really bad contractions. I wasn’t sure if I should say something to Monty. But they got weaker, and they stopped entirely when I was able to lie down after breakfast.”

“Braxton Hicks contractions,” Devon said, nodding. “It’s common at this stage. It’s your body getting ready for the real deal.”

“I don’t need a warmup; I’ve done this before.”

Devon laughed at that. “You’re not in control of your body for the most part, if you’ve noticed.”

“I’ve noticed,” Lucca muttered, shifting in a futile attempt to get comfortable. “Any new assignments from Anya?”

“No,” Devon said, finishing up his form. “She did want me to tell you to remember that magic is in the blood. Not sure what that’s supposed to mean, but she said now is a good time to really connect with that. She’s an odd witch, my Anya.”

Lucca thought of that. When Anya said that previously, she was referring to magic being passed down through the bloodline. Lucca placed a hand on his stomach. Did the fact that he was learning how to use magic mean his child has a better chance of catching on to it? And what did she mean by connecting to it? The blood or his baby?

“Oh, I finally got pictures of the baby,” Devon said, pulling out his phone. He pushed a few buttons before turning it so Lucca could see. “Little Aaliyah. Isn’t she precious?”

Lucca smiled. The baby in the picture was sleeping, wearing a yellow sweater and pants combo with sheep on them. Her skin was a pretty light almond color, her hair thick and a shade of copper she didn’t get from any of her parents.

“Sure that’s your kid?” Lucca half joked.

“Ha ha,” Devon said, humorlessly. “It’s a family trait on her side. Anya said it typically falls out and then she’ll grow darker hair.”

“So if it comes back that same color, you’ll worry that she’s not yours then?”

“You’re in a good mood,” Devon said, taking his phone back. “Maybe I should foil the plan so
you’re stuck here.”

“What a stupid thing to say when I know your Anya would castrate you for even thinking it.”

“Good mood and comfortable. My Anya is a bad influence on you.”

Lucca scoffed, shaking his head. “Are we sure this is going to work? This plan?”

“Barring someone catching on before we can get out of dodge, it should,” Devon said. “You won’t need to do anything but moan sweetly like you do.”

“You’re disgusting,” Lucca told him.

“You’re surprised?”

Lucca rolled his eyes, watching Devon return to his phone. His face softened into another smile as he scrolled through it. Probably more pictures of Aaliyah.


Devon cut his eyes up at Lucca, as if annoyed that Lucca was ruining his time gushing over his baby. He straightened up, shrugging his shoulders.

“It is, actually,” he said. “Her family is known for it.”

“Known? Oh, are they famous?”

Devon smirked. “They are, actually. You’d probably shit your pants after meeting them.”

“You think I’ll meet them?”

“Probably. Anya intends to help you get settled. At the very least, you’ll have to meet her sister. Oh, I guess I will too.”

“You’ve never met her sister?”

“I’ve never met any of her family. Remember? I stole her away to make her my bride overnight.”

“They must hate you.”

“So I hear. They’re stuck with me now, so they’re family.”

“Unfortunate.”

“Not necessarily. If you and Anya get close, our kids might grow up friends. They might even get married one day. Then we’d be family.”

“No thanks,” Lucca said, wincing at the thought of that. “Surrogates can marry women in Faust City?”

“God, anyone can marry anyone,” Devon said with a shrug. “Sexual orientation isn’t bound by gender roles in Faust City. Hmmm, tell me, Lucca. Do you think you’ll find yourself dating women once you move to the city? Or men? Maybe others like you?”

Lucca had never thought of it. Never even considered it. Growing up, Lucca learned quickly that attraction wasn’t necessary for him. He was expected to spread his legs for a man by proxy of what
he was. But Lucca did find people attractive. Guys, girls, and even surrogates. But how much of that was just him recognizing who the Nation considered attractive?

“I don’t know,” Lucca said, honestly. “It was never an option before. Actual attraction, I mean.”

“Hmmm,” Devon said, seeming to be satisfied with that. “Good thing you’ll have nothing but time to figure that out soon.”

Lucca knew Devon was mocking him, but there was truth to that. Lucca was going to have time to figure all of that out. In a matter of days, he was going to be free. There would be a lot to discover about himself then.

~*~

Lucca was sure he learned the difference between the mock contractions he’d gotten earlier and real contractions by the time he did go into labor. His due date came and went with only slight cramping. It was fine: everyone from Lucca to Monty to Devon and even Anya had accounted for the possibility of Lucca going into labor early or late. So when Lucca woke up in the dead of night two days after his due date with his back and stomach in severe pain, Lucca knew this was it.

He needed to wait a bit, however, before it was worth saying anything to Monty. It wasn’t necessary for Lucca to go into the hospital until his water broke. So, Lucca laid in his bed for hours, a new contraction hitting every half hour or so, breathing through the pain. It wasn’t so bad at this stage. It would get worse, but hopefully he’d have an epidural and be in the hospital by then. Hopefully.

By the time the sun rose, around seven thirty now that fall was in full swing, Lucca was sweating from exertion and pain. Lucca managed to sit himself up in his bed and waited; he knew Monty would come to get him for breakfast soon. He just had to wait.

Lucca looked down as another contraction hit, noting that his paints were a darker blue than usual around his crotch. He felt the bed underneath it, and his comforter was wet. The dark color hid it well enough. Perfect.

Lucca’s door opened, and Monty came walking in, already dressed and ready for the day. He was smiling, opening his mouth to greet Lucca when he noticed the scene in front of him. Lucca was bent over, doing his Lamaze breathing as the latest contraction faded, the front of his pants wet. It would be obvious to anyone what was happening.

“Did your water break first?” Monty asked calmly, walking over before kneeling down in front of Lucca.

“No,” Lucca told him. “I think this happened just a little while ago.”

“How long have the contractions been going on?”

Lucca shrugged. It wasn’t like he had a clock in his room.

“It was dark out when it started. That last contraction was the eighth one, I think. Or nine. Maybe ten?”
Monty nodded, standing. He immediately walked over to Lucca’s closet, pulling out the hospital bag that had been waiting there for weeks now. Lucca watched him place the bag next to him on the bed before going back to the closet to find pants and a sweater for Lucca to wear. He placed them on top of the bag, before heading for the door.

“Get changed,” he ordered. “I’ll go tell Chelsea what’s going on and get the car ready.”

“Okay,” Lucca said, taking his time to stand.

He waited until the door shut after Monty before moving. Despite the contractions, it hadn’t taken him long to change. He was out of his wet clothes and into his new ones well before another contraction hit. And he still had enough time to walk over to his underwear and sock drawer where he’d hidden the clothes Eli and Nicolai had knitted for him.

He took the clothes, hiding them under the change of clothes and the maternity pads in his hospital bag. He then walked over to his table where the blanket he’d been crocheting was over there in its basket. He wasn’t too far from finishing it: if he could knock it out while he was in the hospital, he’d probably be able to take that too.

That’s when it hit Lucca: he was leaving. This was it. Once he got to the hospital, he wouldn’t come home again. He and his baby would be gone. Lucca looked around the room, at the window that never opened, and the bed Monty had fucked Lucca in more times than he could count. At the closet door where Lucca had found Rudy, and the table that he sat at so many times with the other surrogates. He gave birth to Gabby in this room, right there on the floor while clinging to the bed.

And he would be leaving all of it behind. It was a weird thought, but not bittersweet. Rather, it was just simply sweet. Lucca smiled to himself, saying goodbye silently right when another contraction hit. Lucca was still doubled over in pain when Monty returned, all smiles again. The only solace Lucca took was knowing that smile would be wiped off his face once he realized Lucca was free from him.

The trip to the hospital had been a blur of Lucca breathing through contractions. Chelsea had opted to stay home with Gabby; she wouldn’t show up until it was close for Lucca to start pushing so she could be there as support afterwards. At least that was her plan.

A contraction had hit just as Monty started to help Lucca out the door. They stopped while Lucca paused to breathe through it. Gabby, who had been at Chelsea’s hip, wiggled her way down and walked over to Lucca. She hugged his leg, the gesture shocking Lucca. As soon as the contraction passed, she looked up, her eyes wide and sweet.

“Better?” she asked.

Though he knew he shouldn’t, Lucca knelt down so he was even with her and nodded.

“Yes,” he told her. “Much better. Thank you.”

Gabby smiled, reaching forward and hugging Lucca. Lucca hugged her back, closing her eyes to stop the tears from coming. She was too good for the Nation. And Lucca was a monster for leaving her behind. He wish he could bring her, but there was just no way to make it happen.

_Not now_, Lucca thought to himself. _But maybe someday._

Not now, though. Now, Monty was helping Lucca stand so they could leave. Lucca had to say goodbye to the house that had been his home for years, to Chelsea, and Gabby, and the neighborhood, and the other surrogates, and everything he would be leaving behind.
He was leaving.

Being at a hospital was a much different experience than having a home birth. Lucca was forced into a wheelchair as soon as he arrived, where he was taken to the fifth floor for surrogate maternity. He’d been settled into a small, private room where he’d changed into a hospital gown and was hooked up to an IV and a heart monitor. His vitals were checked, and then he was playing the waiting game.

Lucca’s heart felt elevated, which the initial nurse had noted as something to monitor, but she didn’t seem too concerned about it. Which was good since Lucca was sure the reason his heart was racing was because of nerves over what was about to happen. This was it: the plan was in motion. It would only be a matter of time now.

Lucca sighed once he was alone. Monty had gone to get Lucca some food, since he hadn’t eaten anything yet, and Lucca was able to enjoy a bit of peace and quiet with only the beeping of the heart monitor to keep him company. Lucca closed his eyes, enjoying this calm before the storm of everything that was about to happen.

Chapter End Notes

Woooowee! Like I said last chapter, this one is pretty tame in terms of events. I honestly JUST added that scene with Gabby. Initially, she wasn't in there at all, but I felt like since I kept getting asked about her, a final scene with her was needed. Lucca loves her so much, and it really is breaking his heart to let her go. There is definitely space for Gabby to make an appearance in the third story, if I can plan it right. But my focus is on the second book, so that's just going to have to be a possibility for now. Poor baby.

When I say this chapter is the calm before the storm, it really is! I will admit that the big escape DOESN'T really happen next chapter, but that doesn't mean other things aren't set in motion. Wooooo, I'm so excited. Next chapter is going to have you all on the edge of your seats. Thursday's, Friday's, Saturday's and Sunday's chapters are going to KILL y'all. Straight murder y'all. They gonna have to arrest me for mass murder, y'all.

Lol, I need to stop hyping it up because with my luck, y'all will read it and be like "wow, all this build up for THAT? You suck!"

Ahhhh, hopefully not.

I'll try to post the next chapter earlier tomorrow. I'm planning a marathon of movies I've been collecting over the years but haven't watched yet lol. Giving myself the time to relax and watch a movie is something I struggle with, so days where I can just marathon stuff is nice.

My staycation, btw, is so relaxing. I haven't been this calm and relaxed and happy in a WHILE. I'm just so chill. Like, I spent the past two days cleaning my room, and getting some stuff in order, and I'm not even halfway through the week! I still got like five more days before I gotta go back to work? God, this is the life I need to lead. I need to get my shit together and start writing some stuff I can get published so I can quit my day job and just do this for a living. I cannot keep working a 9-5.
As always, please leave comments! I adore the hell out of them! And see you all tomorrow for the next installment!
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

Good allies are hard to find...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What are you doing?”

The nurse paused, her hand hovering above Lucca’s IV. She seemed surprised to have been stopped; but Monty was, well, Monty after all. Of course, he’d question anything a woman was doing. As though he was the authoritarian on births.

“Oh,” the nurse said, putting her hand down. “The doctor wanted to switch out his drip chamber. The intake nurse wasn’t aware you were opting for an epidural, so we need this one to make sure his blood pressure doesn’t drop afterwards.”

Monty nodded at the woman, not protesting when she moved to change the IV bag. Lucca watched her, the nurse young and pretty. She seemed to know what she was doing, but she didn’t look like she’d been out of nursing school long. Her hair was cut in a short afro—odd even for an infertile woman—and her dark skin made Lucca think of his mother. Her eyes were a honey copper that shocked Lucca a bit. Her nose was wide, her face round, her body lean and stocky under her scrubs. She was pretty in a way Lucca knew many would appreciate in the Nation. She smiled at Lucca when she was finished, before nodding at Monty.

“The doctor should be in soon to see how dilated he is,” she told him. “The epidural is usually administered when he’s about four to five centimeters along.”

“Alright,” Monty said, giving her a polite smile. “Thank you.”

She nodded at him, pausing, briefly, to look at Lucca. She gave him a wink before turning to leave. Lucca watched her, feeling a buzz at his fingertips. That same buzz that was becoming more and more familiar to him the more he practiced his magic. He wondered what was causing his magic to react like that.

“This time around will likely be a lot faster than last time,” Monty told Lucca. Lucca turned his head to look at him: he was sitting next to Lucca in a chair positioned right next to the bed. Still, he seemed so far away. Monty smiled at him, none the wiser. “That’s good,” he assured Lucca. “The less eventful this birth is, the easier it’ll be to let him go. Right?”

“Sure,” Lucca said, letting his incredulity bleed into his voice.

“Lucca, are you still upset about having to give the baby up?” Monty asked, his voice sympathetic and taking that tone like he was talking to a child. “We talked about this.”

“I’m not upset about anything,” Lucca said. “I’m a bit thirsty though. Am I allowed to have water?”
“Yes, you are,” Monty said, standing. “I’ll go get you some. Wait here.”

Lucca waited until Monty was gone before lying back in his bed and asking the ceiling, “Where am I going to go?”

~*~

“Hmmm,” the doctor said, looking between Lucca’s legs as they were spread on the stirrups at the bottom of the bed. “He hasn’t made any progress.”

Lucca had an arm over his face, trying to hide how embarrassing this was. He lifted it a little, however, to watch as the doctor turned back to look at the nurse standing behind him. It was the same honey-eyed woman from earlier.

“Has his contractions been closing in?” the doctor asked her.

The nurse lifted a tablet, using a stylus to sort through whatever was on there.

“They’ve been about fifteen minutes a part, but they don’t seem to be getting under that.”

“Not good,” the doctor muttered, putting the bottom of Lucca’s gown down over his knees and tapping his calf. “You can put your legs down, honey.”

“What do you mean he hasn’t made any progress?” Monty asked since the doctor seemed content with mostly ignoring him.

“Oh, he hasn’t dilated since the last time I came in,” the doctor said, physically waving Monty off with a hand. “We were at two centimeters then and we’re still at two. It’s not that big of a deal; the baby is just taking his time.”

“You said it wasn’t good,” Monty said, his voice incredulous. He wasn’t used to doctors not taking him seriously. Lucca found it hilarious. “Wouldn’t that mean there’s a problem?”

The doctor shrugged. “Not necessarily. It could just mean he’s in for a long labor. If his contractions were picking up but he wasn’t dilating, then we’d have to get him prepped for a c-section as soon as we can. Which would be convenient; one of our surgeons should be showing up soon.”

“You don’t have a surgeon on staff at all times?”

“Yes. But they’re not all certified for c-sections. Those are usually scheduled. Even if someone is going in for an emergency one, there’s still a bit of prep work that goes into it that will allow whoever is on call plenty of time to get here. But I’m sure it won’t come to that for Lucca here.”

The doctor turned to the nurse and tapped on her tablet.

“Make sure Dr. Lorenzo is aware of Lucca’s situation when he gets in. He’ll stick around if he knows we might need him.”

The vituperation in Monty’s gaze as he watched the doctor get up and leave almost made Lucca laugh. He knew better, however, instead adjusting himself on the bed so he could sit comfortably. The nurse walked over to Lucca, checking his vitals casually.

“He doesn’t mean it,” she told Monty, obviously sensing his anger. “He’s been told that his comments make people worry unnecessarily, so he tries to minimize it afterwards. He doesn’t get
that it comes across as contradictory."

Monty turned his glare to her.

“I’m sure your bedside manner is perfect,” he said, mockingly.

“None of us are perfect,” the nurse said with a shrug. “But he really doesn’t mean to be, well, that bad.”

Monty just stared at her, not speaking. Taking the hint, the nurse quickly finished up, documenting her notes on the tablet before giving Lucca a sympathetic smile and turning to walk away.

“I wonder how difficult it would be to get you transferred,” Monty said, standing and leaning against Lucca’s bed. His face softened a bit when he looked down at Lucca. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say they aren’t at all concerned for your health. Even as a surrogate, you’re providing life to the Nation. They should be more careful.”

“I feel fine, Monty,” Lucca said, right as another contraction hit. He breathed through it, Monty rubbing his shoulder as he did. “Except that, of course,” Lucca added once he caught his breath.

Monty chuckled, leaning down to give Lucca a quick kiss on his forehead.

“You’re doing great, despite everything. I’m proud of you.”

“Well isn’t that sweet?”

Lucca and Monty looked up, seeing Devon standing at the doorway. He was wearing scrubs with a long, white, lab coat. He leaned against the door, looking through a tablet. Lucca wondered if it was the same one the nurse had, or if he just had his own that he was using.

“Dr. Lorenzo,” Monty said, mockingly, though with more humor in his voice. “Thank you for showing up.”

“Ahhh,” Devon said, waving the tablet at them. “Your doctor’s Jamie. Isn’t he annoying?”

“I wanted to slug him.”

“I do most of the time, too. Explains your mood. And here I thought Lucca was our emotional little bitch.”

Lucca wanted to say something at that, but he knew better than to start bantering with Devon when Monty was around. Instead, he just kept his head down, staring at the IV in his arm. Devon chuckled at Lucca’s reaction.

“Aww, he didn’t like that.”

“Don’t tease him right now,” Monty said. “The doctor said he’s not progressing.”

Devon shrugged, already bored. “I don’t know shit about that. But yeah, there’s a note saying we have to watch it to see if a c-section is needed. Isn’t that fun, Lucca? I might get to cut you up twice in one week!”

“Dev, stop,” Monty said, his voice a little stricter now. For once, Lucca was happy for it. “I’m serious about the teasing.”

“My bad,” Devon said, raising his hands in defeat. “Hopefully, it won’t actually come to that. The
director hasn’t been paying attention to this case, but he’ll notice if I’m operating on the same surrogate twice so quickly. He might force us to hold off on the lobotomy if we try that.”

“Isn’t there anything we can do, then?” Monty asked, gripping the side of the bed. “To speed up the process? Isn’t there a drug to do that?”

“There’s a drug to induce labor if needed,” Devon said, shrugging again. “Not to speed it up once it’s started. At best, maybe Lucca can walk around. I’ve heard that helps.”

The last thing Lucca wanted to do was walk around, but he could already see Monty nodding to that. Lucca sighed, already mentally preparing to get up. Devon moved first though, reaching across Lucca’s bed for the nurse call button. Monty raised an eyebrow at him.

“Let a nurse walk with him,” Devon said. “I actually need to talk to you about something.”

“About the lobotomy?”

“Yeah. Nothing major, but it needs to be said.”

The nurse from before appeared at the door, a smile on her face. She saw Devon, her eyes flashing with confusion before she corrected herself.

“Yes?” she asked. “Do you need anything?”

“Monty wants Lucca to take a walk,” Devon answered. “Would you mind tending to him?”

“Of course.”

The nurse was quick to respond, at Lucca’s side and helping him out of some of the cords attached to him. Then she had him moving to sit on the side of the bed before helping him to stand. She showed him how to hold his IV, and wrapped an arm around his back to help guide him out the door. She was pretty tall for a woman: she stood half a head taller than Lucca even. In seconds, she had Lucca out the door and making his way down the hall.

“I don’t know how far they want us to go,” the nurse said as they started down the hall. “If we do a couple of rounds around the wing, it should be fine.”

“I could probably walk on my own,” Lucca said.

The nurse didn’t answer, though she did remove her arm once they turned the corner. Lucca kept his steps slow and steady. He actually liked the time away from Monty. He wanted to get away from Monty once and for all immediately, but he knew he had to wait.

“Shouldn’t be much longer now,” the nurse said, walking besides Lucca.

“It might take a while if I don’t start dilating,” Lucca said, conversationally.

“Yeah. Maybe I shouldn’t have replaced your drip chamber with that one with the terbutaline.”

Lucca stopped moving. “With the what?”

“Brethine,” the nurse said. She had continued walking, though she stopped to turn back to look at him. “It delays labor.”

Lucca wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Why would she do that? What good was delaying his labor?
“I’m Antoinette, by the way,” the nurse said, smiling at him. “You know, I’ve never met Devon before, but he just looks like an asshole.”

The plan. They needed a reason for Lucca to get a c-section. Lucca smiled at her.

“He is an asshole,” he said, walking to catch up to her. Once he did, they resumed walking. “I don’t know what Anya sees in him.”

“Me neither. Can’t believe she ran away to be with him. It took a lot to convince Auntie Addie not to go find them and kill him when she ran off.”

“Is Anya your sister?”

“Cousin. We grew up like sisters though because we were born in the same month. Addie and my mama swear they didn’t plan that, but I think they did.”

Lucca chuckled. For the first time since he got to the hospital, he felt safe. And a little better about the plan.

“This country is terrible, by the way,” Antoinette continued. “Anya said it’d be a weird adjusting, but holy hell. And Jamie’s having a hard time with all this; keeping the secret, I mean.”

“He’s in on it?” Lucca asked, surprised at that one.

Antoinette nodded. “He was born and raised in the City. He’s here doing ambassador work; at least that’s the story. He’s delivering babies to assess how well the Nation handles their surrogates and fertile women. He’s nervous about the whole thing, so he’s not too happy to be forced to participate in this.”

“What is he nervous?”

“He’s a little bitch. His report will go to the U.N. From there, they’ll determine whether they need to deploy a peace operation. It’s not just because of how they treat its citizens; the Nation’s wars are becoming problematic for the entire world. Jamie’s report is part of something bigger, but, well, let’s just say it’s a good thing you’re getting the fuck outta dodge now.”

“That does sound intense,” Lucca admitted.

“He’s getting a nice deal out of it,” Antoinette said with a shrug. “Once he deems that you need a c-section, he gets to leave with us. He’ll be happy to go home: he hates it here too.”

“I was born here, and I hate it here,” Lucca said.

They turned a corner. Another surrogate was walking down the hall with a woman who was humming pleasantly. She looked like a wife. The surrogate looked young: fresh out of a Center young. And miserable. He didn’t even look up when they passed, though the wife gave them a polite smile. Lucca and Antoinette were quiet until they saw the two turn the corner.

“That’s the shit that gets me,” she said, her voice low so as not to be overheard. “I’ve only been here a few weeks, and every surrogate I’ve seen has that same detached look on their faces. Like you’d rather be dead than do this.”

“He probably does,” Lucca said, glancing over his shoulder. The surrogate was long gone by now. “I know I did.”
“I have it easier than most in the city, but I’ve still never seen anyone that miserable before coming here. It’s scary.”

Now it was Lucca’s turn to shrug. “That’s what the Nation does to us.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this chapter was pretty tame too, but I promise tomorrow's and Friday's are going to have y'all losing your minds! And Saturday and Sunday, I THINK, are the climaxes. Then the following chapters are just the wrap ups.

I love the name Antoinette.

Oh, some of you will be happy to know that I finally started the second book. I'm hoping to get past the first act today, but we'll see. This chapter I'm on is taking FOREVER lol. I think I might try to write more sex scenes. I have zero experience with them, but I'll only get practice if I try, right? Ugh.

Halfway through my staycation and I don't want it to ever end! Lol.

Leave me some comments, please! Y'all know how much I love them!
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

And so it begins!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took three hours of Lucca suffering through contractions that were now no less than twelve minutes apart while only dilating half a centimeter in that time for his doctor to declare that Lucca needed a c-section. Monty protested it at first, certain that since things did speed up slightly in those three hours, Lucca might be able to do it.

Antoinette had gone to get Devon at that point, and it was only after Devon reassured Monty that he would take care of Lucca that Monty finally relented. The whole ordeal had stressed Lucca out a bit, which raised his blood pressure. Jamie then jumped on that, stating that Lucca might be at risk of developing pre-eclampsia if they didn’t get the baby out as quickly as possible. Lucca knew, somehow, that wasn’t true, but Devon had nodded sagely to the remark. Monty had no choice but to believe them.

“It’s a good thing we’re already at the hospital,” Lucca had said jokingly to Monty after Devon and his doctor had left. “Unlike last time.”

“It’s weird that you’re having complications,” Monty said, pacing as Antoinette started to prepare Lucca to move. “It was pretty easy last time. This should have been just as simple.”

“We can never predict these things,” Antoinette said, giving Monty a small smile. “It’s great that you care so much about him. A lot of families don’t seem to get concerned when things come up.”

Monty stopped his pacing, looking at Antoinette with wide eyes. She didn’t seem to notice, writing things on her tablet. Lucca watched Monty from the corner of his eyes, tensing as Monty walked over to Lucca’s bed, putting a hand on the railing.

“What are you implying by that?” Monty asked her.

Antoinette’s head jerked up, surprised. She looked at Monty before glancing at Lucca. Lucca wasn’t sure how to help her: when Monty felt out of control, his first reaction was to assert it somehow. There was nothing he could do to Lucca at the moment, so Antoinette was the easy target.

“Nothing,” she said. “I just mean that most families are so focused on the baby that the surrogate’s wellbeing tends to fall to the waste side.”

“This baby is a surrogate,” Monty told her, matter-of-factly. “We’re not keeping it.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“Wouldn’t that have been noted on his file somewhere?”
Antoinette blinked at Monty. She glanced down at the tablet, nodding her head.

“I see. It is here. I—”

“Missed it?” Monty accused. He raised an eyebrow at her. “Somehow. What other things have you possibly missed, I wonder?”

“Monty,” Lucca said, reaching out and taking his hand on the railing.

Monty responded immediately, turning his gaze towards him.

“What is it, Lucca?” he asked, his voice softer now.

“Are they going to put me to sleep for this?” Lucca asked, letting just a little bit of fear drip into his voice.

“No, Lucca. They use a regional anesthesia. And I’ll be right there afterwards, okay?”

Lucca nodded, and only then did Monty seem to relax enough to let Antoinette finish what she needed to do before the surgical technicians came to wheel Lucca out of the room on a gurney they brought. Lucca kept quiet as they brought him into the elevator. Antoinette was with them, looking at her tablet.

The tension was thick in the air. Lucca didn’t want to ask if the two techs wheeling him were in on the plan. Though Lucca was sure he got his answer when instead of hitting the button for the second floor, one of them hit the button for the roof. Lucca froze, pretending he didn’t see it.

“You hit the wrong button,” the other tech said, pressing the second-floor button.

“Oh really?” the first tech said, shaking his head. “My bad. I zoned out. My shift is over after this.”

“Seriously? You still need to pay attention. What if he was bleeding out?”

“He’s not that bad, right? It’s just a c-section.”

“Dude—”

“Cameras and mics are out,” Antoinette said, suddenly.

Both of the techs immediately relaxed, the first one taking off his glasses while the other took off his badge. The door opened, and a burst of air tore into the elevator. Lucca considered asking if he could walk, but a contraction tore through him at that moment. He breathed through it while the two techs rolled him over to the helicopter sitting on top of the roof.

Lucca had never been that close to one before, let alone in one. It wasn’t on yet, but someone was up there messing with it. The two techs opened the back and worked to get Lucca’s gurney inside. They then grabbed bags of clothes—throwing a loose sweater and pair of sweatpants over to Lucca—changing out of their scrubs and instead putting on casual clothes, jackets, and helmets. Lucca looked behind him, and saw his doctor, Jamie, already seated in one of the seats perpendicular to him. There was another empty seat next to him, and two seats parallel to where Lucca was laid out.

Antoinette hopped in once the techs headed to the front of the helicopter, right as Lucca finished changing his own clothes. Lucca watched the men, shocked they knew how to fly it. Antoinette nodded at the doctor, who had a headset on his head. He pointed at something on the ground, and Antoinette reached for it. She came up with two headsets herself, handing one to Lucca before
situating herself with the other. Lucca just put it on his head, all other noise disappearing once it was on.

“We should go now,” the doctor said. “Before they realize we’re missing.”

“The second we start, we’ll draw attention,” one of the techs said from up front. “Miss A, it’s your call if we wait for Dr. Lorenzo.”

Antoinette tapped a finger against her headset, thinking. Lucca watched, saw the lack of concern for Devon in her eyes. She’d leave him; Lucca knew she would. But if Devon was left behind, he’d be the one blamed for Lucca’s disappearance. Lucca wasn’t sure what the punishment for that would be, but he was sure that would mean Anya would never see him again.

Also, Lucca just realized he forgot something.

“My bag!” Lucca said to her, struggling to sit up. “I forgot to grab my hospital bag.”

“We can’t hold out for that,” the doctor scolded. “You’ll have everything you need once we land.”

“Please,” Lucca said, remembering what Nicolai asked him. “There’s something my baby will need in there. I have to have it or else this will all be for nothing!”

Antoinette’s eyes darted to Lucca, and she frowned, lifting her watch to her lips.

“Delta-D, do you copy? There was a hospital bag left at the starting line. Repeat: a hospital bag left at the starting line. Please retrieve and rendezvous at the meeting site in no more than 120 seconds. No response will be considered an affirmation, and we will act accordingly. Over.”

Antoinette lifted her watch to her ear, pushing the headset aside. She was quiet for a time, waiting. Then she shook her head.

“No answer.”

“Did he hear?” Lucca asked.

“I said no answer was an affirmation. He might not have been able to respond if he’s still inside. Still, we have no way of knowing unless he gets here with the bag.”

Lucca frowned, but knew there was nothing he could do. It wasn’t like he could run back and get it himself. Still, if he left those clothes, he’d be the absolute worst person in the world. He begged God, the universe, magic—something—to have let Devon hear Antoinette’s message.

“It’s been two minutes,” the doctor said eventually.

Antoinette glanced at Lucca. She shrugged.

“We can’t leave him,” Lucca tried. “Even if he couldn’t get the bag, we can’t leave him. Anya misses him. She’d want to see him.”

“She gave us a mission to complete,” the doctor contradicted. “If we get caught here, we’ll fail.”

“Gotta agree with the doc on that, Miss A,” one of the techs said. “He’s an outsider anyway; are we going to let him ruin our chance?”

“He’s Aaliyah’s father,” Lucca said, his heart racing. Fuck these guys. “Anya would be devastated if they were never able to meet.”
Antoinette sighed. She knew Lucca was telling the truth. But the other guys had good points. She was the head of this operation: it was her call.

“Our target is Lucca, and he’s here,” she said, glancing at Lucca again. “We’ll wait 90 seconds for him; that’s all we can afford. He knew the plan and he’s not here anyway. That’s not on us.”

“Roger,” one of the techs answered.

The doctor looked annoyed, but nodded. More waiting. Antoinette was looking at her watch, counting the seconds. Lucca waited; wondering if they’d end up leaving Devon. A part of Lucca hoped they did: after everything Devon did to him, there was no love lost between them. But he was about to escape the Nation, with his baby, because of Anya. And Anya loved him. Anya would want to see him again. Anya wanted to have a family with him. And Lucca owed a lot to Anya.

For her and her alone did Lucca wish that Devon would make it. He didn’t want to have to be the one to tell her something happened to him. Especially if what held him up was trying to get Lucca’s bag. He’d never forgive himself for that.

“T-minus 30 seconds,” Antoinette said suddenly, looking at the doctor. “Strap the target in; we’re about to takeoff.”

The doctor frowned but unbuckled himself, getting up to strap Lucca into the gurney. Lucca didn’t like it; the straps were tight and restricting. But he knew that he had to tolerate it; he was sure it wouldn’t be safe to be in the sky without being strapped in.

“Next to me,” Antoinette said as she closed the helicopter doors. “He’s literally in labor; flying like this puts him in serious danger for blood clots. You need to tend to him to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

“Fine,” the doctor sighed, settling in next to her.

“Alright, boys, get ready to take off. T-minus five. Four. Three. Two.”

There was a bang on the door. Antoinette jumped and went over to the door, peaking out the window. She scoffed, shaking her head.

“Start her up, boys,” she said, opening the door. “Son of bitch. Were you trying to cut it this close?”

“I would have been here on time if you didn’t send me on a little mission,” Devon said, hoping inside.

Just as he did, there was a roar as the helicopter started. Antoinette locked the doors while Devon walked over to one of the seats at Lucca’s head. He dropped Lucca’s bag on his legs along the way, giving him a wink. He sat down, finding a headset and putting in on. By then, the blades were roaring, drowning out any other sound.

“Whatever is in there,” Devon said, nodding at Lucca, “had better have been worth y’all almost leaving me.”

“You’re here,” Lucca said, wishing he could move to take the bag off his legs. Why was Devon such an asshole? “Why are you bitching?”

“Someone’s feeling himself now that he’s on his way out,” Devon said, with a laugh.
Lucca didn’t respond then, feeling the turbulence of the helicopter slowly rising. It was surreal; he was leaving. He was actually leaving. Lucca closed his eyes, trying not to think of how high they were getting. He’d never been in a plane before, so all of this was new. There was a bit of inertia as they took off, the helicopter propelling forward. The doctor looked like he was going to be sick while Antoinette looked serious as she checked in on her watch.

“Alright everyone,” Antoinette said, grinning as they flew off. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Chapter End Notes

Lucca’s on his way out, y'all! I'm so excited for tomorrow's chapter. And the chapter after that! And Sunday's chapter! God, you all are going to LOSE YOUR FUCKING MINDS. The next three chapters are going to be the definition of intense. Just warning you now: if you have any heart conditions, TAKE YOUR MEDICINE BITCHES.

Okay, now that I'm done being dramatic, I wonder how many of you guys thought they would leave Devon. Would have been nice, right? Was it too obvious having him come through in the last minute like that? Hmm?

Let me know what y'all think in the comments below! What do you think is going to happen next chapter? Not that I'll confirm or deny any theories lol. See you all tomorrow!
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

The escape.

Chapter Notes

Gotta put some warnings on this one: trigger warnings for violence, guns, death, and rape.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The helicopter ride was not a straight shot to Faust City. Aside from it being unlikely that the helicopter would last long enough to make the trip without refueling, the military tracked all air traffic. Their hospital transfer clearance would only get them so far before the Air Force would become suspicious. The last thing they needed was the entire Nation military coming down on them.

So, they got as far as Delaware, the trip taking about half an hour. Lucca had about four contractions between this: and the doctor confirmed he was almost five centimeters dilated. Time wise, Lucca knew he had plenty of it to get to Faust City before the baby would come. Still, Jamie thought it would be best to administer at least one more dosage of whatever was halting Lucca’s labor.

After, of course, he lamented about how dangerous all of this was for Lucca. It was nice that he cared—if only because the Hippocratic oath forced him to—and by the time they landed in Delaware, Lucca was feeling better about all of this.

They landed in an empty lot, where a Jeep was waiting for them. Two men were in it, getting out to salute the two pilots. They switched; the pilots took the car while the new men hopped into the helicopter. Antoinette told Lucca that they would take it to the nearest hospital and report Lucca there so the authorities would check there before looking for them elsewhere. They waited for them to fly off before they got into the car and headed down the road.

Twenty minutes of driving took them to an abandoned runway. And right at the end was a small jet. Lucca was glad he wouldn’t be strapped down to a gurney this time. This was the plane that was supposed to take them all the way to Faust City. According to Antoinette, it was registered as a diplomat’s private jet. Meaning the Air Force couldn’t do diddly squat to it.

They all piled in, the pilots taking their spot in the cockpit. There wasn’t as much medical equipment in the jet as there were in the helicopter, a fact the doctor ranted about as he reminded them that Lucca was, while delayed, literally in labor.

There was nothing to be done about it. Lucca found a seat in the middle of the jet, Devon taking the seat next to him. Antoinette and the doctor positioned themselves closer to the front. They weren’t too far, but Lucca did notice that it would be easy to talk to Devon without them hearing.
Lucca wondered if that was intentional on Devon’s part.

As they took off, Lucca decided to simply ignore Devon, so he opened his bag and took out the blanket he was working on. He hadn’t had time to work on it at the hospital, but he could probably finish it in the time it would take for them to get to Faust City.

“I’m surprised we made it this far,” Devon said, leaning back in the seat. “We should have brought some snacks.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to eat once we touch down,” Lucca said with a shrug.

“What are you doing? You knit?”

“Crochet.”

“Oh, God, how boring. What are you making? A blanket?”

“Yes.”

“Is that all you know how to make?”

Lucca narrowed his eyes at Devon. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“So that’s a yes,” Devon said with a laugh. Then he shrugged, shaking his head. “I’m used to going to Faust City as an ambassador, not a criminal. It’s more exciting this way.”

Lucca paused his needle.

“Are you scared?”

“Aren’t you? What if you have this baby now?”

“He’ll wait. He’s been patient this long.”

“Poor thing. He is probably so annoyed we won’t let him out.”

“Are you excited to see your baby?”

“Of course. I missed her first couple of months: I want to be there for the rest. Until the day I die.”

Lucca glanced at Devon, shaking his head.

“You always say that sort of stuff so directly,” Lucca said. “It’s embarrassing.”

“That’s the stuff you have to say honestly,” Devon said with a shrug. “Most people don’t until it’s too late. You should think about that for your baby.”

“What?”

“Kids need to hear that sort of thing a lot. How much they’re loved, and how happy they make you. They need lots of hugs and kisses and attention and affection. That’s not what they preach in the Nation, so you might not have thought about it. But you’re going to be the one responsible for giving him all the love he’ll need.”

Lucca didn’t answer, turning back to his blanket. He hadn’t given it much thought. Lucca didn’t have much practice at being affectionate. His mother had been that way when he was young. She
hugged him a lot, and said over and over that he was her miracle child. She never went easy on the love.

In retrospect, it wasn’t typical for a surrogate child to grow up like that. Even Tristian, despite how much Eli loved him, hadn’t been doted on like that. And since being taken from his mother, Lucca wasn’t really allowed to be affectionate. Any small show of love—any hug, chaste kiss, or smile—could have been interpreted as flirting. And any affection Lucca showed Monty was completely put on.

Lucca thought on that the entire plane ride, going up and down the rows of the blanket he was almost finished making. He thought about what sort of parent he was going to be for this baby. Devon was right: he was going to be this baby’s parent. Not Monty. Not Chelsea. Not some caretaker at a cold, Daycare.

Lucca hadn’t thought about parenthood beforehand as he was more focused on escaping. But now that he had the time and the quiet, he knew he wanted to be the best parent to his child. He was escaping the Nation to give his baby a better life; he wouldn’t fuck it up by not loving him the way he needed to be love. He had this chance and he was going to do it right.

“What do you think,” Lucca said, finishing up the blanket, tying up the end sloppily, “I should have the baby call me? Mom or Dad?”

Devon snorted, looking up from a book he’d been reading.

“Is that what you’ve been thinking of all this time?” he joked, glancing at his watch.

“That and how these contractions are picking up,” Lucca said, wincing as another one hit.

The doctor had checked on Lucca a few times through the hours they’d been flying. Lucca had dilated another two centimeters, and his contractions were about eight to ten minutes apart. They would need to land soon.

Thankfully, Antoinette had announced that they were about fifteen minutes away from the hospital they were heading towards. Fifteen minutes away from Faust City. Fifteen minutes away from freedom.

“You’ll have to decide that for yourself,” Devon said. “There isn’t a standard in the city, I don’t believe. Granted, there aren’t a shitload of surrogates with children there to begin with.”

“Even though I gave birth to him,” Lucca said, packing up the blanket and putting it in the hospital bag with the other baby clothes, “I don’t think I’d like it if he called me Mom.”

Devon didn’t respond, but Lucca could feel the buzz in the air. He rolled his eyes.

“You want to say something slick,” Lucca said.

“It’s really hard not to,” Devon admitted, a grin climbing up his face. “You just make it so easy. Not to mention—”

“Shit!” Antoinette said, standing suddenly, a hand holding a headset to her ear.

Lucca and Devon both froze, watching as she walked up to the cockpit and opened the door. It was hard to make out, but there was noise coming from what sounded like a radio. Devon frowned, standing to make his way closer to her. Lucca hesitated before getting up and following, placing a hand on a nearby seat to steady himself.
“This is Al Faust’s own private jet!” one of the techs flying the plane was saying into a handheld radio. He looked back at Antoinette, his eyes fearful. “We are under orders from Al Faust directly not to stop until we reach the city.”

“You have two minutes to comply before we shoot you down,” the voice over the intercom said. “Diplomatic planes are not allowed in this airspace.”

“That’s a lie!” The other pilot said, shaking his head. “This is a direct route to Faust City as outlined in the latest Hempstead Travel Agreement!”

“I repeat,” the person on the radio said, ignoring him, “land your plane immediately and prepare to provide paperwork authorizing your travel.”

The first pilot looked at Antoinette.

“What do we do, Miss A?”

“If we land, they’re going to kill us,” the doctor said, joining them. “We can’t do that.”

“If they fire at us, we’ll go down,” Devon said. “And likely die.”

“We can outpace them, can’t we?”

“Do you not see those fucking jets right next to us!” one of the pilots said, pointing out the window. Lucca looked, and saw two on their right side. “Those are military grade; they’ll keep up with us and then some.”

“You have one minute to comply before we shoot,” the voice on the radio said.

“Shit,” Antoinette said.

She turned, her eyes meeting Lucca. They watched each other for a while, and Lucca saw her run through all the scenarios. Lucca wasn’t sure what any of this meant. Was there a way to talk their way out of this? Did Lucca need to hide or was it better for him to be seen? Lucca had no idea what the best course of action would be. But Antoinette made her decision.

“Land,” she told the pilots. “Tell them we’re landing, that we have civilians.” She nodded at Lucca. “Go buckle in. At least until we land. And you two, the story is that you’re doctors who are returning home after some ambassador work. Remember, we don’t have any magic aiding us in this: we need to use our heads.”

Devon and Jamie nodded, Jamie immediately turning to help Lucca into a seat for landing. Lucca grabbed his bag, keeping it close. Devon and the doctor sat next to each other up front while Antoinette sat down next to Lucca. Lucca felt the drop as the plane came down, and then a jolt as they prepared to touch down. He tensed, a contraction tearing through him at the worst possible time.

“As soon as the plane stops, we have to move,” Antoinette told him. “The only place we can try to hide is the bathroom. If we’re lucky, they’ll see two doctors flying home and let us leave.”

“And if we’re not lucky?” Lucca dared to ask.

Antoinette didn’t answer. The landing was rocky and shaky. But, eventually, the plane did stop moving. And Antoinette moved first, unbuckling herself and then Lucca before gripping his arm and helping him stand.
They rushed to the back of the jet, Antoinette opening the bathroom, and locking the door. They both knew that wouldn’t hold, but the goal wasn’t to keep anything out; just to hide their presence. Lucca gripped his bag, his heart racing and his stomach roiling. He felt like he had to throw up. He kept it under, though, sitting on the toilet while Antoinette kept her ear to the door.

There was silence for a while. At first, they couldn’t hear anything but their own breathing. Then the terrifying sound of guns going off filled the air. Lucca gasped, Antoinette putting a finger over her lips to remind him to stay quiet.

“What the hell is going on?” Lucca heard the doctor yell.

There were a few more banging sounds, then the rough bark of soldiers asking questions. Or giving orders; it all sounded the same. Lucca then heard Devon speak, his voice low and calm. There was a bit of a back and forth, and then the sounds of heavy boots walking around the cabin.

Lucca tensed; if they were looking around, would they want to get into the bathroom? What would happen then? Lucca wanted to run, but he was trapped. He hated this: he still felt helpless. What was the point of all the practicing he’d done if he couldn’t do anything in this moment?

Then an idea hit him. It was a dangerous one, especially because he’d never done this before. He had no way of knowing if it would work.

“I have an idea,” Lucca said, getting off the toilet and unlocking the bathroom door.

He scanned the room, quickly, taking in the white walls and the florescent light over the sink and the old mirror. He hoped this would be easier since he knew what the room looked like. He held out his hand, imagining the ball of orange light. It materialized in seconds, Antoinette jumping. Her eyes went wide, obviously surprised by this.

Lucca imagined the ball expanding, like the shield, but a different nature this time. Not a shield to block anything, but a shield that showed whoever looked inside a simple bathroom. An empty bathroom. The light expanded as it often did, getting bigger and bigger until the entire room was covered in the orange glow.

Lucca focused on that image of the empty bathroom. This, he decided, is what anyone who opened that door would see. As soon as he thought that, the door opened. A man in fatigues and holding a semi-automatic rifle stood there, the gun pointed. It landed between Lucca and Antoinette, and the two held still, holding their breaths. The soldier looked surprised, glancing around the room, his eyes scanning right over them. He went over to the toilet, raising the lid and looking inside briefly.

“The fuck?” he muttered, turning and leaving, the door falling mostly shut with a slight crack. He called out to his partner. “Clear!”

Lucca sighed, letting the illusion fall, his vision getting a bit dizzy. That had taken a lot out of him. As soon as the illusion fell, a contraction hit, and he was bending over, biting his lip so he wouldn’t make a noise in pain. He couldn’t give them up after all that. Antoinette hovered above him, rubbing his back.

“Clear, my ass,” Lucca heard another soldier say. There was the cock of a gun. “Where are you hiding him?”

“Hiding who?” Devon asked, his voice still calm. “It’s just the two of us on the plane.”

“We have reason to believe that you’re harboring a pregnant surrogate on this aircraft.”
“What? Where would we hide one? Also, isn’t that dangerous?”

“Why are you looking at me?” Jamie asked.

“You’re the obstetrician. I just cut people open.”

“An obstetrician?” a soldier asked. “That’d be convenient to have on board if you were kidnapping a surrogate.”

“What? That’s absurd. We just want to go home after our mission trip.”

“I know relations between the Nation and Faust City aren’t perfect,” Devon said, trying to deescalate the situation. “But we’re clearly not hiding anything, gentlemen.”

“Where are your mission papers?” one of the soldiers demanded.

“With the pilots you decided to kill for no reason. Which also lends the question of how we’re going to get home now.”

“You’re not that far from home. Call a taxi.”

The soldiers laughed at that pitiful attempt at a joke. Lucca glanced at Antoinette. Her eyes were looking between the gap the soldier left open. The look on her face told Lucca that this was not good. At all.

“Fine,” Devon said, sighing heavily. “If the radio’s working, maybe we can use that to signal for someone to come get us. Will you gentlemen be staying while we do that?”

“Yeah, you’re not doing that,” one of the soldiers said.

“Whoa, put that down,” Jamie said.

“Are you giving us orders, maggot?”

“What? No! I’m just asking—oh my god, please stop waving that gun around!”

“Sounds like an order to me.”

“It’s fortunate we only take orders from our government. Not pieces of shit like you.”

“Look, I’m so—”

At least five rounds went off in quick succession, the sound like fireworks going off right in front of them. Lucca jumped, putting a hand over his mouth to stop him from making a sound. Antoinette closed her eyes, shaking her head. There was a thud, the smell of copper and something heavily sour wafting through the plane.

“Shit,” Devon said then. “Gentlemen, please. Can we—whoa, wait! I have a daughter—”

More rounds went off, more than Lucca could count, and he closed his eyes as well. When it was over, there was more of that sour smell of gunpowder raging around him. And more of that copper smell that Lucca knew now was blood. The plane was silent.

Lucca shook his head, not believing it. Maybe they shot near Devon to scare him. Maybe he finally learned to shut his big mouth. Maybe—
“He might have made a run for it as soon as they landed,” a soldier said, his boots walking away and his voice getting further and further away. “Report this to base, I’ll do a perimeter check outside to see if I see something.”

“It’s getting dark; might be hard to find him if he’s on foot.”

“He’s in labor, they said. He won’t get far.”

The soldiers kept talking, their voices getting muffled as they left the plane. There was nothing but silence for a while. Lucca and Antoinette tried to catch their breaths, listening and not moving. Lucca didn’t need Antoinette to warn him that they had to stay there; that the soldiers might come back. He found the grip on his bag and pulled it to his chest, cradling it.

They heard more yelling and a few bangs from outside. Tears stung at Lucca’s eyes, but he couldn’t lose it here. Not yet. Not until he was in Faust City, safe and free and able to have his baby in peace. As if knowing he was thinking of him, another contraction tore through Lucca. He breathed through it, trying to be quiet as he did it.

Lucca wasn’t sure how long they stayed in the bathroom. But they didn’t speak or move until they heard the roar of a few engines start up. In seconds, they heard the planes take off. Only then did Antoinette let out a sigh, throwing her head back as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

“Shit,” she said. “Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit.”

“What are we going to do?” Lucca asked, because he felt like he could. He still kept his voice low, terrified they were still being listened to.

“I have to contact Anya,” Antoinette said, messing with her watch. She pressed a few buttons, then paused to look at Lucca. “Anya didn’t say anything about you being able to use magic.”

“I only just started learning,” Lucca told her. He shook his head. “She probably didn’t want us banking on it.”

“Makes sense. Whatever you did, by the way, was genius.”

“Anya said a lot of magic is visualization. I wanted to see if I could project that vision onto someone else.”

“That was your first time doing it?”

Lucca nodded. Antoinette let out a low whistle.

“Well it worked. And we’re alive because of you.”

Lucca nodded, trying not to think of Devon and the doctor and the pilots. He wouldn’t believe it until he saw it; but that would require leaving the bathroom. He didn’t want to do that.

“Miss Alpha to base,” Antoinette said into her watch. “Come in. Sierra-Oscar-Sierra. The jet has not landed on target. Over.”

Antoinette waited, shaking her head.

“Can they hear you?” Lucca asked.

“I don’t know if we’re close enough for the frequency,” Antoinette said. “The south has shitty radio and IP service. Shit.”
“Home base to Miss Alpha,” a voice from the watch said. “We read you. Provide passcode. Over.”

Antoinette smiled in relief, muttering a thanks to God or the universe or whatever was looking out for them.

“Miss Alpha to home base,” she said, her voice tired. “Passcode: Olivia. Message: Seirra-Oscar-Sierra. Please, no one else is here but me and the target. Over.”

There was a moment of silence, before the voice came back.

“Confirmed, Miss Alpha. Your location has been determined. Please stay at current coordinates until backup arrives.”

“What?” Antoinette snapped. “No! We can’t stay here. It was the Nation’s military that took us down, Clark! Everyone else is—we can’t stay here. They know who our target is. They left for now, but they’ll be back for forensics and clean up any minute now!”

More silence. Antoinette muttered in annoyance. Lucca felt another contraction, which was fine since he was barely able to keep up with what he was listening to. He placed a hand on his stomach, closing his eyes. His baby was still, as always, but it was scary. All of this must have been putting stress on him. He was being an angel so far, but Lucca knew it was a matter of time before nature wouldn’t be kind to him. He needed to get out now.

*Please*, he thought to his baby, feeling that buzz of magic at his fingertips. *I know you want to come out, but I need you to hold off just a little bit longer. Please just wait until we’re safe, okay?*

He felt more buzzing through his body, magic filling his body with a pleasant heat. Which was perfect considering how chilly it was getting.

“Toni,” the voice through Antoinette’s watch coming back, “Anya is saying you gotta stick tight.”

“We can’t, Clark,” Antoinette repeated. “We gotta move. I’m not trying to die in this fucking country.”

“I know. And Olivia will fucking kill us if something happens to you. But Anya—”

“Tell Anya her good-for-nothing husband is dead!”

There was a pause. Antoinette immediately looked like she regretted her words. She shook her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Anya, I’m sorry. I just—we can’t stay here any longer. Lucca’s contractions are getting closer, and he was almost seven centimeters when we last checked him. If he has this baby here, this becomes an even bigger problem. Al is already going to have our asses for this. If we start a war, we’ll be screwing over more people than just us.”

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said, shaking his head. “This is all my fault.”

Lucca didn’t understand everything they were saying, but he did understand that: that this was all his fault. He’d been surprised to hear the name Al Faust earlier. The Faust family started Faust City years ago. For a while, the Nation was at war with magical people like the Fausts. It got ugly. Very ugly.

Faust City became a compromise: a sanctuary city of sin, free from the Nation’s rule so long as Faust City didn’t interfere in the Nation’s affairs. The Nation also wasn’t allowed to meddle with
the city as well. Anyone, supposedly, was allowed to go to Faust City if they hated the Nation that badly. The Nation asserted that fertile women and surrogates were happy in their lives in the Nation. Their purpose kept them from wanting to run. It wasn’t that they couldn’t leave; just that they didn’t want to.

Therefore, if they were caught, the story would be that Lucca was kidnapped. For one reason or another. And if Antoinette and Anya and whoever else was helping them were connect to Al Faust, the current leader of Faust City, this kidnapping would become a violation of the treaty between the city and the Nation. It would be a declaration of war.

And all because Lucca asked to leave. He really was selfish; this was all his fault.

“If you can find a place to hide away from the jet, do it,” Anya’s voice said from the watch suddenly.

Lucca’s head jerked up, as did Antoinette’s. They looked at each other, then at the watch.

“Anya?” Antoinette asked, unnecessarily.

“You watch will let us know where you are,” Anya continued, not answering the non-question. “It’s getting dark, so try to find somewhere hidden and safe. You’re close enough that we can use a transportation spell to get you back. It’ll take a few minutes to set up, so take that time to get safe.”

“Roger,” Antoinette said, her voice sounding more confident as she stood and helped Lucca to his feet.

“Oh, and Lucca?” Anya said.

“Yes?” Lucca said, gripping his bag. Could Anya hear him from the distance he had to the watch?

“Don’t ever fucking blame yourself for this again. We all got you into this mess; we’re going to get you out.”

Lucca blinked. He didn’t think she could hear him. He also couldn’t really believe that. If this failed, it was his fault. Still, he knew what she was really trying to say: they didn’t have time to play the blame game. They needed to get out. So, Lucca nodded.

“Ok,” he said.

“You have your orders,” Anya said. “Over and out.”

“I didn’t know transportation spells were a thing,” Lucca said absentmindedly while Antoinette put her hand on the door.

“They’re not great for long distances,” Antoinette said. “That was why we couldn’t use one to get you out. More than twenty-five miles makes it easy to fuck up, and I wouldn’t trust anyone but Al or my mama to do one up to fifty miles. Enough small talk, let’s go. And Lucca, you gotta move past what you’re about to see.”

Lucca nodded. Antoinette opened the door, the smell of gunpowder and blood flooding them. Lucca held a hand over his mouth, afraid he would puke. He followed Antoinette out of the bathroom, his eyes zeroing in on the doctor and Devon. Even though Antoinette had just warned him, it was hard to see. The doctor was on the ground, his eyes open and staring at the ceiling distantly.
Devon was slumped backwards over a seat, his body limp and unmoving. Lucca could see the bullet holes, blood still leaking on to the floor. A part of him wanted to go over and just, Lucca didn’t know, say something. Think something. Devon had been alive just minutes ago. He’d been waiting, patiently, to get to Faust City to see Anya again. To see his daughter.

And then it hit Lucca: his last words were that he had a daughter. One he’d never met. One he never would meet. Blame washed over Lucca, a mantra repeating in his head. My fault. My fault. My fault. This was his fault. Devon was dead trying to rescue him. And now a little girl would grow up without her father because of it.

A contraction hit Lucca as he got closer to the door, and he had to stop to breathe through it. Antoinette jumped out of the plane, turning to wait for him. Lucca placed a hand on his stomach, immediately feeling that buzzing of magic. It took him a second to realize it wasn’t coming from him: it was permeating from inside him.

Magic is in the blood.

Lucca felt the magic, pushing out a bit of his own to match it. His body went warm at his stomach, and he realized that he was feeling his baby’s magic. He smiled.

“Let me get you out of here first,” he said to the baby, even though he knew the baby wouldn’t understand. “I just need you to hold out long enough for me to get you safe. Please.”

The warmth spread through his stomach and around his back, the pain disappearing. Surprised, Lucca stood up, walking to the plane’s door with ease. Something told him that he was sure this was what an epidural would feel like. He wondered if he had done that, or if the baby’s magic had caused it. Did it matter?

“Come on,” Antoinette said, reaching an arm out to help Lucca down.

Lucca took it, hitting the ground a bit harder than he wanted to, his bag dropping next to him. He picked it up, holding it to his chest. He followed Antoinette as she walked along the side of the jet. It was completely dark now: it was hard to make out everything completely. Lucca could tell they were in a clearing in some wooded area. It looked like the middle of nowhere, but Antoinette, spotted a road.

“So people can get here that way,” she said. “We should go the other way; stay off roads. Let’s go.”

She turned to head the opposite way, into a bunch of trees. Lucca turned with her, the night air brisk despite Lucca’s sweater. They got about three steps in with a burst of light seemed to flash right on them. Antoinette held out an arm, stopping Lucca in his tracks. He looked over her shoulder, seeing that there was still a jet landed there. A man in fatigues—the one who checked the bathroom—was sitting on top of the jet, a gun aimed at them.

“What terrified Lucca most was that there were more jets next to him. Five in total. Lucca had only seen the two on the one side when they were still in the air, but there could have been more. They killed the pilots so there was no way Lucca and Antoinette could confirm how many there really were. Shit; they just assumed there was two. And they must have been banking on that.

“Thought you might return to the scene of the crime if you thought we left,” the soldier said, jumping out of the jet. Men jumped out of the other jets, pulling out guns and pointing them at them. The soldier pointed behind them. “And look at that: the cavalry’s arrived.”
Lucca glanced behind them, his heart dropping as he saw Jeeps tearing down the road Antoinette said to avoid. They circled the clearing, men jumping out in fatigues, brandishing guns. Lucca placed a hand on Antoinette’s back, feeling her shake. Fuck. They both knew they were screwed.

“Hands up!” a man jumping out of a Jeep cried out, gun aimed.

“What do we do?” Lucca asked Antoinette.

She shook her head, raising her hands. “What they say.”

Lucca dropped his bag, raising his hands as well.

“On your knees, hands behind your head!”

Antoinette followed orders, four men immediately walking over to her and handcuffing her hands behind her back before pushing her forward so that she fell flat on the ground. Lucca moved his hands behind his head, refusing to get on his knees.

“Unable to follow orders, runt?” the man barking orders said as soldiers circled him.

Lucca couldn’t hold back his glare.

“I am very pregnant,” Lucca told him. “I’m not getting on my fucking knees.”

The man scoffed, walking forward until he was standing directly in front of Lucca. He was tall, and bulky. Intimidating. Lucca kept his gaze straight ahead, his eyes landing on the man’s chest. So he didn’t see the butt of the gun coming, smacking him square on the side of his face. Lucca took the hit, still not moving other than his head whipping to the side. There was a pause before the man started laughing.

“Mutt can take a hit,” he said. “Like a good bitch should.”

Lucca held back a retort; this was military after all. He couldn’t mouth off and expect this to end well. He was miles away from Monty or anyone who would protect him.

“I just gave you a compliment, bitch,” the man said, his voice low and dangerous. “When you’re complimented, you should say ‘thank you.’”

Lucca took a deep breath in and out, hate burning in his chest.

“Thank you,” Lucca said tentatively, looking up at the man’s face.

The man grabbed Lucca’s jaw, his thumb gripping into the where he hit Lucca. He jerked Lucca’s head up, Lucca closing his eyes instinctively at the gesture. His hands also fell, moving to grab at the man’s arm. He didn’t seem to mind.

“Now, bitch,” the man said, his voice threatening, “I know your master taught you to respect your betters. I’m a sergeant. Don’t you think I deserve a little more respect than that? Huh?”

Lucca nodded, tears stinging his eyes.

“Then everything you say to me should end with a ‘sir.’ So be a good bitch and try that thank you
again.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lucca said, wishing this man would let go of his face.

“And what are you thanking me for, bitch?”

“For complimenting me, sir.”

“And?”

And? Lucca shook his head. What else did Lucca have to thank him for? What more was there?

“And for correcting me,” Lucca tried. “Sir.”

The sergeant chuckled.

“Very well-trained bitch. But you’re missing the big one.”

“Please,” Lucca said, his voice coming in as a whine. “Please, I don’t know what you want me to say.”

The sergeant lifted his other hand, and Lucca winced, closing his eyes. He felt something hard and cold against the side of his face, a slight relief from where his face was still stinging from the blow.

“Open your eyes, bitch,” the sergeant said. “Look at me.”

Lucca obeyed, watching as the sergeant’s eyes darted between Lucca’s face and whatever he was holding against it. Lucca turned his eyes to see what it was, realizing once the sergeant took it away that it was a small tablet. And it had a picture of Lucca’s face on it.

“Yup,” the sergeant said, finally letting go of Lucca’s face then. “Yup, that’s our little surrogate we’re tracking down. Oh, and you forgot to thank me for rescuing you.”

The sergeant turned to walk away, heading back to one of the Jeeps. The other soldiers approached Lucca, and his heart went into overdrive.

“Wait,” Lucca whispered, taking a step back.

It didn’t help; he’d backed into someone behind him, who immediately snaked an arm around his chest. There were more hands then, grabbing at him. Lucca heard the sound of metal, and found himself instinctively pulling away.

“Oh,” the sergeant said, pausing to look at the soldiers. “Be careful with him, boys. This Grayson brat is a Nation darling; I don’t feel like having to explain why we’re giving him back all roughed up.”

The hands on Lucca immediately were gentler. Someone ordered Lucca to put his hands in front of him, and he watched helplessly as he was cuffed. He glanced over at Antoinette, saw a couple of men lift her to her feet. One of the soldiers addressed the sergeant.

“What do we do with this one, Sergeant?”

The sergeant looked at Antoinette, considering.

“All of the other occupants in the jet are neutralized?” he asked.
“Yes, sir.”

“Then bring her in. We need to figure out who was involved in this.”

“Sir.”

The sergeant paused, seeing the question on the soldier’s face. Then he chuckled.

“The target needs to be brought back with a pretty bow. I don’t care how she comes back: just be sure she makes it back, boys. And ready to answer some questions.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” the soldier said, turning to Antoinette.

The men around Lucca started to drag Lucca towards one of the Jeeps, just as Lucca heard Antoinette start to struggle against the men. Lucca looked back, watching as too many men surrounded her, pulling on her clothes. Antoinette tried to fight them, kicking at them and slamming her head back into whoever nose was right there. But for every soldier she took out momentarily, there were three ready to replace him and continue.

“Wait,” Lucca said, pulling away from the men. “Please, don’t hurt—”

“Shhhh,” one of the men said, covering Lucca’s mouth with his hand. “None of that. Just be a good boy and you’ll be back with your family soon, okay?”

Lucca wanted to protest, but the soldier kept his hand over Lucca’s mouth until they reached the Jeep. By that point, Antoinette’s fighting had turned to her yelling at the men to stop whatever they were doing. Lucca was thrown into the Jeep and properly gagged. In a blur that seemed to be happening too quickly, the Jeep took off, heading down the only road with Antoinette’s screams echoing behind him.

Lucca closed his eyes, the night air whipping around him while the soldiers around him boasted about the accolades they’d get for this. Lucca’s mind kept turning on how this all failed. He let Nicolai and Eli down. He let his baby down. He let Devon get killed. His innocent doctor got killed. And now Antoinette was being hurt. And all of it was Lucca’s fault.

All of it.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! That was a dozy! Lucca was so close and yet so far away!

Did anyone expect Devon to get killed? I think as soon as I decided that Anya was going to have a baby, I decided that Devon was going to die. I even foreshadowed it earlier this chapter! When he said that he wants to be with his daughter "until the day I die." It's a thing that happens in stories a lot where if a character starts planning their future with someone, or references their hypothetical death in some way, they gonna die. I NEVER catch it at the time of reading/watching something, until the character dies and I'm like "WAIT, WHAAAAAAAT?" So it was kinda exciting to do it myself.

Did anyone catch it?
In case anyone didn't understand how they got caught, as soon as the hospital realized Lucca was missing, along with a bunch of staff (most of whom were new) and a missing helicopter, the military was called in. At some point (assuming they first checked in on that hospital in Delaware before declaring Lucca officially missing), they would have called for all planes in the Nation's air space to land (and any planes attempting to come in would have to land somewhere else and wait). Once that happens, anyone still flying would have been investigated. Our crew didn't get the message to land, thus why they got caught.

I didn't say explicitly how they got caught, and I thought of adding something in the final edit. But I felt like 1) that would assume my audience is too stupid to pin together possible ways our heroes would have been caught, and I don't want to assume that and 2) I felt like it was just straight overkill to have someone go into exposition on what happened. Not to mention I feel like it lowkey doesn't matter HOW they were found; it's reasonable that the military would be able to track down a surrogate trying to run pretty quickly. Especially if they knew he was airborne.

Anyway, I'm not sure why I waited so long to edit this and upload it. I got a new bullet journal notebook today, so I was migrating that and I was sooooo into it lol. Does anyone else bullet journal? I'm not a pro at it, but I've been getting better at it. And I do feel that it helps me get out my thoughts so I'm not in my head quite as often.

Please let me know what you guys thought! Next chapter is the aftermath of Lucca's capture! Will he escape? Okay, I tagged this as happy ending, so that's a stupid question to ask, but that doesn't mean you guys aren't going to SHIT yourselves over what happens. The next two chapters are going to be LIT! Whewyyyyyyyy, the climax is right around the CORNER y'all! Can you believe it????????

Leave comments s'il vous plait! Merci!
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

Escape from Guantanamo Bay...

Is that an okay joke to make?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The walls were metal. Lucca had to admit that he never saw that before. Brick, plaster, cement, wood; he’d seen those. But he never saw metal walls. It was weird. He laid on the small bed, turned to the wall, grateful that it’d been his right hand chained to the headboard. That made it easier to look at the wall instead of the room that was barely a glorified cell.

Whatever he’d done earlier to numb his contractions was still lingering; a blonde woman in scrubs came in occasionally to note how many contractions Lucca had since the last time she visited. He hadn’t felt any of them. They were down to about five minutes in between, and Lucca would hit nine centimeters soon. He wished he could control when his baby came; wished he could hold it off.

Not that it would matter at this point: he failed. He wasn’t going to get to Faust City, so who cared whether he had the baby in the next two minutes, or two hours? Time was no longer something to fight against; this baby would be Nation-born no matter what.

Lucca heard the door open, closing his eyes. He was sure it wasn’t that long ago that the blonde woman had checked on him. He didn’t want to turn on his back again so soon. He just wanted to stare at the cool metal of the wall. He heard footsteps walk over to him, then nothing for a few seconds. Then more movement as someone sat down on his bed. Lucca held his breath; if his nurse was going to try to talk to him, he would scream.

But she didn’t try to talk. Instead, she reached forwarded and placed a hand on his head. Lucca frowned: she had big hands for a woman. And considering how she was pretty petite, that didn’t make much sense.

“Lucca.”

With a burst of energy Lucca didn’t think he had in him, he sat up in his bed. He stayed facing the wall, his heart racing. That hadn’t been the blonde woman’s voice; hell, it hadn’t been a woman’s voice at all. But it was a voice Lucca knew too well.

Lucca turned, nothing preparing him to see Monty sitting there. Lucca just stared at him, sure he looked stupid. And caught. If he had his wits about him, he’d be better at controlling his reaction. But this was, to say the least, unexpected.

“Monty,” Lucca finally managed, his voice a whisper.

Monty smiled at him, though it didn’t reach his eyes. Lucca could feel that quiet rage Monty held when he was livid. Seeing Monty brought the reality of Lucca’s failure down on him like a ton of
bricks. Lucca wished he had just killed himself when he had the chance.

“Hey,” Monty said, his voice uncharacteristically gentle. “How are you feeling?”

Lucca just shook his head. He didn’t have an answer to that. Monty gave him a sympathetic look, reaching forward to push a few locks out of Lucca’s face.

“Poor thing,” he said. “You look so tired. You must have been so terrified being taken like that.”

Lucca just blinked at him. “Taken?”

“Yes. The kidnappers. I never thought Devon would plan something like this, but his wife’s disappearance must have driven him to insanity.”

That didn’t make sense. None of that made sense. Monty knew that. Lucca saw the warning in his eyes, and decided to ignore it anyway.

“I wasn’t kidnapped,” Lucca said. “I ran.”

“Mmm,” Monty said, nodding. “Stockholm syndrome. It must have been easy to connect to your kidnappers when one of them was your doctor.”

“I ran, Monty,” Lucca insisted.

“Or maybe they tortured you. Brainwashed you to think you wanted it.”

“I ran.”

“And—”

“I ran away.”

“You poor—”

“I ran.”

“Delusion is—”

“I fucking ran, Monty!”

Monty finally stopped, his face turning dark. He watched Lucca for a few seconds, his voice low when he spoke again.

“Keep your voice down,” he warned.

“They should know,” Lucca said, glancing around the room, sure there was a camera somewhere. “They should know what happened.”

“What happened is Devon conspired to kidnap you and your unborn child, likely for something heinous. You were headed to Faust City. They’re known for human trafficking there.”

“Why are you ignoring this?” Lucca asked, shaking his head. “I ran from you. Why are you pretending it’s something else?”

“Because it doesn’t make sense for my pregnant surrogate to run,” Monty snapped, the anger finally letting loose. “I’ve known you since we were both boys, Lucca. I’ve stayed your friend and
even bought your bid to spare you the trauma of being sold to some creepy, old ass motherfucker who would have no regards to your happiness.”

“What happiness?” Lucca said, feeling bold. What more did he have to lose? “I’ve been miserable ever since you ratted me out. When have I ever been happy?”

“Oh please, Lucca. Do you know what all I’ve had to do in order to help you?”

“Do you mean how you made the state hold off on my mother’s lobotomy to control me?” Lucca snapped. His face was hot and all he could see was red. He wanted everything to burn; but first and foremost, he wanted Monty to burn. “There was no reason for them to hold off; my mother wasn’t fertile.”

“She had you, Lucca.”

“Through invitro! After many attempts! How many times did they have to put a baby in my mother before the two she had stuck, Monty?”

“Lucca, you need to calm down.”

“All to keep up this lie? Just to keep me in line? You ruined her life—you ruined her—just so you could put me in my place?”

“Everything I have ever done was because of my love for you, Lucca.”

“You’ve ruined my life, and now you’re going to ruin me just like you ruined her. And you expect me to be grateful to you, Monty? Happy? Really? Are you that fucking dense?”

“I’m only a few years older than you, Lucca. Do you know how much work I had to do to make sure I was in a position to match anyone’s bid once you turned eighteen? I had to practically rewrite everything this country knew about psychology to get where I am today!”

“Congratulations! You did more work for your pitiful boner than any other man in this shitty country!”

Lucca had expected the slap; he knew there would be a response to that. So he wasn’t at all surprised when Monty backhanded him. Hard. He did wish, however, it wasn’t on the same side of his face that the sergeant had struck earlier with his gun. Lucca’s body felt warm, and he could feel his skin buzzing.

“I’ve warned you,” Monty said, standing up, his hands going straight to his belt. “I’ve warned you time and time again not to disrespect me.”

“I’m in labor!” Lucca yelled, a slightly hysterical laugh leaving his throat. “You’re going to fucking hit me?”

“I warned you. I said I would if you ever disrespected me again.”

“God, I wonder why I would run!”

“Don’t put this on me, Lucca! You’re the reason for all of this!”

“Oh, you’re yelling. Nice. Please, Monty! Hit me, Monty! Show me how fucking angry you are!”

Monty moved, his belt folded in his hand. Lucca tried to prepare for it, but there was little he could do as Monty climbed onto the bed, straddling Lucca’s legs. Lucca’s first response was to fight
back; he brought his free arm up in an attempt to catch Monty’s hand holding the belt. But Lucca still had his other hand chained to the bed. It was a simple thing for Monty to use his free hand to grab Lucca’s arm and slam it next to him in the bed. Lucca cried out, his arm in a weird position as Monty brought the belt up to begin.

The first strike missed most of Lucca’s hip, but the second one was on target. Whatever that target was; Monty was obviously pissed. As such, the belt came down all over Lucca’s body. Monty attacked Lucca’s shoulders, his chest, his hips, legs, and even belly. The pain didn’t bother Lucca as much as the claustrophobia of not being able to move. And it didn’t help that his body was so hot, his skin buzzing and itching like something begging to be released.

Lucca paused, feeling that energy again. The magic that wasn’t his, but was clashing and adding to his own: amplifying his power. Lucca was tired of holding it in, and it was obvious his baby was tired of this beating as well. So Lucca released his breath, feeling the heat move. Lucca imagined it like a blast permeating from his body. Like an explosion. Like he was exploding.

And he did: the magic roared out, rushing with a speed Lucca couldn’t control if he wanted to. And Monty was blasted right off of Lucca, hitting the far wall with enough force to stun him. Monty hit the ground, the belt falling before his body did. Lucca stared at the ceiling, catching his breath, a smile growing on his face.

He eventually sat up, looking at Monty. He was on the ground and he wasn’t moving. Lucca hoped he was dead. But even if he wasn’t, he was still knocked out. That meant Lucca had a few moments of peace.

As if sensing his calm, a siren sounded to disturb it. Lucca froze, sure whoever was watching the hidden camera—wherever it was—saw Lucca’s attack. Any minute now, men would come barging into the room to subdue him. A few seconds passed, however, and nothing happened. Lucca didn’t even hear the sound of footsteps near his door.

Weird.

“All soldiers to the Lima quadrant,” a voice said over a loudspeaker. “This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill. Targets are two female combatants; heavily armed and dangerous. Kill on sight. Repeat. Targets are two female combatants; heavily armed and dangerous. Kill on sight.”

Lucca tilted his head a that. Interesting. He looked at his hand still bound to the headboard. He focused, visualizing the lock to the handcuffs coming undone. Lucca heard a click sound, and easily got the handcuffs off. He smiled. He wasn’t sure if his obviously magical baby was giving him the boost, or if Lucca was just getting better at this magic stuff. Either way, he was grateful for it. And he was sure he would need it.

Lucca slid off the bed, walking over to the door. He put his ear do it, hearing men distantly yelling. The siren was still ringing, repeating the message again and again. Lucca did notice, however, that whichever quadrant the “female combatants” were in changed every so often. From Lima, they went to Kilo, then Juliett. Lucca wondered what quadrant he was in.

He kneeled down, looking at the lock. He placed his hand on it, imagining that he shoved enough energy into it for it explode. In a matter of seconds, it did. Lucca stood up, catching his breath for a minute, before opening the door. The hallway was empty, red lights flashing everywhere. Lucca looked up, seeing a sign at the door right across from him saying “I Quadrant.”

“Oh,” Lucca said aloud, stepping outside the room. “The names are the letters of the alphabet.”
“You just now figuring that out?”

Lucca turned, a smile on his face as he recognized the voice. Sure enough, Anya was walking down the hallway, wearing a long black skirt, a flowing black top, and her locs hanging down her back so she looked like the badass witch she was. She was carrying a wooden staff and there was blood on it. And her on face.

But what really made Lucca happy was seeing Antoinette walking next to her, her shirt missing, and her entire torso covered in blood. She looked like an Amazonian warrior, and she didn’t seem at all bothered by her breasts being exposed. Granted, the fact that there was blood all over them probably made it difficult for any guy to get off on it.

“Thought it’d be harder to find you,” Antoinette said, shrugging off a bag from her shoulder.

Lucca recognized it as his bag, immediately taking it from her and looking through it. The clothes and blanket were there. Lucca wanted to cry, but he knew that would have to wait.

“Thank you,” he said to her. “I thought I lost this for sure.”

“You two were supposed to hide,” Anya said, her tone serious though her face light. And round. She obviously hadn’t lost all of her baby weight.

“Oh, shut up, Anya,” Antoinette said. “We don’t have time for the banter. How did you get out? They don’t have a guard on you?”

Lucca looked into the room, where Monty was stirring but still on the ground.

“Is that Monty?” Anya asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Lucca said, shrugging. “He got a little handsy, so I reminded him how to be a gentleman.”

“Good work. Must have felt good letting loose on him.”

“I would have felt better if I took the time to castrate him.”

“Oh, you should have,” Antoinette said then, smiling. “Very therapeutic.”

Lucca looked at her, noting all the blood on her. Then he remembered what a good chunk of those soldiers did to her.

“Did you get the ones at the clearing?” Lucca asked her.

“And then some.”

“I thought we didn’t have time for banter,” Anya smirked.

“Anya, Jesus, shut up. So where’s the portal?”

Anya’s face fell, immediately getting serious. She used to her staff to point above them.

“On the roof.”

“On the roof?”

“Portals need a lot of space. I didn’t know the layout of this building, so the roof was the best bet.”
“Fine. Let’s go.”

Lucca followed them as they headed to an elevator. All things considered, Lucca was surprised the elevators were still working. They got in, hitting the button for the roof. The elevator started moving, light music replacing the sirens.

“God, I hate elevator music,” Antoinette said.

“ Seriously. I’d rather listen to reggae than this,” Anya said, her nose turning.

“Reggae is better than this, Anya.”

“Not everyone is a dancehall freak like you, Toni.”

“So you two really aren’t sisters?” Lucca asked.

“Hell, no,” they both said.

The elevator jerked then, coming to a screeching halt. Lucca’s heart skipped, putting a hand on the wall to keep from falling over. Anya and Antoinette didn’t look nervous. Even when there were numerous banging noises on top of the cab.

“Motherfuckers,” Anya said.

“So the elevator was a trap,” Antoinette said, smirking.

“Shut up, Toni.”

“Just saying.”

“Toni…”

“You owe me twenty bucks.”

“If we get out of this, I’ll give you a thousand.”

“I’m holding you to that. Especially since I know you can afford it.”

“Bite me, you useless mortal.”

The door at the top of the cab opened, and a canister fell in, hitting the floor. Lucca stepped away from it, seeing a white smoke coming out of the can.

“Are these guys, like, dumb?” Anya mocked.

“Yeah, we don’t even need magic for this,” Antoinette said, stepping forward and grabbing the cannister.

She threw it up into the air, the men on top of the cab yelling. Anya lifted her staff, a bolt of what looked like white-blue lightning came out, following the cannister. In a second, what sounded like a small explosion went off. There was coughing coming from the men, and a bit of shouting. Anya stood under the door, twirling her staff around her.

“Be right back ladies and gents,” she said, before levitating through the door.

Antoinette quickly jumped up, grabbing the handle to the door—why the hell was she so tall?—
and bringing it down with her to keep the smoke from getting inside the cab. They heard a few
whacking sounds, and then the thud of men hitting the ground. Or, rather, the roof of the cab.

“Oh,” Antoinette said, pressing back against the wall and pulling Lucca back with her. “Stand
back.”

“Why?” Lucca asked.

Answering his question was the sound of guns going off. Lucca could hear the bullets hit metal. A
few came straight through the top of elevator, hitting the ground where they’d been standing just
seconds before.

“Oh. That’s why.”

“Men and their guns,” Antoinette said with a shrug. “Always overcompensating for something.”

The elevator started moving again, reaching the next floor before stopping. The door opened, and
Anya stood there, her staff pointing towards them. She looked like she was straining. They got out,
Anya dropping her hands as soon as they were next to her. The cab, with the few men on top, fell to
the ground with a crash loud. Lucca looked at the soldiers on the ground around them, a couple
alive and moaning.

“How long until I can do something like this?” Lucca asked.

“Please do not be impressed by her,” Antoinette said, shaking her head.

“Why not?” Anya asked, turning towards them. “I’m pretty impressive if I do say so my—”

Anya collapsed suddenly, falling to the ground. Her breathing was erratic, and she clutched her
chest. Antoinette ran over to her, letting Anya put a hand on her shoulder for support. Lucca
followed, unsure what he could do to help.

“Are you okay?” Antoinette asked her.

“I’m just a bit out of practice,” Anya said, between breaths. Her face was sweating. “That shouldn’t
have had me this winded already.”

“Mama said magic takes a lot out of you those first few months after childbirth.”

“Mine said the same thing. Just didn’t believe her.”

“We don’t have time for you to rest.” Despite the harshness of her words, Antoinette’s tone was
soft. Sympathetic.

Anya nodded, glancing at Lucca. “I know. Help me up.”

Antoinette reached down to give her a hand, just as the sounds of footsteps grabbed Lucca’s
attention. He looked up, guards rounding the corner. There were at least five of them, guns up and
aimed. They stopped a few feet away, and Lucca saw their fingers on the triggers.

Lucca moved on instinct; Anya’s back was to them, and she was exhausted. There was no way she
would have gotten up to respond to them before their guns went off. So Lucca stepped in front of
them, ignoring Antoinette’s protest, and lifted his hand. He didn’t think of his little energy ball, but
rather a large shield to protect them. It materialized quickly, right as the guards fired.

The shield protected them, but Lucca didn’t expect to still feel the impact of the bullets. Every one
that hit his shield felt like a hammer banging against his chest and head. He wasn’t sure if it was because he was inexperienced, or if this was normal. What he did know was that it hurt. And he wasn’t sure how long he could take it.

So he remembered Anya’s lessons, and visualized the shield moving towards the men. It rushed towards them, an orangey shadow chasing after them. The men lowered their guns, shocked. Two turned and ran while the others stood frozen as the shield hit them. The shield knocked them off their feet, pushing them back until they hit the wall. Hard.

Lucca felt that too; as if he had been shoving them with his own hands. They were heavy, but he wanted them to hit the wall hard. Hard enough to put them under. So he focused and pushed, only feeling satisfied when he heard the cracking sound of them slamming against the wall. The shield dropped easily, and the tension in Lucca’s chest released. He took a few deep breaths, trying not to feel too proud of himself.

It was hard not to, though.

“There you go,” Anya said, standing and patting Lucca’s back. “And you told my Devon that you couldn’t control the shield.”

“It was easier this time,” Lucca admitted. “Everything feels, I don’t know, amplified. I think my baby is helping me. I think he’s magical.”

“He probably is. I told you magic is in the blood.”

“Is it okay to be using his powers like this? Am I hurting him?”

“If he didn’t want you to use them, you wouldn’t be able to. He’s fine. He wants to help.”

Lucca wasn’t sure he believed that his baby wanted what Lucca was doing with his magic, but he nodded. At the very least, he would believe Anya when she said he wasn’t hurting him.

Antoinette noticed a staircase at the end of the hallway, and they headed towards it. As they reached it, however, the two guards who ran earlier returned with more guns. Lucca raised his hand again, but Anya reached forward and pulled him back. Before he could protest, she lifted her staff and slammed it against the ground.

The floor shook, the men losing their balance. Anya raised her staff again, this time towards them. The men rose in the air, dropping their guns from the shock. Anya lifted them until they reached the ceiling before slamming them down onto the ground. The impact was hard, cracking the floor around them. One man hit his head, knocking him out, while the other was stunned. Either way, neither of them were getting up any time soon.

“That better be the last of them,” Anya said before gasping for breath.

Antoinette went in front of her, opening the staircase door for her to get through. Anya nodded her thanks as she walked by, holding on to the railing as she started up the stairs. Antoinette trailed behind her, making sure she didn’t fall while Lucca brought up the rear. Lucca wanted to help Anya, but he found himself struggling up the stairs himself. Had the little bit of magic he’d done really taken that much out of him?

“You’re overdoing it,” Antoinette said to Anya. “Your sister is going to ream you out.”

“She’s already mad I’m doing any of this. Besides, these motherfuckers killed my husband. I think I have the right to get a little rough.”
Lucca didn’t say anything, guilt jabbing at his heart. Anya paused as they got to the next level, putting her hand to the wall. She was obviously checking to make sure there weren’t any more guards waiting for them. How she was doing that, Lucca had no clue.

Eventually, she nodded and continued leading them up. Their pace was slow, Anya not able to rush herself. It worked for Lucca only because he could keep up. Maybe trying to do this escape while he was in labor wasn’t the best plan. Especially if Anya wasn’t at full strength after having her daughter.

Despite that, they did eventually make it to the top. Anya opened the door. It was still night, the air cool with a slight breeze. Lucca shivered a bit against the cold, following the women to the roof. The air smelled like safety. Like escape. Like freedom.

“Oh, you have got to be shitting me,” Anya said.

Lucca caught up to them, his blood running cold when he saw what made her stop. In the middle of a roof was a silvery-clear circle hovering in space. Lucca was sure that was the portal Anya created; their way out. And right next to the portal, pointing a gun at them, was Monty.

“Fucking hell,” Lucca muttered.

Chapter End Notes

Oh. My. GAWD.

What a chapter! I had so much fun rereading that! I made some lazy edits last night (when I was so tired my vision was going lol), so when I did my read through today, I added some scenes. So I apologize if there are more grammatical errors in this chapter than normal. I typically don't add in the final edit: just fix all the mistakes. But I felt like their escape wasn't action packed enough, so I added a few more fights.

I don't know if I'm alone in this, but I LOVE writing fight scenes. Action anime like Yu Yu Hakusho and Sailor Moon really inspired me to get into writing when I was, like 12. I literally got into writing because I was trying to write YYH fanfiction and I couldn't make it work because it was requiring the characters to do things OOC, so I was like "lemme just write my OWN story with my OWN characters so none of this matters!" So I always prefer writing things that allow for action (though I guess I can get angsty when I want to lol).

That said, please tell me you all loved this chapter. Tell me how much you loved it. Lol.

If you're wondering how Monty got a gun and got to the roof before them, don't. Lol. Jk. Actually, that's part of the reason I extended the action scenes. As things stood, I didn't think it made sense for Monty to get a gun, then get on the roof before them. But with the added fights, I can believe it more.

He was stirring by the time Lucca and co. met up, remember. He heard Anya say that the portal was on the roof, so once he could stand, he went there. Considering how Lucca and the ladies got held up in the elevator and again in the hallway, before SLOWLY making their way up the stairs, Monty was able to get to the roof. He
wasn't there long before them.

You all know what this means? NEXT CHAPTER IS THE FUCKING CLIMAX!!!!! AHHHHHHHHHHHHH! I'm so hype! And it's fitting for Sunday's chapter I think. Though a part of me feels like it's silly posting the climax and making y'all wait for the wrap up chapters. Also, is two chapters for the wrap up too much? Maybe I'll condense them to one. But I was thinking of expanding them, because I think the follow up chapters (the last especially) were WAYYYYYY too short. I kinda wanted to introduce a bit more, especially to set up the next story. Muahahahaha.

Maybe. We'll see.

Either way, after tomorrow, the next update will be Wednesday. You'll see the story update as completed if Wednesday's chapter is the last one. I doubt it will be, but just in case. And if not, the final update will be Friday.

I can't believe this long ass story is almost over. It's been such a long process. This story has taken up most of the year! Lol. I guess that's normal, though? Hmmm.

As always, PLEASE let me know how you feel! Leave comments! Go off! Freak out! Get hype! Party rock is in the HOUSE tonight!

Okay, I'll stop now. See y'all tomorrow!
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

Our epic climax is here!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Should have known,” Monty said, his eyes on Anya, shaking his head. “Should have known you had something to do with this when Devon went missing. Do you know he’s dead?”

“Yes,” Anya said with a tilt of her chin. Her voice was strong and confident. “I’m quite aware of what this country has done to him.”

Monty scoffed. “You would pass the blame to us. Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say that you’re the reason he’s gone?”

Anya smirked, titling her head at Monty. “Oh? How so? Please elaborate, Montgomery.”

“If he had never gotten involved with you to begin with, he would have gone down a more honest path. You’re the reason he strayed.”

Anya laughed at that. It was unnerving, really, watching the way she threw her head back and all but cackled. In the night, holding her staff, dressed in all black; she looked like the evil witch of some tragedy. Then she stopped, standing straight and serious in a split second. Lucca felt a chill go down his spine.

“That’s what we do, right?” she asked. “That’s the story the men in this country tell themselves. We harlots and whores come around and seduce good, Christian men from their path of righteousness. That way, you all have someone to blame when you give in to those basal instincts.”

“You deny it?” Monty asked, incredulous.

Anya shook her head, lifting her staff with one hand and resting her other hand on the knobbed top. She looked at it, a break in her cold demeanor, her eyes soft and wistful.

“No one ever understood my Devon. He never denied what he was at his core. It was ugly at times; it’s not like I approved of every disgusting little urge he indulged. But God knows he claimed his humanity. He would have been more of a beast had I not put a leash on him.”

“You’re not making any sense.” Monty took a staggering step forward. “I don’t care, honestly. I don’t know what sob story Lucca told you, but he’s not leaving with you.”

“That’s not your decision,” Antoinette snapped. “And you need to put that thing down before you hurt yourself.”

A bang tore through the air. Monty took a step back, the kickback from firing the gun momentarily throwing him off. Lucca jumped, ducking slightly and placing a hand over his stomach. He didn’t expect Monty to actually fire: the threat had felt empty. Once Lucca was sure he wasn’t shot, he
glanced at the women.

Both of them hadn’t even flinched, their eyes still on Monty. Antoinette glanced down, and Lucca followed her gaze. There was a bullet hole in the ground in front of her. Anya saw it too, raising her gaze to Monty. Fury colored her eyes. Antoinette scoffed.

“Big man really wants to get hurt.”

“You take my daughter’s father from her,” Anya started, raising her staff towards Monty. Lucca tensed when he saw the knob at the top start to glow a blueish-white color. “And then you threaten more of my family. I don’t know why you insist on invoking my wrath, Montgomery, but I will be happy to oblige.”

“I won’t miss next time,” Monty warned, raising the gun at her again.

“You’d better hope not because if you do, you will join Devon in hell.”

“Stop,” Lucca said, feeling his body warm up.

“Step back you two,” Anya said, the glow around her staff getting brighter and brighter. “I’m taking this motherfucker out.”

“Stop!”

A contraction ran through Lucca, shocking him straight to his knees. He hadn’t expected that; if the spell he casted earlier was fading, it must have meant that the baby’s magic was fading. A part of Lucca was concerned that meant something was wrong. A bigger part of Lucca knew, somehow, that it was because his baby needed its magic for something else. And the overwhelming urge Lucca had to push felt like proof of that.

“Lucca!”

Antoinette was by his side in seconds, letting Lucca lean against her. Monty dropped the gun, taking a step towards them.

“Lucca,” he said, reaching out to him. “Please, you need—”

“I said ‘stop!’” Lucca snapped, raising a hand towards him.

Monty stopped in mid-step, the gun falling from his hands. He could move his head, however. He looked down at himself, at the gun on the ground, and then back at Lucca. Lucca had tried to freeze him the way that Anya had done at her bakery a while ago. But it looked like he wasn’t able to manage it fully the way she did. That would probably come with experience.

Lucca met Monty’s eyes; for a moment, they just watched each other. Lucca saw understanding dawn on Monty’s face. Knowing Monty, he probably came up with eight different reasons for what happened in the cell earlier. None of them, however, would have put what happened on Lucca.

But there was no denying it now. Monty had to accept that Lucca had this power. And Lucca could tell from the consternation on his face that Monty was not having it.

“So that was you,” he said, his voice accusatory. “Let me guess: this she-witch taught you devil magic? Or was it someone else? The same people who taught you how to read?”
“This baby is coming,” Antoinette said to Anya. “We don’t have time for this. We need to get him to base now.”

Anya glanced at Monty, who was struggling against the spell. Lucca felt it; a tug pulling against a string in his head. It built like a tension headache, with every throb representing Monty’s attempt to break free. Anya placed a hand on Lucca, warmth filling him instantly. Somehow, it made the next contraction that gripped him feel not as bad. He needed to push soon, though. His baby wanted to come out.

“Let go, Lucca,” Anya said, holding her staff up towards Monty. She walked over to him, kicking the gun behind him. “I’ll keep him still. Or kill him; whichever you prefer.”

“Just come home, Lucca,” Monty said, his voice oddly gentle. “I don’t know what prompted this, but running away isn’t the answer. Just come home and we can figure this out.”

Another contraction hit: a not-so-gentle reminder of why Lucca was doing this.

“I’m not giving up my baby,” Lucca told him.

“Lucca, he’s not—”

“What? He’s not mine? I’m literally about to pop him out and somehow I don’t have a right to him?”

“Lucca, you’re a surrogate.” Monty sounded genuinely bemused. “You’ve always known it would be like this.”

“Well, I no longer consent to it.”

Monty didn’t answer, and Lucca saw the way his jaw tensed to keep his mouth shut. He almost said it: what he really thought. Then realized how, especially given the current circumstances, it wasn’t even close to the right thing to say. And Lucca smiled, even as another contraction blossomed, urging him to start pushing.

“You don’t think I have the right to do that,” Lucca said, standing with Antoinette’s help. “You don’t even see the problem with that. And then you wonder why I want out. I don’t care to help you understand anymore, Monty. I just want to leave.”

“Lucca, please. I—”

“Don’t kill him,” Lucca said, letting Antoinette help him over to the portal.

Anya sighed, moving away from Monty and over to the portal as well. Lucca let a breath out, releasing the tension of the magic around his head. His head stopped pounding, the relief heavenly.

“I think you should just kill him,” Anya muttered, frowning. “He seems like the type who’ll follow you to the end of the world.”

“He won’t be able to touch me once I’m in the city.”

“You need to start pushing right away,” Antoinette said, letting go of Lucca. Anya took his other arm in support. “I’ll make sure they’re ready for you.”

Lucca watched as she turned towards the circular portal, walking forward with easy. As soon as her body touched the light, she disappeared. Lucca froze, another contraction hitting him.
“Does it hurt?” he asked, hoping the question would make him forget the contraction.

“Nope,” Anya assured him. “It’s like walking into a new room. You won’t even feel the difference.”

Lucca nodded stepping forward, it finally hitting him: he was just one step away from freedom. Finally, he could—

A gunshot sounded off like an explosion. Lucca felt everything slow down as he glanced over his shoulder, seeing Monty hold the gun in front of him. Anya’s arm left Lucca’s, grabbing his attention. Sure enough, she turned to face Monty, a gunshot wound between her chest and left shoulder, blood already pouring from it. She reached up, touching it, before turning to glare at Monty.

“You son-of-a-bitch,” she growled, her steps staggering backwards.

Anya fell back, hitting the portal and disappearing. Lucca watched her go, another contraction hitting. He couldn’t help but double over, watching as Monty dropped the gun and took a step forward. Lucca felt sweat drip down his brow, despite the cold air around him. It was just him and Monty now.

“Finally,” Monty said, taking another step. “I’m done playing these games, Lucca. You’re coming with me.”

“No, I’m not,” Lucca told him, his voice stronger than he felt at the moment.

“This isn’t up for debate.”

“I agree.”

“What are you going to do? You’re in labor, love. Let’s just go downstairs, back to your room—”

“You mean that cell?”

“Lucca, please. Be reasonable.”

“What if you killed her?” Lucca demanded, trying to stall as another contraction hit. “What if she’s dead because of you?”

“She’ll be better off for it,” Monty said. His tone denoted no remorse. “She was a demon, Lucca. You saw that witchcraft she used. It’s ungodly.”

“So you really don’t care? Whether you may have killed her?”

“All I care about right now is taking you home where you belong.”

Lucca placed a hand on his stomach, his body already warm.

Just one more time, he thought, feeling for that other magic source again. Lucca thought of his first mistake: trusting Monty with a secret that he was too selfish to keep. He thought of how he trusted Monty again, walking into that cabin to be beaten and raped. He thought of when he learned about how Monty planned for Devon to rape him. He thought of his mother, who had been locked up and forced to carry children again and again despite how difficult it would be for her. He thought of Chelsea’s pleas when Monty pulled her into his room.

And then he thought of Gabby, whom he had to leave behind. Of Gabby, who would have to grow
up in the Nation. Who would never be taught to read. Who would be groomed her entire life for motherhood. Who would have to spend her life being raised by the monster Monty was.

Everything Monty had done to Lucca was unforgivable, yet Lucca was prepared to live with that. Accept what had happened so he could move forward. But what Lucca wasn’t prepared to do was let Monty’s reign of terror continue. Monty had no problems hurting Chelsea, nor Anya, nor anyone else who got in his way. He had no problems hurting Lucca, whom he claimed to love above all else. There was nothing stopping him from hurting anyone else.

Even Gabby.

Lucca lifted his hand towards Monty, imagining the hot anger of everyone Monty’s ever hurt. Lucca let the red seep into his vision, the fury he’d kept hidden raging around him. Monty stopped, his eyes widening slightly. It was obvious Lucca was doing something. Lucca had no idea what Monty could see, and he didn’t care.

He just wanted Monty to burn.

And in an instant, Monty’s entire body lit on fire. As though a cloud of flames rained down and covered him, Monty immediately started panicking. He slapped at his shirt and pants, falling to the ground, yelling in terror and pain. He writhed around, pathetic, trying at first to put the fire out by rolling. That didn’t do anything, of course, and his screams turned frantic. It wasn’t enough, but Lucca got hit with another contraction. He wanted to rain more fire on Monty; turn him to ash.

But Lucca didn’t have any more energy to create more fire. Instead, he simply watched Monty as he crawled helplessly on the ground, reaching towards Lucca still. There was something nice about that: seeing Monty helpless. It would be a new feeling for Monty. And the last thing he’d ever feel again.

Lucca watched until Monty’s screams turned silent, and his blackened hand fell to the ground. Only then did Lucca turn, looking at the portal, still hovering inches away. Without another glance back, he walked forward, the light enveloping him immediately.

Like Anya had said, there was no jerking or pulling or anything dramatic. One minute, Lucca was on the roof, the night air surrounding him. The next, he was in a large room. Lucca had expected some official looking building; similar to the cell with dim, florescent lighting and a group of gruff looking men in stealth-appropriate uniforms waiting.

Instead, he walked into what looked like a bedroom. The walls were a pale blue, a far window open and letting in some of the night air. There was a large bed in the center, covered in so many towels that Lucca thought they should have just put another comforter on top. And instead of soldiers, he saw a small group of women—and two men—wearing scrubs.

They had all crowded around someone who was sitting at a desk to the side. Lucca realized it as Anya, her face twisted in anger and annoyance as Antoinette kept her in her seat with a firm grip on her unhurt shoulder. She was bandaged up, and looked full of energy and fire. Lucca let out a breath of relief, happy that Monty hadn’t gotten her too. God, Lucca was sure he would die if he found out he was the reason even more people were dead.

Anya didn’t notice him at first, her gaze focused on someone standing in front of her. A woman, tall and stocky, wearing a fitted, navy blue suit. Her arms were crossed in front of her chest, her skin a deep mahogany that seemed to shine bright even in the dim light of the lamps in the room.

She was the first one to notice Lucca, turning her head towards him. If her body language hadn’t
been intimidating, her scowl was. The way her kinky afro was styled in a wild mane around her head, she looked about as fearsome as a lion. And that was despite how strikingly beautiful she was. Her features were strong, from her jaw to her nose to her cheeks. And yet her eyes had a softness that no amount of glaring could erase; almond eyes that Lucca thought were similar to Anya’s. Except this woman had a mole under her left eye.

She raised a hand towards him. Lucca wasn’t sure what she was about to do, but he didn’t have time to think about it. A rush of air blew past him, knocking him back a step. He heard a snapping sound behind him, and looked to see that the portal he’d walked through was gone. The woman turned her nose at him, as if disgusted, before turning back to look down at Anya.

“Are you happy now?” she asked, her voice low with a vibration that Lucca wasn’t used to hearing from women. “Your stray made his way back. You going to fucking act like you have some sense now?”

Anya stood, despite Antoinette’s best efforts, and walked in front of the woman. Their faces were inches apart, sparks seeming to go off between them. Another contraction hit, and exhaustion seemed to overwhelm Lucca in that moment. He let out a small moan, collapsing to the ground, his bag hitting the ground next to him. Lucca shrugged it off, the weight of it seemed overwhelming now.

“The baby’s coming now,” Lucca heard Antoinette say as he closed his eyes to breath through this. “Get him on the bed! Quickly!”

Lucca felt arms on him immediately, lifting him gently as the contraction faded. The men carried took him to the bed, which felt softer than anything Lucca had ever been on before. The women were at his side immediately, one checking his vitals while another helped him take his pants off.

They were gentle and polite, asking him questions to figure out how far along he was. Lucca let them know that his contractions were less than two minutes apart, and one of the women confirmed that he was well dilated enough to start pushing. Lucca distantly saw Antoinette and the new woman leave the room, the woman pausing to glance at Lucca before shutting the door behind her. Anya sat back down in the seat at the desk, supervising the attendants.

The rest was a blur. Lucca was aware of pushing, of someone counting while he did so and encouraging him. He felt too tired to push. At one point, he said that to the woman who was letting Lucca squeeze her hand. She assured him that it wouldn’t be long, and he could rest once the baby was there.

And Lucca had closed his eyes, imaging holding his baby. This precious boy that inspired Lucca to finally take control of his life. This angel that Lucca was determined to save. His child. His son. His baby. His. His to claim. His to raise. His to love and cherish and support and teach. His child, already brimming with magical energy, helping Lucca do things he never thought he could.

Lucca pushed, thinking only of how much he wanted to finally meet this child. This child who saved Lucca’s life in more ways than one. And that gave him the strength to push harder and harder and harder even after the woman whose hand he was squeezing said he could take a break. Keep pushing until—”

“We got the head!” one of the women at Lucca’s feet announced. She looked up at Lucca, a giant smile on her face. “Just push a little more! He’s almost here!”

Lucca nodded, bearing down and pushing again.
“There we go. Shoulders. Stomach. Legs. Here he is!”

There was movement then, and orders being given out quietly. The woman sitting next to Lucca wiped down Lucca’s forehead, congratulating him. Lucca couldn’t relax, however, because he didn’t hear anything. Gabby had cried right away. Why wasn’t his baby crying?

“Back to daddy,” the woman who had caught the baby said, putting him on Lucca’s chest.

Lucca cradled him, his heart melting as he watched his baby squirm. The woman was still wiping the baby down, rather roughly. In fact, when his baby finally opened his mouth and let out a wail, Lucca was sure it was the clean up making him cry than anything else. But he was crying. Right here on top of Lucca. And alive. And healthy. And here.

And free. Born in Faust City instead of the Nation. A natural born citizen. Legally, no one could force him back to the Nation. He was safe. And that thought brought Lucca to tears, crying alongside his son.

Chapter End Notes

Does anyone else feel like Gal Gadot in Wonder Woman when she saw that baby and ran towards it? "A ba-by!!!!!!" lol.

Wow. It's really here. The frigging climax. It's been so long and here we are. Insane. I can't believe that I'll be done posting this story this week. It's both exciting and sad. I've had so much fun posting this, but all things must come to an end. Oh well.

That being said, will you believe that I didn't intend for Monty to die when I started this? Now that this story is almost done, I can talk about the story that inspired this. It was supposed to be a story about a brothel in Faust City in which Lucca was one of the prostitutes. I had a main character who started working there as an administrator, and the person who ran the brothel was Monty. There was supposed to be this tension as Lucca ran away with Monty's second child but wouldn't tell Monty where the child was. The story was supposed to end with the two of them reconciling, but because the story had a bunch of POVs (Lucca being one of them) and a bunch of people who ran from the Nation trying to survive, it made sense to write a story about what happened to these characters before they escaped. Lucca's story was supposed to be told in conjunction with the two other POV characters, but I lowkey got bored with their stories, and Lucca's took over.

It wasn't until I kept writing, however, and Monty kept doing worse and worse shit that I knew I was going to have to scrap that idea (and the POV idea in the next story) and kill Monty off. I did go back and forth on that as well; if Monty was alive, then he would be obsessed with finding Lucca and bringing him back to the Nation. I even would think about Monty finding Lucca and his son and forcing them back home and all this stuff. But that just seemed too cruel. I said this to someone in the comments, but Lucca is, for the most part, DONE with his suffering. And to solidify that, I killed Monty off so no one would be able to threaten his happiness again. He deserves it. He really does.

Also, Lucca will not become a prostitute. I actually think what he does get into really works for him, and I can't wait for you guys to read it. I think everyone will be proud
of him.

So next chapter will be the aftermath, and then the conclusion chapter after that. In order to get all chapters out before the end of the month, the next chapter will be uploaded on Wednesday, and then the final chapter on Friday.

I keep mentioning the sequel, and while I did start the story, I actually decided to take a break from writing for a bit. Mainly because I plan to participate in NaNoWriMo, so I know that come October and November, that will be my main focus. And because this story has taken up SO much time this year, I've honestly neglected a LOT of stuff in order to write this. And I need to address them/do them. And I want to READ. Can you believe I haven't read a single book all year? The one I'm currently reading I started in December, but all year, every time I picked it up, I'd stop after a few sentences and then go write instead. I just want to enjoy some stories without having to create them lol.

That being said, it's likely the sequel won't come out until February or March (since I like to write ahead before I start uploading so I can keep a consistent upload schedule). I do have a tumblr page: aizenat.tumblr.com. I'll use it to post writing updates for anyone who might want to know when to expect the sequel.

One last thing: next chapter, we'll find out the baby's name. Any guesses on what it will be? I'll give you a hint and say that it's been said at least three times already.

Leave comments! For those of you who were waiting for Monty's death, are you satisfied with it? I decided he would be burned to death back when Lucca first used magic and saw red and thought of fire. I was like "yeah, that bitch is going DOWN." Lol.

See you all on Wednesday!
Chapter 66

Chapter Summary

Part of the responsibility of the freed is to stand firm in that newfound freedom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lucca had spent about a week in bed, tending to his baby. Anya was almost a constant companion, helping Lucca to the bathroom when he needed it and taking the baby when he needed a little time to sleep. Not that it was often; his baby was a perfect angel. He only cried when he was hungry or needed a change, though Lucca rarely put him down for him to need anything else. And even in those moments when he did cry, he seemed to catch on quickly that Lucca would tend to his needs immediately, so he never fussed for long.

“I’ve never seen a baby so mild mannered,” Anya said one day as she sat on Lucca’s bed, rocking the baby in her arms. “He’s just looking at me. God, what a cutie!”

“He looks less like Monty than Gabby did,” Lucca said, wrapping up the diaper and wipes he’d just changed.

“That’s good,” Anya said, her voice turning a bit harsh. “Easier to forget him.”

“I thought the same with Gabby. How Monty was so terrible, yet could create something so beautiful.”

“Aaliyah’s the same way,” Anya said, smiling. “She’s so sweet. I can’t wait for you to meet her. She gets her first round of vaccinations next week. We’ll let the babies meet then.”

“So what happens now?” Lucca asked. It was a question he’d been wanting to ask; he knew he couldn’t stay in this bed, cuddling his baby forever.

Anya sighed, setting the baby down on the bed in front of her. The baby immediately yawned, his eyes getting heavy. Lucca had finished feeding him before changing him.

“We have options,” Anya said. “My sister’s been fighting me on this, but I’ve gotten her to grant you refugee status. Meaning you’ll have access to a lot of immigration programs to help you settle in and get adjusted.”

Lucca remembered the woman that Anya was staring down when he stepped through the portal. Lucca hadn’t seen her since that day, Anya stating that she was busy. Lucca assumed she was likely some sort of businesswoman. She must be pretty wealthy to also have influence over whatever system granted refugee status to newcomers. Devon did mention that Anya’s family were well off. Maybe it was some sort of family business.

Either way, Lucca didn’t think he’d left enough of an impression for her to help him out. Lucca remembered the way she turned her nose at Lucca; her heavy and terrifying scowl.

“She doesn’t like me very much,” Lucca said. It wasn’t a question.
“It’s not you she has a problem with: it’s me.”

Lucca raised an eyebrow at her. “You?”

“Yeah. I know I might have looked cool kicking all those soldiers’ asses, Lucca, but I’m not as put together as you’d think. Even eloping with Devon was stupid.”

Lucca hesitated; they hadn’t talked about Devon since getting to Faust City. Lucca was afraid to dwell on it. But it never made sense to him: what did Anya ever see in him?

“Then why did you?” he asked.

Anya smiled, looking down at the baby and smiling.

“I was young when I met him. Older than him, but young. And he was so different than the other men from the Nation that I met before. He called their ways stupid; I could criticize the way the Nation treated women and people like you without worrying about it becoming an international incident.

“But I think what I really liked was that he respected my power. At any time, I could magically rip him to shreds. If he ever crossed a line, I could punish him. I could destroy him at the drop of a hat. And he loved that I was stronger than him. And I felt strong with him. Compared to my sister, I’m as threatening as a kitten.”

“Your sister is stronger than you?” Lucca asked. He involuntarily swallowed.

“Oh yeah,” Anya said, nodding vigorously. “And she’s always been like that. Just better than me. She was always destined for greatness. And now she’s the head of our family, the most powerful woman in this city, and no one would ever dare to cross her. No one ever respected me like that. Not until I met Devon.”

“I always thought you were too good for him,” Lucca admitted.

Anya chuckled. “Everyone did. Funny how I was always the worthless failure until I got with some Nation boy who wasn’t good enough for me. I thought my mama was gonna whoop my ass when I came back here pregnant.”

There was a pause between them. Lucca kept his eyes on his baby, watching his eyes droop more and more until they closed and didn’t open. Lucca watched him sleep, every rise of his little chest proof that leaving was the best thing Lucca could have done for him. Still, the guilt that tore through him was eating him up. He needed to speak. To apologize.

Lucca opened his mouth.

“Anyway!” Anya said, cutting Lucca off. “Enough about me! My family still supported me, despite disapproving of my life choices, so who am I to complain? You asked a very good question. What next? Well, the first step will be housing. We have a few boarding houses, some that are perfect for single immigrants with kids.

“Or, if you’d like, I’d be happy to find you an apartment nearby. You’ll have to find a job to help pay the rent. There’s actually a complex my friend opened up a few years ago. You’d have a roommate that you’d split the bills with, but it’s a great halfway house sort of thing to give you more independence and freedom than a boarding house while helping you prepare to get your own space.
“And in terms of work, I’ll obviously help you with that, too. I’m sure you’ve heard how dangerous this city can be, and it’s easy for immigrants to wind up in unsavory professions to make ends meet. I—”

“I don’t want to take up more of your time,” Lucca interrupted, something in him breaking as he listened to Anya ramble. “You’ve done so much for me already.”

“Yes, but that’s why I have to help you,” Anya said, looking confused. “After all the work it took to get you here, I’m not going to let you get caught up in some gang shit and leaving your baby an orphan.”

“And I really appreciate that, Anya. I do. But—”

“Why would you turn down my help? There are people in this city who would kill for a little assistance from someone in my family. Wh—”

“Because I’d feel guilty letting you help me when I’m the reason your daughter’s going to grow up without her father.”

Anya came up short, her eyes widening at that. Then her face fell, hurt, and she shook her head.

“I told you not to blame yourself for that,” she said, her voice low. “It’s not your fault.”

“Devon died helping me escape,” Lucca insisted. “How is it not my fault?”

“Because it’s my fault. And Devon chose to help you. God, Lucca, we could have found any other doctor to kiss Monty’s ass. I have agents all over the country that would have been happy to help me get you out. Devon volunteered to put himself in that position. He always knew the risk.”

Lucca shook his head, tears pooling in his eyes.

“You weren’t there when he died. The last thing he said when the soldiers turned their guns on him was that he had a daughter. He didn’t want to die.”

“No one wants to die, Lucca. But we both knew the risk. That morning when he called me to tell me you were admitted to the hospital, we said final goodbyes. Just in case. We prepared for this, Lucca.”

“But—”

“Do you know I almost left Devon over what he did to you?”

Now it was Lucca’s turn to be brought up short.

“What?” he asked.

“I almost left him. My bags were packed when he came home after dropping you off. I wanted to marry him because I thought he respected me. I had no intention of marrying a rapist.”

“Then why did you stay?”

Tears did fall down Anya’s face then, and she wiped them away while shaking her head. She looked angry, and her next words were so rough and raw that Lucca’s baby woke with a jolt.

“Because I’m an idiot!” she said. “Because he apologized and begged me and said he’d never do it again. And I loved him and made excuses for him. When I saw you again at my shop, I realized
how stupid I was. I kept calling him ‘my Devon’ like he was perfect all while the poor child he raped was standing right there.”

The baby started to fuss, and Lucca picked him up, holding him to his chest. He immediately calmed down, resting his head against Lucca’s heart.

“I wanted to leave then, too,” Anya admitted, her eyes distant as she looked straight ahead. “He begged me to stay. He said that when the day came where you called, he would do everything in his power to help you. Even if it killed him. Just to make it up to me. I told him I wasn’t the one he hurt. He never got it, but he was determined to do it.

“That’s why it’s not your fault. It’s my fault. I’m the reason he’s dead. I never let him forget you. I never fully forgave him. I never let it go. If I’d forgiven him, maybe he wouldn’t have volunteered. We could have found someone else to take his role, and they’d be dead while my Devon would be here and alive.

“But that’s selfish, Lucca. And maybe I offered to help you to appease my own guilt. And maybe my wanting to help you now is more of that. But, goddammit, despite how wrong my love for Devon was, I did love him. I still love him. And if something happens to you here, something that I could have prevented by giving you a place to live and helping you find good work, then Devon’s death will have been pointless. Trying to help you would have been pointless. I just need something good to come from this.”

Anya really started crying then, sobbing with tears pouring down her face. Lucca moved, adjusting his baby to rest on his shoulder, using his other arm to pull Anya into a hug. She went and cried there, right next to his baby. Lucca understood what she meant. It was what had pushed Lucca over the edge to kill Monty: he needed to escape so that Devon’s death, the doctor’s death, those pilots’ deaths, even Monty’s death wasn’t in vain.

And now, he needed to live for the same reason. And live happier and better than he ever would have in the Nation.

“Okay,” Lucca said. “Then please help me make it here. So I can make it up to you and Aaliyah.”

Anya sniffed, lifting her head and wiping away tears.

“Thank you,” she said. “God, why couldn’t you just accept my help in the first place?”

Lucca chuckled, the sound making his baby coo and fidget in his arm. Lucca adjusted him, Anya taking calming breaths while she watched.

“Are you ever going to name him?” she asked. “It’s been days now. We need to finish the birth certificate.”

“I already did name him,” Lucca said, lifting the baby up in the air and bringing him down to give him kisses on his face. The baby smiled at that.

“Really? What did you name him?”

“I had to name him what he was: my Angel.”

~*~

Lucca couldn’t stop fidgeting with his hands as they waited. He glanced behind him, looking at the wooden door behind them.
“Chill out,” Anya said next to him, crossing one leg over the other. “She’s more bite than bark.”

“So, she’ll kill me first and ask questions later?”

“Exactly. You won’t have time to be scared.”

Lucca shook his head. It had been two weeks since he came to Faust City, and he was well enough to at least start looking for a place. Anya wanted to take him out the next day, but apparently her sister had wanted to have a talk with them beforehand in her study. Lucca’s mind kept going back to his brief interaction with her—if he could call it that—the first day he arrived. If she was a lot stronger than Anya, that meant she probably could kill Lucca with just a glance if she really wanted to.

As such, he was struggling not to shit his pants.

The door opened behind him, and Lucca tensed. He glanced briefly over his shoulder, watching as Anya’s sister walked in. She was in another tailored suit, this one a russet color with a deep, brown tie. Lucca noted, distantly, that she wasn’t wear heels, but those dress shoes men typically wore that still clacked against wooden floors like heels.

She walked over to the desk they were sitting in front of, not looking at them until she sat down in the big chair behind it. She levied a hard look at Anya, holding her gaze for almost a full minute in silence before turning to look at Lucca. Lucca completely froze, unsure what to do. Before it could go on too long, however, she sat back in her seat and gave Lucca a surprisingly warm smile.

“Hello,” she said to him, tilting her head in a way that seemed too feminine for her. “I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced. I am Anya’s older sister: Amira Ludwig Faust. You are permitted to only call me Al.”

Lucca blinked, his blood running cold. Al Faust? The Al Faust? Then another thought hit Lucca: Anya was a member of the Faust family? Lucca turned to look at Anya, who was obviously trying not to look at him.

“Devon said you came from a respected family in the city,” Lucca said to her. “No one ever said anything about you being a Faust.”

“Really?” Anya said, playing dumb. “That never came up before?”

Al cleared her throat. Lucca turned his attention back to her, her smile turning more polite than warm.

“I’m sorry,” Lucca said, figuring that had to be rude. “I just didn’t expect to meet Al Faust when I woke up this morning.”

“Most people who meet me don’t plan it,” Al said, raising an eyebrow.

She didn’t speak again, as if waiting for something.

“Oh,” Lucca said, understanding. “I’m sorry. I’m Lucca.”

“Lucca,” Al repeated, opening a drawer at her desk and taking out a tablet and a stylus. She hit the screen a few times before grabbing the stylus. “Tell me, Lucca. Do you have a last name?”

“Oh, um,” Lucca started, glancing at Anya. “In the Nation, my last name was legally the same as Monty’s.”
“Okay,” Al said, putting the stylus down. “Listen, Lucca. I’m a very busy woman. I have a video meeting in, let’s see, ten minutes. So, this needs to be quick, and it’s only going to go quickly if you actually answer my questions. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Great. So, again, do you have a last name, Lucca?”

“Leroux.” His mother’s maiden name.

Al had been reaching for the stylus again, but paused when she heard that name. She looked up at Lucca, narrowing his eyes at him.

“Where did that name come from?”

“It’s my mother’s maiden name.”

“Where is your mother from?”

“Faust City, actually.”

“She left the city?”

“Right before the war started. To be with my father.”

“Her given name?”

“Madeline.”

Al sat up straighter, her eyes snapping to Anya.

“Did you know about this?” she demanded.

Anya glanced warily at Lucca.

“I did not.”

Al scoffed, shaking her head.

“The motherfucking irony.”

“Please don’t tell me you somehow knew my mother,” Lucca said, trying to make sense of this line of questioning.

“Not personally, no,” Al said. Lucca was half surprised she answered. She didn’t seem like the type to like being questioned. “The Leroux and Faust families go way back to emancipation times. We’ve been in this city when it was called New Orleans. And we built Faust City together.”

“Madeline was a bit of a cautionary tale for us growing up,” Anya elaborated. “She wasn’t magically inclined and didn’t really care to learn. She was more fascinated with people; travelling and meeting them. She met a soldier stationed nearby, and fell in love. Then eloped, believing she’d get to travel a lot thanks to him getting different assignments. She left the city and we never heard from her again.”

“The warning being not to rush into the Nation for love,” Al finished, looking at Anya again. “Because it’s going to end up fucking you over. And yet my idiot sister went and followed in her
footsteps.”

Anya didn’t respond, just glaring at her sister while the two stared each other down again.

“It’s a shame, though,” Al continued, returning to write something on the tablet. “The Leroux family struggled with fertility over the last few generations. They were all but dying out. The matriarch, Mama Tilda, died just a few years ago. She would have loved to have met her great-grandson. Most of your family are either living abroad, or just don’t like me enough to keep me in the loop of their lives.”

“As if you don’t know what they’re up to regardless,” Anya quipped.

“Fèrmé, please” Al said, waving her hand idly at Anya.

Anya sat up, waving her hands in exasperation. Lucca recognized it as the trick that he and Anya used to shut Devon up when he got annoying.

“The only relative I’d feel comfortable introducing you to is Tatiana,” Al continued, as though she weren’t interrupted. “But she might be too busy running her Nation resistance group to make it. I’ll see if I can arrange a meeting.”

Lucca opened his mouth to ask more about that, but Al kept going.

“You’ve really lucked out, kid,” she said, then shook her head. “My apologies. Lucca. Your last name makes me nostalgic, and you’ve managed to befriend my sister. Not even thirty days in and you’ve made powerful friends in very high places.”

“That’s not wh—”

Al waved her hand again, and Lucca’s voice went dead in his throat. It was weird feeling this himself; it was like the words couldn’t make it from his brain to his mouth. He looked at Anya. She rolled her eyes, shaking her head.

“It wasn’t a question,” Al said, politely. “I’m trying to be nice. Immigrants are protected in my city, legally, but that doesn’t mean things don’t happen that I can’t stop. You, however, as a family friend and my sister’s personal friend, will be under the explicit protection of the Faust family. Anyone fucks with you, they fuck with us. Or, rather, me. And no one in this city wants that. So congrats.

“I can have you set up with a room in west wing as soon as you’re feeling up to it. I’ll assume you’ll want your baby in there until he’s old enough for his own room. My aunt and cousins stay over there as well, so you won’t be alone if that’s a concern. It should be helpful since Anya and I will likely be too busy to keep you entertained most days.

“And you both will still be expected to participate in society. Both of your children will be placed in preschool once they’ve hit six months; Anya, I expect you working by then. Oh, and don’t worry, Lucca; this preschool is one our mother runs. It’s highly selective and prestigious. Your son will learn a lot there. Also, if you wanted to pursue education, I’ll allow that in lieu of a job for the time being. And Anya, you’ll also be responsible for helping Lucca with job hunting or schooling while you’re on maternity leave. His safety is your responsibility now. Are we all in agreement?”

Lucca’s head was spinning. There was something annoying about how Al was deciding everything for them. Not to mention he really didn’t like that last part. He was Anya’s “responsibility?” He was a child, or some pet. Lucca didn’t like it.
However, he also couldn’t answer her. A point Anya made by waving her hands and pointing at her throat.

“Oh, yes,” Al said, waving her hands. Lucca sucked in a breath of air as his words came to him again. “Forgot. So, are we all in agreement?”

“Yes,” Anya squeaked out, rubbing her throat.

“No,” Lucca said.

Al’s head snapped towards him, the smile falling clear off her face.

“Excuse me?” she said, her voice taking a low octave that sounded dangerous.

“I said no,” Lucca repeated. “If I wanted to be at the mercy of some totalitarian asshole, I would have stayed in the Nation with Monty.”

Al just blinked at him, and Lucca could feel a buzz in the air. Al Faust had a reputation: dangerous, powerful, and not the sort of person you’d want to cross. But meeting her in person made Lucca realize that she’s just human. Flaws and all. And she was a control freak. Just like Monty. And Lucca didn’t risk everything—didn’t kill—just to become a slave in someone else’s house.

He had no intention of returning to the life he just escaped from.

“I will find a job and support myself as soon as possible,” Lucca said. “So, I don’t need your deadlines. I will accept your offer of schooling for Angel, though. I want him to learn everything I couldn’t, and it would make it easier to find work if he is in school during the day.”

Al raised an eyebrow. Lucca swallowed, wondering if he should sweet-talk her a bit. The part of Lucca that had spent years learning how to play Monty begged for a chance to shine. It would take time for Lucca to break that reaction when dealing with controlling personalities. But for now, he decided to use what he learned in the Nation.

“If I could move out tomorrow, I would. Since you were nice enough to make me a refugee, Anya said there’s a lot of programs that can help me. If there are any for housing, I’ll use them. I don’t want to impose too long. Ideally, I’ll be gone within a month or two. If not, then I’d accept a bit of pushing from your end.”

Al’s brow furrowed at that. “I wasn’t saying all of that to get you out of my house. I—”

“I know,” Lucca interrupted, sitting a bit taller. Her reaction was also human. Lucca smiled. “I know you just want to help. And I appreciate that. And knowing I can turn to you if I need it makes me feel a lot better about all of this. But my goal isn’t to need your help. Especially not often. I want to do this on my own. I came here to be free. I want to do that.”

Al let out a breath, her eyes a bit wide. She looked at Anya, as if looking for an explanation.

“Lucca’s not me,” Anya said, shrugging. “You don’t need to put a tight leash on him.”

Al seemed to consider that, looking Lucca up and down before nodding.

“I see. My apologies; I find most people aren’t self-motivated, so I’m used to having to help in that regard.”

“Giving your position, I believe that,” Lucca said.
Al smiled, and Lucca was surprised to see it reach her eyes.

“I like you. And I don’t like people often. No deadlines. But I do want to help however I can. Getting started is the hardest part.”

“I believe that too,” Lucca said, nodding. He let out a small breath of relief. “Thank you.”

Al smiled at him, before turning to scowl at Anya. Anya waved her hand at Al, rolling her eyes.

“I could learn a lot from him. Yeah, yeah,” she said. “Are we done? Isn’t your meeting, like, now?”

Al sighed, jerking her head in the direction of the door. Anya stood and Lucca followed. Once they were in the hallway, Anya let out the longest breath Lucca had ever heard anyone hold before.

“Holy shit,” she said as they started down the hall to where nannies were watching their babies. “I thought she was going to kill you when you said no. And then you ended up getting her to respect you? Jesus, Lucca, were you trying to show me up?”

“No,” Lucca said, honestly. “It was just annoying listening to her go on about what I was going to do. It made me think of Monty.”

Anya nodded. “Yeah, I can see that. She has the best intentions.”

“Just like the road to hell.”

Anya laughed at that. “I think we were both worried about you for no reason: you’re going to do great here.”

Chapter End Notes

I think the next chapter will, technically, be an epilogue. Still, it's the final chapter. How exciting and bittersweet. I really am going to miss sharing this story. It's been such a wild ride.

Anyway, can you believe I forgot I had to upload this chapter today? Lol. I was hoping to work on it slowly because I knew I wanted to take time to expand it. Buuuuut, here we are lol. I also added a lot to this chapter today, so if there are grammatical errors, I apologize. I really wanted to redo that conversation with Al because holy hell was it rather awkward in the first draft. I feel like this one was just firmer.

Al isn't that bad, guys. I know Luca compared her to Monty, but he has a very limited frame of reference. Al is literally in charge of the entire city lol. It's not an easy job to have. Not to mention she also deals a lot in the shady underground markets in Faust City. And she has to deal with the precarious situation that is the Faust-Nation relations. There's just a lot she has to balance, and she can only do that by being a bit of a control freak.

BUUUUUUUT we'll deal more with Al's control issues in the next story. ;P

Ah, the reason she's called Al is because of her initials: A.L. Faust. Someone in the Nation saw that before meeting her and assumed they were going to meet a man
named "Al." When Al walked in, the diplomat exclaimed "you're Al?" and Al fell in love with it. She always thought her given name was too girly for her anyway (I happen to really like Amira, but go off I guess sis), so she started going by it. She also LIVES for the reactions when people meet her and realize that she's the famed "Al Faust" because she KNOWS they're not expecting a woman. Lol.

Also, Al is a stone cold stud. She knows how to use a strap is all I'm saying lol.

I wonder if anyone put together that Al was Anya's older sister? Anya having an older sister who was powerful was mentioned. NOT to mention Devon talked about Anya's family and A names (and Antoinette, their cousin, also has an A name). No one asked, but the hints were there. Did anyone catch it before this chapter?

I also feel like a jerk revealing Al so late in the game. I adore her so much (I'm in lesbians with her lol). It's a shame you'll all have to wait so long to see more from her. Ah well. I hope you enjoyed her intro!

Despite how Al is always hard on Anya, she does love her. Al, again, has a lot she's responsible for, and her sister was one of them. She does resent Anya a bit for running off (especially since Anya has the privilege of doing so while Al could never do something so reckless herself), but she's relieved to have her back safe and sound. Their relationship will get better. Being a single mom will force Anya to mature quickly. Al won't be so hard on her forever!

Please leave comments, everyone! Last chapter is Friday! The end! I can't believe it! See you all then!
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

All things must come to an end...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The streets of the city were busier than anything Lucca had ever seen. Granted, he’d never even been to cities in the Nation. Still, the hustle and bustle of Faust City was intoxicating. There were people constantly walking around, street performers playing instruments or dancing for a few coins. Lucca saw children of all ages, most of them in uniforms, running on playgrounds or make their way to the library with backpacks on their backs.

There were shops and stores galore; small shops for tarot readings, restaurants and bakeries, and boutiques. And, according to Anya, they weren’t even in the wealthiest area of the city.

While Anya refused to look for houses in areas close to any red-light districts, she did agree to take Lucca away from the upper East Side of the city where Al lived to look for housing. Lucca was actually loving the apartments and townhouses they were finding. Most of them were in good neighborhoods with good schools and nice neighbors who had kids of their own.

Still, Lucca didn’t have a job. He wasn’t even sure what jobs he could qualify for. He had zero experience, zero training, and zero education. Even the moderately priced places they were looking at were out of his price range. And while Anya had already declared to pay at least the first six month’s rent for Lucca once he eventually moved out on his own—even going so far as threaten to find his landlord and shove the money down their throat if Lucca tried to turn her help down—he needed something he could afford after he was no longer relying on the Faust’s aid.

“We’ll visit the immigrant services tomorrow,” Anya said as they took a break at a park. They had grabbed sandwiches from a deli and had the babies in strollers. It was a warm day despite it being the first day of November; apparently, Louisiana never got too cold. “They can go over any housing programs and you can see if you like that instead.”

“Can’t wait,” Lucca said, more focused on Angel than he was their conversation.

Angel had just woken up and hadn’t been fed in a couple of hours. Lucca took him out of his stroller, grabbing a bottle from his diaper bag. He’d pumped the night before in preparation for this day trip: he wasn’t as brave as Anya to just nurse in public. Aaliyah, who was even cuter in person than in the pictures Devon showed him, was still sleeping.

“Or,” Anya said, for the fiftieth time that day, “we can just get a place together.”

“You’ll try to pay for everything if we do,” Lucca accused. It was a fair accusation to make.

“I can afford everything,” she whined. “Especially once I start back up helping Al with her ambassador shit. It would be perfect. We can help each other with the kids.”

“Anywhere you go, Al is going to be involved.”
“She’s not that bad!”

“She’s your sister. You have to put up with her. I don’t.”

Anya sighed, knowing Lucca was right.

“Fine. There’s a really good school in Little America. Lots of Nation immigrants to bond with.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Lucca?”

Lucca looked up, watching as one of the bodyguards—Al insisted—stopped someone from approaching them. Someone Lucca recognized. Someone he didn’t expect to ever see again. Lucca stood, tossing Angel’s bottle back into the carriage. His perfect baby didn’t even fuss. Lucca addressed the guard.

“Let him through,” Lucca said, smiling. “I know him.”

The guard let a glaring Vic through, whose face melted into a smile as he turned towards Lucca. He looked different and yet the same. He filled out a bit in the years since they’d seen each other. Grew a few inches too. His hair was cut short; shorter than ever allowed for surrogates at the Center. His skin was darker, too. Probably all that Louisiana sun. But it was Vic, standing right there in the flesh.

“Holy shit,” Vic said, his eyes wide as he approached. He looked dumbfounded. “It’s really you. I thought it was you, but—I can’t believe this. I never thought I’d see you here!”

Lucca hugged him, only remembering belatedly that he was still holding Angel. They split up, looking at each other. It was amazing how different and yet the same Vic looked. Lucca was sure Vic was thinking the same for him.

“Jesus, Vic,” Lucca said, running and hand through his hair. “What are you doing here?”

“I ran, Lucca,” Vic said, shaking his head. “We did a layover in Lafayette, and I just fucking ran. I thought I ran into some traffickers at first while I was on the street, but they were these people who smuggle people out of the Nation. It was straight luck. They got me out and I’ve been here since. What about you?”

“I only just got here. I actually ran in the middle of labor.”

Vic’s eyes got wide, and he glanced down at Angel.

“Dios mío,” he said, smiling at Angel. “And who do we have here?”

“His name’s Angel. And he’s not even a month old so he really hopes Uncle Vic doesn’t have any dangerous viruses on him.”

Vic laughed; a real laugh. The sort of laugh that Lucca didn’t think he’d ever hear again. A laugh that reminded him of those days back at the Center, when they made fun of their teachers. A laugh that brought back memories of fighting over who owned that knit hat Vic loved stealing from Lucca. A laugh that had been a private secret between them for years because anyone who heard them would try to take it from them.

The laugh that died when Vic had been raped. When Lucca had been too out it from his own rape
to even notice it missing. The laugh that Lucca was sure life had tore aware from him—from Vic—forever. And yet was here, light as a bell and melodic and familiar while also being different. New. Or, rather, renewed.

“I’m good,” Vic said, raising his hands in defense. “I work at a kitchen, so I know how important hygiene is. Is this your first kid?”

Lucca could feel his smile fall a bit. “No. I had to leave my firstborn behind.”

“Fuck.” Vic’s face fell, his eyes softening. “I’m sorry, Lucca.”

“It’s fine. Monty, uh, passed, so at least I know it’s just Chelsea raising her. She’ll be fine. For the most part.”

Vic nodded, obviously catching on that Lucca didn’t want to talk about that. Lucca had thought about it a lot over the past couple of weeks. About Gabby. About how she was still stuck in the Nation while Lucca had escaped. He never said anything to Anya about it; he knew she would try to talk him out of his thoughts. Talk him out of his hatred. His anger. His disappointment. All of these feelings he had directed towards himself for abandoning his child.

Logically, he knew there was nothing to be done. He knew he shouldn’t blame himself. He knew he wasn’t the monster he called himself in those moments. But the hole in his heart from knowing Gabby was out there in the Nation, waiting to grow up be taught to love her subjugation was there. And no words could fill them. Nothing could.

Not yet, anyway.

“I actually aborted my baby when I got here,” Vic admitted, shrugging. “It was the first thing I did when I got here. I couldn’t do it, Lucca. I couldn’t have his baby.”

“It’s hard.” Lucca nodded. “I know. Carrying Monty’s babies was hard. It’s not easy what they wanted from us. You did the right thing.”

“I know that. Now.” Vic paused, looking at the guard hovering nearby and Anya giving them space by staying seated on the bench. “What’s up with the suits?”

“Long story,” Lucca chuckled, shrugging. “Want to meet a Faust?”

“What? Like, seriously?”

Lucca nodded. He turned, watching Anya take Aaliyah out of her carriage as she started fussing. Lucca waved at her.

“Anya, I want you to meet someone.”

“Anya, I want you to meet someone.”

“She’s seriously a Faust?” Vic asked.

Lucca nodded as she approached. “Anya, this was my roommate at the Center back in the Nation, Vic. Vic, this is my friend Anya.”

“Anya Faust,” she said, smiling at him. “Apparently, I have to advertise that, or else people get upset.”

“I’ve known her for years and had no idea she was a Faust,” Lucca explained.

Vic laughed, a bit nervously. “Really? Yeah, this is kinda weird.”
“You’ll get used to it. Or not. Tell me Vic, where are you staying?”

“Oh, I actually have a place with my boyfriend,” Vic said, looking down as he said that. Lucca caught it: he was shy. “He’s still at work, so I was killing some time before he got off.”

“Damn,” Anya said. “I’m trying to convince Lucca to get a place with me instead of those immigrant housing programs.”

“Oh, no,” Vic said, shaking his head at Lucca. “No, you should absolutely do that. That’s how I met Justin. He’s from the Nation too.”

“Really?” Anya asked with a tilt of her head.

“Yeah, he was a soldier.”

“How did he end up here?”

Vic pointed to himself. “Well, he likes guys, so…”

“Right, makes sense.”

“I keep telling Anya it’ll be best if I do it this way,” Lucca said.

“It really is. When I first got here…”

Lucca listened to Vic, the three of them eventually moving back to the bench so the babies could be fed. Vic held Angel, awkwardly, until Angel threw up on him. They walked Vic back to his apartment to clean up, catching his boyfriend, Justin, just as he was about to go inside the building. And then they took up space on the street to talk some more before Lucca and Anya needed to leave to go change the babies.

And as Lucca walked down the street, back to Al’s house—for the time being—Lucca looked up at the sunny, fall sky. He swore it looked brighter here than it ever did in the Nation. And even though Anya insisted that was his imagination, Lucca wasn’t so sure. Everything was brighter here: the sun, the sidewalks, the color of the buildings, and his future.

Lucca glanced down at Angel’s sleeping face. Angel’s future was the brightest of all.

Chapter End Notes

If we lay a strong enough foundation
We’ll pass it on to you
We’ll give the world to you
And you’ll blow us all away
Someday, someday
Yeah, you’ll blow us all away
Someday, someday
~*~

It’s over ya’ll. We’re done! Summer is almost over, and I’m ending it with the end of this story. Amazing.
First off, I want to thank all of you guys for sticking with me and believing this would have a happy ending. I said it would happen. It's been a long and bumpy ride, but I've learned so much. I said this time and time again that my mission for this story was to just write. It was to just write with reckless abandon. To rediscover why I loved writing after YEARS of depression killing my creativity and drive. For the first time in years, I feel confident about my future with writing. I know I CAN write stories, lots of them, and tell them well. I feel like I reconnected with a part of myself I spent years wondering if it was dead.

So writing and, even more, SHARING this story and seeing you all react has been the biggest and brightest joy of my year. Even on days where I felt like shit, you all came through with the long dissertations, analyzing and pointing out things in my stories and characters that I hadn't noticed. This is my first time sharing a story with an audience like this, and the feedback has just made me hungry for more. Hungry to write more and more and more and MORE. Thank you all so much. Every word of encouragement, every critique, every comment has filled my heart in ways I can't even articulate.

So, what next? I kept teasing about a sequel, and I went back and forth originally about them. At first, I had no intention of staying in this world: I planned to move on and work on other projects. But now this sequel has taken over my mind. And I NEED to get it out. I will warn you all: it's going to be MUCH shorter than this one. And, therefore, probably a lot more coherent. Hopefully.

As of right now, I did complete the planning (for the most part) and even started with the first act. BUT, I'm not really satisfied with it, so I'll likely rewrite it and start in earnest. That said, even though I finished writing this story a while ago, editing it so I could post it (and posting it, especially during the post bombs) has taken a lot out of me. I need a break from this world, this story, and, subsequently, the sequel. Meaning I likely will NOT start working on it until January of 2020.

Meaning I likely won't start posting it until February or March of the same year at the earliest. I hate to make everyone wait so long, but I don't want to get burned out again with writing. I want it to remain my joy and love. I hope you all understand that.

In the meantime, I will be posting on tumblr at aizenat.tumblr.com. This is the best place to follow me if you want updates on my writing, and know when I'll start uploading again. If tumblr ain't your thing (I don't blame you), then you can just check back in around February/March for updates.

Other projects I am working on will be a blog (I want to launch this year with a soft reset in early 2020, if possible), and a possible podcast/youtube channel. I decided that once those are established, I will share them here so you all can get more content from me. IF you want that lol. These things will, however, use my real name instead of this pen name, so I ask everyone be respectful regarding that. I will not discuss or talk about this story on those platforms; however, so anything regarding this story will HAVE to be directed to my current tumblr page.

I will also be participating in NaNoWriMo. While I'll be resting in September, October and November will be 100% dedicated to that. And December will be recovering from that. Thus why I will not promise to write again until after the New Year after
NaNoWriMo. This might surprise y'all, but I've never done it before, so I'm excited to participate this year!

I think that's all that needs to be said and noted for now. Please leave comments. Let me know what you all think! I'll miss posting and interacting with you all. Follow me on tumblr if you can! And I can't wait to post more here! Thank you for your patience, time, and love! You all have been amazing in helping me fall back in love with my craft! Thank you so much, and see you around!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!