

[BEGIN SAMPLE]

Gleaming, golden, and grinning, Lucio stands in the road to the marketplace. He's tall and upright, a stark contrast to the slinking, horned figure that prowled the palace halls just days before.

When I asked for information on the ghost that whispered into my ear, the Devil offered to bring him close by for a proper conversation.

Lucio: "This is more like it!"

Asra had warned me about his tricks. Every word would be a snare. And I would never be certain which might capture me. I had to be cautious.

Still, I never expected the Devil would bind me to the spirit in the palace. The supposedly deceased count is now healthy, hale, and tied to me by a mysterious spell.

Lucio: "Don't get me wrong. My palace is delightful beyond words, but it can be stifling when you've been forced to spend years inside it alone."

He grins at his reflection in a passing mirror, taking a moment to smooth back several strands of hair. His polished figure glimmers beneath the sunlight.

Lucio: "The company was magnificent, mind you. But even I need a fresh change of scenery every so often."

Every harsh press of boot leather against the pavement tugs at my heartstrings, the strange presence beneath my skin enticing me to follow him.

The Devil seems content to keep us on a longer leash at the palace, but out in the daylight, I can take no more than five steps away from Lucio.

Lucio: "You're not going to sulk this entire time, are you?"

1. "I'm not sulking."

2. Glare.

OPTION 1:

MC: "I'm not sulking. I'm just thinking."

Lucio: "So you say. If I didn't know better, I'd think you don't enjoy being around me."

He throws back his cloak, the bone-white fabric nearly striking my face as I come up behind him.

Lucio: "All my citizens enjoy me, however. So that can't be right."

MC: "You think highly of yourself."

Lucio: "Why wouldn't I? The city has flourished under my rule!"

Lucio: "And I've given my people endless entertainment. What more could they ask for?"

I bite back a sour answer.

Instead, I stare at Lucio. My face is glass smooth.

He tosses me a showman's careless smile.

OPTION 2:

I cast him the foulest expression I can muster. It stops him in his tracks and his mouth curls into a wicked grin.

Lucio: "Ho ho! I've seen less threatening expressions on a battlefield. What exactly have I done to summon your ire?"

MC: "You haunted me, set your dogs on me and frightened me. Is that enough?"

Lucio: "The Devil was insistent we meet. Besides, you were a guest in my home. I couldn't help my curiosity."

Lucio: "And look what it brought about! I've been restored, you've kept your own life in the process...and the two of us are taking a lovely stroll through my lands."

Lucio: "Really, what more could you ask for?"

MC: "A better traveling companion."

Lucio turns back and glares, his eyes piercing me through.

But suddenly, he laughs. It is a booming, musical sound against the backdrop of low murmurs and hooves striking the pavement.

STORY CONTINUES HERE:

Lucio: "Just you wait."

Lucio: "I'll give you plenty of reasons to like me."

The rest of the city seems to have plenty of their own.

Sunlight bleeds from the marketplace's open roof, highlighting the vendors' glittering smiles as they call out to Lucio.

Some try to hawk their wares, but others are thrilled to see the count.

Fortune Teller: "Ah, the Arcana smile upon you my lord!"

Fortune Teller: "Welcome home. You were greatly missed!"

Lucio: "And I missed you as well! It's good to walk the streets of this city once again."

Nadia did say he was generous with his people. Perhaps not all have lost their memory of it.

As we wade through stalls and the clamor of fast-talking merchants, Lucio comes to a halt.

Portia stands at the fruit vendor's stall, dropping pomegranates into a basket woven from palm leaves.

Lucio: "I recognize that servant. You there! Girl!"

Portia: "Yes, my lord?"

Portia barely hides the disdain in her voice. Her eyes narrow, and her lips purse into a thin line.

She has a dozen reasons to dislike the count, but Lucio hardly seems to notice.

Lucio: "You've spent several weeks tending to [MC_NAME]. Tell me, what's [HIS/HER/THEIR] favorite treat?"

Portia's eyes grow wide and hesitant, prompting me to nod.

MC: "Go ahead, Portia. I don't mind."

Portia: "[HE/SHE/THEY] enjoy pumpkin bread the most, my lord."

Portia: "I've seen [HIM/HER/THEM] eat a whole loaf in one sitting. Sometimes two, if [HE/SHE/THEY] can manage it."

Lucio lets out a bark of laughter that's as harsh as it is thrilled.

Lucio: "Ha! Well then, I can't leave our magician with an empty stomach. Let's get some pumpkin bread into you."

MC: "That's not necessary. I ate before we left the palace."

Lucio: "Nonsense! Let me spoil you."

Lucio: "I promise, you'll like me quite well after our shopping trip."

Lucio strides over to the baker's stall and reaches for the coin purse at his waist.

He loosens its golden thread and rummages through crushed velvet, pulling out several rubies and slamming them onto the counter with a solid thud.

Lucio: "Baker! A loaf of pumpkin bread for the magician. Keep the rest for yourself."

The baker looks up from a mound of chilled pastry dough, a lump rising visibly in his throat, then disappearing as he answers the count.

Baker: "I am terribly sorry my lord, but I've run out of my stock for the day."

Lucio's eyes narrow to honed points. A muscle twitches in his jaw.

Lucio: "What do you mean you're out?"

Baker: "A group of gondoliers purchased all my loaves earlier this morning. I haven't had time to bake more."

Lucio: "You'll make time if I say so! When I ask for something in this market, you'd best have it ready!"

Baker: "My lord, I apologize. I meant no offense!"

Lucio: "You'd better be sorry. Now get to work with that pumpkin bread."

Sweat breaks out on the baker's brow. He nervously chews his lower lip.

Baker: "My lord, it isn't just a matter of time. I need to purchase more cinnamon, flour, yeast..."

Lucio's clenched, golden fist hits the counter. Wood splinters beneath his fingers.

Lucio: "Then get some!"

He thrusts his free hand out to the open space, pointing deliberately at the surrounding stalls.

Lucio: "We're standing in the middle of a market! Are you telling me that you don't everything available to you?"

His voice is thick with menace.

Lucio: "Because my Vesuvia has everything its citizens could ever hope for."

Lucio: "If you disagree with that, there's a place for you in the colosseum with the other fools who dared to cross me."

- 1. Intervene.**
- 2. Walk away.**

OPTION 1:

MC: "Enough, Lucio."

The sound of his name before his title catches his attention.

Lucio looks at me with all the petulance of a scolded puppy.

Lucio: "This baker had the gall to tell me no!"

MC: "Only because he can't make the bread. It's not worth a scene."

Lucio: "I am not making a scene! I am only demanding what I've asked for, as is my right as the ruler of this city!"

Portia: "Former ruler."

Lucio: "I wasn't speaking to you, girl!"

MC: "Well, I'm not going to listen to this."

OPTION 2:

Lucio's jaw drops as I turn around in the midst of the argument and take a step.

Lucio: "Come back here!"

He reaches for my wrist, but I avoid his grasp.

MC: "I'm not going to stand here and listen to you berate this baker."

Baker: "Thank you, Magician."

Lucio: "Berate? He's refusing to give you a loaf of your favorite bread!"

MC: "No, he's unable to give YOU what you wanted."

MC: "And I'm not sticking around for one of your tantrums."

STORY CONTINUES HERE:

As I walk away, Lucio has no choice but to follow. His heavy boots sound behind me for a brief moment. Suddenly, they skid to a halt.

Lucio: "Two can play at this game."

Lucio pulls back with a thunderous step.

Wind seems to pull at my knees and ankles, sending me sprawling back toward Lucio with rapid strides.

MC: "Stop it!"

I surge forward, pulling him away from the baker's stand and into the street.

Lucio: "Never!"

Lucio hauls back with a stubborn stomp, and I go flying.

I'm not prepared for the force with which I hit Lucio, but his catlike muscles react quickly.

Lean arms circle my waist, holding me steady.

My chest is crushed against his own. His breath is hot on my cheek.

One hand is warm as desert sand. The other is cold and sharp as a steel blade. Both splay over my back, clutching me close.

Lucio: "Well now. If you'd wanted to get close to me, you only had to ask."

He laughs as I push him away and start walking.

Lucio: "Oh come on! Be a little more fun, magician."

Lucio: "After all, we're set to spend quite a bit of time together."

He catches up to me easily, his stride matching mine for every step.

Lucio: "Why don't we take some time to get to know one another better, hmm?"

He gestures toward several nearby gondoliers, their boats parked at the dockside and bobbing in the canal.

Lucio: "A trip on the water is a lovely way to spend an afternoon. And I'd appreciate the pleasure of your company."

MC: "Have you ever been on a boat that wasn't steered by servants?"

Lucio: "Of course! Not all princes are born in palaces. And I've captained plenty of my own ships."

Lucio: "What do you say? Take a voyage with me!"

1. Go on a boat ride with Lucio. (PAID)

2. Head back to the palace.

OPTION 1:

MC: "Alright. A short trip."

Lucio: "Oh, if you insist."

Lucio trades several words with a nearby gondolier before collecting the rope. He swiftly unties the knot linking the vessel to the docks and steps inside, holding out his golden hand.

Lucio: "If you would."

I clasp my fingers with his own, steadying myself before stepping into the boat.

Lucio is a decent sailor, his broad shoulders easily carrying the weight of the oars as we head away from the shore.

The water is a blend of rich blues and greens. Several darkly coated fish swim beneath the surface, circling our vessel before scuttling away.

MC: "You're better than I expected."

Lucio: "My parents ensured I knew how to hunt, fish, and row."

Lucio: "It would have been easy to give me a sword and train me to be a warrior, but they wanted to be certain I could survive all my enemies...even those that didn't wield steel or sling arrows."

MC: "It sounds like they cared about you a lot."

A shadow falls over his face. Gravity seizes the corners of his mouth bends his brows, leaving him with a fearsome scowl.

Lucio: "In their way, I suppose they did."

He pulls up the oar, taking a seat across from me and allowing the boat to float on the open waves.

Lucio: "But you have something of a story as well, don't you?"

Lucio: "Tell me. How did you find yourself apprenticing with Asra?"

MC: "I'm not completely certain. Asra tells me we've known one another for years, but my memory doesn't stretch that far back."

MC: "I can only remember the last three."

Lucio: "A pity. Asra is an adventurous sort. You must have joined him for a few outings."

MC: "Not many. Asra usually keeps me in the city."

MC: "However, there was this one time at the marketplace..."

Lucio and I spend the next hour trading stories. I regale him with tales of my scrapes with Asra, and he spins stories of bloody conquests and fierce battles.

Lucio: "...and so I plunged my spear into the ground, spun around and kicked him swiftly in the chest!"

MC: "And did he surrender?"

Lucio: "Not at first. There was still enough fight in him to pull a dagger out of his boot. But not enough to catch the punch I landed on his jaw."

Lucio: "When he came to, I was holding the knife to his throat."

MC: "And what did you do with him?"

Lucio: "I killed him of course. And took half his village's grain as tribute for Vesuvia."

The glance I offer is narrow as a needle's edge. Lucio lifts a single, elegantly arched brow.

Lucio: "You disapprove?"

MC: "I only wonder if there might have been a path with less...bloodshed."

Lucio: "And how do you propose I keep the people fed and safe without tribute, hm? Vesuvia is strong today because of my efforts."

MC: "Nadia seems to have done a good job without resorting to violence."

Lucio: "For now."

Lucio: "The people expect entertainment, and they'll be cross if she fails to deliver it."

MC: "She seems to be doing well with the masquerade."

Lucio: "Ha! A masquerade is only a trifling sample of the pleasures I can provide."

He slides a metallic finger up my inner wrist, drawing tight, coiled circles along my flesh.

Lucio: "I might have shown you an evening of hedonistic delights if I had known you three years before."

MC: "That's a bold promise."

Lucio: "Oh, it's better than that. It's an invitation."

MC: "I'm not sure I can trust you."

Lucio: "That's half the fun of it. And besides...do you really need to?"

Lucio folds another set of fingers along my jawline.

His flesh is warm against my own, and his touch sends ripples of sensation through the tender pathways and clusters of nerves beneath my skin.

A breath fans my lips, hot and humid. It's rich without being saccharine, like a tart red wine.

Every sharp, defined line in his features looms close. His gaze is searing and hypnotic, and I can't bring myself to turn away.

But before he can kiss me, the boat gives a sudden jolt. We've struck the edge of a wooden pier.

Lucio: "Ah! Back to the shore, it seems."

Lucio: "Another time, magician."

OPTION 2:

MC: "I'm not feeling up to it."

MC: "I'd rather head back to the palace."

Lucio scowls, but quickly straightens up and starts walking. His steps soon outpace mine.

Lucio: "Very well. To the palace it is."

He comes to a sudden halt, tossing a grin over his shoulder as I catch up with him.

It's shark-like and gleaming. His version of good humor.

Lucio: "I must say...this visit went better than I expected."

MC: "You're serious? I nearly slapped you three times over."

Lucio: "And there are few left who openly defy me."

Lucio: "You, magician, are least an entertaining companion."

[END SAMPLE]