

## The Shadows We Walk In

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# **The Shadows We Walk In**

by [EccentricFangirl777](#)

## Summary

The guild was utterly devastated when Celestial Mage Lucy Heartfilia was declared missing after what seemed like a simple mission. Fast forward over a year later, she is found, broken and near death, by Laxus and his team. Could the light of Fairy Tail ever heal from her scars? Would Fairy Tail be ever to recover from the hardest hit the guild has ever taken? Very mature themes.

## Notes

This is possibly my hardest and most serious work to date.

## Prologue

Mira blinked at the hand that slammed a request on the bar, rattling all the bottles and plates and utensils on the wooden counter. She looked up at the agitated Laxus, and Mirajane forced a smile on her face, knowing why he was acting that way. “Another mission?” the beauty asked, prying the piece of paper from underneath his bulking hands. Her eyes scanned the paper, reading aloud, *“Please help! Missing women and children, need help tracking down kidnapper. Location: Cedar Springs, near the border. Time: unknown. Reward: anything we have. Please. We need help immediately...”*

Mirajane paused, blinking at the desperate words of the request and feeling pity at the people’s expense. Quickly writing down the details and glancing briefly at Laxus’ team who were staring at the two curiously and expectantly. “Do you think...?” she asked softly, as she handed him back the paper.

Laxus nodded curtly. “The last trail I had of her was up near the north.”

“Right around Cedar Springs,” Mira muttered absently before approving their request and looking up to him. “I hope you find her, Laxus. And the others, too,” she added hastily. Laxus didn’t say anything in reply, simply walking to the table where the Thunder Legion sat with the request in his hands.

“Do you think it’s a lead?” Ever asked immediately once Laxus settled on his seat.

“Yeah,” Laxus said gruffly, snatching Bickslow’s drink from his hand. The Seith mage released a cry of indignation, which went unheard by Laxus as he gulped down the rest of its contents. “The trail I picked up was heading north, and we haven’t surveyed the area around Cedar Springs yet.”

“But that trail was from seven weeks ago, Laxus-sama.” Freed said. “It could be a cold trail, especially after all this time.”

Laxus gritted his teeth, the glass in his hands cracking. “It *was* weeks ago, yes,” he agreed stiffly, “but this town—” He pointed to the name on the paper. “— it’s further north from Mt. Hakobe, where Natsu and I last smelled her. It’s near the border with Seven, and there’s a possibility that the kidnapper could’ve brought her up there in the last few months. She *has* to be there when we—”

“Natsu!” a surprised cry rang out across the guild, and everyone froze and turned to the guild’s entrance, where a defeated and battered Natsu stood, swaying on his feet. His gravity-defying salmon hair now hung limply over his eyes, which were bogged down with deep circles. Lacerations and dark bruises littered his tanned, now pallid and sickly skin. His clothing was in tatters. Happy rested tiredly against his shoulder, his drooping eyes fighting to stay open. “You’re back!”

At that, the guild exploded into questions.

“Natsu, what happened?”

“Are you okay?”

“Did you find her?”

“—any evidence?”

“What took so long—”

“—*six months*, Natsu—”

“—worried sick!”

Natsu trembled as the questions and exclamations assaulted him and the guilt ate away at him. His fists clenched in frustration, his flames engulfing his arms as he fought to keep his frustration in control. Happy, sensing his mood, jerked awake, flying over him as he flitted back and forth. “Natsu, wait—”

Natsu snapped. “*I couldn’t find her!*” he bellowed. The guild silenced, his desperate declaration echoing and resounding in their hearts with a painful pang. Several guild members crumbled back into despair, their earlier excitement and hopes shattered for the umpteenth time.

Mira looked down at her hands. Levy sobbed into Gajeel’s arms. Erza smashed her fork in her cake in anger with a furrowed brow, and Gray ripped his shirt away in frustration. “I tried everything, but—” Natsu’s voice cracked as he dissolved into miserable tears. “I don’t know where she is. I lost her trail. It was just *gone*. Maybe if... maybe if I’d tried harder, maybe if I —” Natsu whirled around. “I’m findin’ her. I’m gettin’ her back. I don’t care... I don’t care if...” he mumbled incoherently, and several people lurched forward, withholding him and preventing him from taking another step with their arms.

“Let me go!” Natsu screamed, desperately thrashing against their iron grips, but for once, he was way too weak to fight back. He had been gone for over six months, constantly on foot with little food and facing the harsh elements of the north, and even though Natsu was a powerful Dragon Slayer, he had his limits. “I need to find Lucy! Please! I need to!” His knees trembled like jelly before he finally collapsed into his nakama’s arms, who cried along with him. “Lucy!” he sobbed, his struggles against their grip melting away.

Lexus turned away from the pitiful scene, his jaw locked, before he stood and slowly walked away, his hands fisted at his sides. The Thunder Legion exchanged troubled glances, knowing what was eating away at their leader.

It had been one year and four months since Lucy Heartfilia, the light of Fairy Tail, had disappeared.

One year and four months had passed since their leader’s love of his life vanished.

The last day before Lucy became missing in action had started out typically enough, with a beautifully clear sky and mild weather. Evergreen, Lisanna, Bickslow, and Freed were sitting

with Laxus, chatting amongst themselves, when Lucy waltzed into the guild, the brilliant smile on her face oddly juxtapositioned with the unconscious body of Natsu Dragneel being dragged around roughly like a rag-doll by the beautiful Celestial Mage.

Unluckily for the Lightning Dragon Slayer, Bickslow had somehow noticed the constipated-esque expression on Laxus' face past his daily make-out session with Lisanna. "Oi, Sparky!" he said, his voice promising humiliation. "If you like Cosplayer so much, why don't you just ask her out?" Lisanna's, Evergreen's, and Freed's jaws dropped at the proclamation, necks cricking as their attention snapped towards Laxus, and they damn near fell to the floor in disbelief when they noticed the stoic blond blush several shades of red.

"*Shut up*, Bickslow," Laxus hissed, actually glancing around to see if anyone had heard. Luckily, no one seemed to be eavesdropping on the conversation, and with one more sneaky glance at Lucy, he looked back to a shocked and snickering audience.

"Damn Laxus." Evergreen snickered behind her fan. "You are *so whipped*." She couldn't seem to contain her amusement, however, as she began to lose her composure, cackling like a witch despite the scowl Laxus sent her way.

"He's been whipped since last year!" Bickslow cackled along with Ever as he slapped the wooden table in his amusement, deftly dodging the punch Laxus threw in his direction. "I tell you, he's been staring at her so much, I'm surprised no one noticed!" Lisanna suppressed a giggle and took pity on Laxus, hitting Bickslow gently to stop his merciless teasing. He looked down affectionately at his girlfriend, holding his palms up in surrender. "Just kiddin' babe," he said before swooping down, ready to kiss her when—

"OWWW! WHAT THE *FUCK* WAS THAT FOR, LAXUS?"

Lucy and Mira stopped talking to look at the amusing spectacle of a cursing Bickslow throwing a fit at a stony Laxus. "I wonder what happened this time," Lucy giggled, shaking her head. Unbeknownst to her, Mira, having heard the conversation between Laxus and Bickslow with her enhanced hearing, was sporting a wicked grin and a plotting gleam in her eyes, which disappeared instantly when Lucy turned back to their conversation.

"So, yeah," she said. "I think I'll do this job. It pays a lot, and it looks pretty easy enough that I don't have to bring Tweedledum over there." She rolled her eyes at Natsu, who was attempting to aggravate Gray into another fight.

"Alrighty, Lucy!" Mirajane chirped, recording the mission in her notebook. "I'll see you in around a month?" Lucy nodded. "Be careful, okay? I know the mission's pretty easy, but since you absolutely refuse to use transportation..."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to waste any money when I have my dear Pegasus over here to take me there." She showed off her beloved new silver key, which glinted beautifully under the guild's lights. Lucy winked at the white-haired beauty and prepared to leave.

"Hey, Cosplayer!"

Lucy groaned. She whirled around, her hands at her hips. “What do you want, Bickslow?” she snapped, her foot tapping the ground impatiently. “I’m in a hurry.”

Bickslow only grinned, sauntering over to her when Laxus pulled him back, an aggravated expression on his ruggedly handsome face. “Sorry about him, Blondie,” the blond said. “Just *ignore him*.” He glared at Bickslow, clearly peeved at the Seith mage but with what, Lucy had no clue, and shoved the snickering Seith mage away. Laxus stood in front of her for a while, and Lucy was just about to ask him what was up when he quickly cleared his throat. “Be safe, Lucy.” Laxus had spat it out so harshly and quickly, Lucy was left wondering if he actually meant what he said and if he actually did say her name for the first time.

At the countertop, Mirajane was shaking her head in disappointment, tsking at Laxus’ poor attempt at a conversation.

“Okay...” Lucy said slowly to no one in particular before shaking away her confusion. Her face once more gained its cheerful expression. “I’ll be going guys! See you soon!” She waved, her back turning and exiting.

*“See you guys soon!”*

Four little words that they had all taken for granted. Four ironic little words.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Lexus reclined against the train seat, music blaring in his ears to distract him from his nausea over transportation. His arms crossed, his fingers tapped against the crook of his elbow as he thought long and hard over the little evidence Fairy Tail managed to scrape up ever since Lucy officially became missing in action.

Once a month had passed since Lucy left for the mission and she *still* hadn't shown up, a distraught Mirajane brought it up with Makarov, who immediately commenced a search and rescue operation. Two months after Natsu came across damning evidence that sent the guild reeling, Makarov asked other allied guilds to help. Months turned into a year, and the guilds were forced to shift their search for Lucy from an all-out investigation to a standstill. Of course, there were still teams to look for her after taking job requests—specifically, Team Natsu, Team Shadow Gear, and the Thunder Legion— but the efforts and few clues they had found in the beginning began to decrease rapidly.

Lexus remembered the first couple weeks of the guild's search and rescue operation. Because Lucy was a part of Team Natsu, the remaining members— Erza, Gray, and Natsu— were the three to lead the search and first to search for her. They had been the ones to go directly to the small town Lucy had taken the job request for, and they came back in a matter of days, worried sick when they explained that the townspeople had not seen Lucy arrive at the location itself. The revelation had everyone panicking, but all the more determined to get Lucy back.

Gajeel and Wendy were sent to sniff out the possible trails Lucy could have taken on her way to the town, while Lexus and Natsu began to search neighboring cities. The hunt had been fruitless until Natsu found one of Lucy's keys in Hargeon after a few weeks. The town Lucy was supposed to have arrived in was near Mountain Village; Hargeon was further north of it, closer to Magnolia more than anything.

Lucy probably hadn't even begun her journey to her job when she disappeared. She also wouldn't have left Loke's key, *any* of her keys, for any reason unless it was a message.

Lucy had been kidnapped, and likely after stepping foot out of Magnolia.

Everyone was infuriated beyond words and belief when the conclusion was made. Makarov promptly sent messages to guilds Fairy Tail was close with across Fiore and officially declared the Celestial Spirit mage Lucy Heartfilia as missing in action, allowing a nationwide search for the Celestial Mage. But the search, one where Fairy Tail, Sabertooth, Blue Pegasus, Lamia Scale, and hell, even the *Magic Council* actively participated in, proved unproductive.

After six months had passed, the Magic Council stopped "wasting resources" to find Lucy.

After nine months, Lamia Scale had to stop sending in numerous teams and members for the search, but promised to continue searching for Lucy nevertheless.

After a year and a month, Blue Pegasus, Lamia Scale, and Sabertooth stopped searching altogether.

After fourteen months, Fairy Tail officially called off the nationwide search and rescue operation.

Instead, the task became a personal endeavor, a mission where every Fairy Tail team refused to quit and let go of. Lucy was their nakama and their light. She was the one who never gave up on Fairy Tail, even when they had given up on themselves and their other nakama. They'd be damned if they'd let her down, *ever*. But all the evidence they gathered were few in between, only able to count all of it off in two hands.

One: Lucy was kidnapped, potentially by a stalker.

Two: She and her kidnapper or kidnappers (they had never figured out how many people were involved in Lucy's kidnapping) were travelling, slowly but surely, up north where— and Laxus hoped with all his heart and soul that it was not linked in any case whatsoever to Lucy's own kidnapping— human and sex trafficking remained underground but prevalent.

Three: There were whispers in towns and cities of a blonde girl that matched the direction Lucy was seemingly going towards. The reported blonde was said to be haggard and pale in appearance, blonde hair ragged and mussed, and with no seen companions, but any other indications it was *their* Lucy, like her keys or her Fairy Tail guild mark, were never specified.

Four: None of her Spirits, specifically Loke, whose key Natsu had found in Hargeon, had contacted Fairy Tail or any of its members in the sixteen months of Lucy's disappearance, and it was likely because either A) They were explicitly told not to, or B) They weren't able to. Laxus highly doubted it was option A.

Five: The last scent Laxus picked up on of Lucy was in the northeastern districts of Fiore, just past the group of mountains Mt. Hakobe was a part of. Something about the new clue aroused Laxus's suspicions, especially since something in Lucy's scent was off. But she had been gone for so long that the scent of her true self was slowly fading in his memories as more and more time passed.

And finally, the possibility that Lucy was in Cedar Springs, a small town in the outskirts of the border between Fiore and Seven, or any of its surrounding towns and villages was highly likely. If she wasn't in the town, then she *had* to be around the area.

If she wasn't, then it meant that Lucy was no longer in Fiore.

Laxus closed his eyes, silently willing away the bile that threatened to rise, and it wasn't from the train's movements. The possibility that Lucy was no longer in the country of Fiore was one Laxus shuddered to consider, was one where *everyone* in Fairy Tail refused to consider.

Seven was a country rife with conflict and sin, plunging it in everlasting darkness and dirt. Ever since the civil war that struck the country decades ago, Seven had never been able to recuperate since then, its government overtaken by a greedy group of tyrants that led the country to even worse conditions. A failed state in every sense of the phrase, Seven had become a melting pot of sin and bedlam.

Fiore took the security of the border between the two countries very seriously and refused to interact with the country any more than needed. That included any rescuing of defectors from Seven and sending any agents into Seven outside of espionage, something only the deeper levels of Fioran government did. Border security had heightened, especially in the last few years, and no one, not even Fioran citizens, was allowed to go past either side.

If Lucy was in Seven, Fairy Tail would be powerless to help her.

Lexus felt a gentle shake on his shoulder, and he opened one eye to see Freed holding up his luggage. "Lexus-sama," he said. "We're here." Seeing the confused look on Lexus' face as he looked around the empty train compartment, he explained, "Bickslow and Ever are currently outside hailing a carriage. We're still quite a ways from Cedar Springs." He decided not to comment on the suddenly green tinge Lexus' face gained.

Not soon after, Lexus found himself trying his best not to get sick over transportation. Luckily, he had fallen asleep not long after the carriage pulled out of the train station, and he found himself being shaken awake again when the carriage arrived in the little town.

Cedar Springs was as woodsy as it came. Like the town's name suggested, large cedar trees populated the area, creating a beautiful sea of green as far as the eye could see. Lexus rather liked inhaling the fresh, outdoorsy scent of the mountain air, finding it much fresher than the airs found in urban areas. Meanwhile, the town itself sat on the edge of a mountain, overlooking the beautiful emerald forests and a nearby hot springs that attracted several tourists during the winter months, even though the location was not in the very least ideal, considering the rumors and whispers of human trafficking.

A man whose black hair was peppered with silvery streaks hobbled his way with his cane towards the Thunder Legion. Upon closer inspection, Lexus noticed the bandages that wrapped around the man's foot and the small scars that littered his body. "You must be the Fairy Tail mages," the man said gravely, but he smiled slightly, his eyes crinkling in a friendly manner, and held out his hand. "My name is Jin, and I'm the mayor of this town, the one who sent in the request."

After Lexus and his team introduced themselves, Jin began to walk them down the pebbled streets of the charming, bustling town. "Because we're so close to the border with Seven, the Fioran government regulated that nearby communities get together to form a strong and communicative district as a way to protect ourselves from Seven and to monitor any possible activity between borders. Cedar Springs was the appointed capital of this district, and it is because of our town's position, we hear of the several complaints district participants have."

Jin sighed heavily. "The most pressing issue we've all had for the last decade was the disappearance of several of our women and children, and we fear that they are targets of human trafficking." Ever released a strangled cry, obviously livid at the information. "We try

our best to find them, and often times we don't. But for this particular mission..." Jin stopped in front of a three-story building, a red cross hanging against its white facade. "For this particular mission, we might finally have a lead to the traffickers or kidnappers." They entered.

Lexus just barely stopped himself from crinkling his nose in disgust at the sickly-clean smell of the hospital. Swallowing his discomfort at the overwhelming smell of iodoform, he asked, "Why are we in the hospital?"

Jin didn't reply, simply weaving through the sea of doctors and nurses, who looked curiously, some even hopefully, at the team of mages. He arrived at one of the doors, and he opened it, revealing a small body wrapped in white cast and another larger one, a female's, in a separate bed, and the steady beeps of the heart monitor. The Thunder Legion's eyes widened, justified anger brewing in their stomachs as they took in the broken body of the small child and the beaten face of the young woman.

"These two appeared in one of the villages nearby, just a few kilometers from here. Although several wounds and bruises donned their bodies, they were absolutely hysterical, begging the villagers to help them rescue someone, begging them to hurry as soon as possible. It seems as if the two victims had been kidnapped and managed to escape, with the help of someone else, likely another victim of kidnapping. Unfortunately, soon after being admitted in this hospital, the two fell into a coma and haven't been able to disclose any more information since then."

"How long ago did they arrive at that village, sir?" Freed asked.

The mayor frowned. "About seven weeks or so ago, I believe," he said. "We've attempted to scout the land towards which they were running from, but our search produced nothing." He turned to them, wrinkled eyes holding so much pain. "The district council and I were thinking that perhaps whoever kidnapped these two are the perpetrators behind the human trafficking ring. If we find their kidnappers, we may finally be able to end the human trafficking that had plagued our district for years."

Lexus glanced around the hospital room. "You want us to sniff out their location," he guessed.

"I was hoping so, yes," Mayor Jin said. He moved to the bedside of the young lady, opening a drawer and taking out a plastic bag holding bloodied and dirtied clothes. "These are the clothes they were wearing. We tried our best not to get any other scents onto it, so we placed it in here." Jin handed Freed the plastic bag, who in turn gave it to Lexus.

"And the young boy was found holding this..." He rummaged through the drawer before holding up another plastic bag. Lexus froze, the rest of the Thunder Legion following suit as they stared at it in disbelief. "They looked like magical items, and according to one of our researchers, the runes here are magic-binding..."

The rush of blood in his ears drowned out what the mayor was saying as Lexus looked at the plastic bag in fear. Inside the bag was a familiar golden set of gold and silver keys, bloodstained and worn out, small runes written across the metals of both the ring and the individual keys. It felt as if time had slowed, and Lexus was an outsider looking in, like a

viewer with a lacrima entertainment set, and distantly, he registered his team's gasps, their heartbeats thudding slowly against their ribcages, their fear and shock tangible in the thickened atmosphere. It felt surreal. There was no way....

He walked forward sluggishly, his legs suddenly feeling as if he was wading across thick mud, closer and closer to the mayor who had long ago stopped talking to stare at the Lightning Dragon Slayer in worry. Laxus reached out with trembling hands to touch the items that had once undoubtedly belonged to Lucy Heartfilia. "What....? Where...?" he breathed, unable to speak past the pressure in his chest.

Mayor Jin shrugged helplessly. "I'm afraid I don't know," he said before flicking his eyes between the team members, noting their pale faces and shell-shocked looks. "Does this belong to anyone you know?"

"I hope with all my heart that that is not the case," Freed said seriously, but his desperate hopes did not negate what was clear to him and the others: they had just found the rest of Lucy's keys. Freed glanced at the blond mage he had always looked up to and took note of his pale complexion. Deciding it was best to switch subjects, he asked, "If I may ask, is there an inn or hotel where we can rest in as we complete this mission, perchance?"

Jin bobbed his head enthusiastically, thankful for the change in subject, leading the group out of the hospital room, items in tow. "Of course. We have a small resort here to accommodate the visitors who come here for the hot springs. Because of your willingness to help our little town, you are allowed to stay there, free of charge, for the first week."

Ever's eyes widened. "Are you sure?" she asked, to which the mayor chuckled and reaffirmed his declaration. "Thank you," she said, and Jin began to give them directions to the resort, which was just a few minutes' walk deeper into the town's forest. As she and her teammates walked to the resort, Ever exchanged worried glances with Bickslow and Freed. After several moments of silent conversation, Ever said, almost reluctantly, "Laxus...."

Laxus snarled angrily, and the others flinched at his tone. "No," he snapped. "Now's not the time. We have a mission to accomplish, and I will not allow personal feelings cloud our judgments."

Ever's eyes teared over. "She's *nakama*, Laxus!" she yelled, stamping her foot angrily. The others stared at her, wide-eyed, stopping in their tracks. "We may not have been the nicest to her, but Lucy *always* treated us as she did with the others! Always! She was the first to forgive us, and the first to reach out to me. *She cared about me, about all of us!*" Ever's lips trembled. "If she's... if..."

Laxus' face relaxed into an expression of cold indifference. "We will find her, but now is not the time."

Ever grabbed the keys from Laxus' hold, and he bristled. "*This is hers!*" she screamed, furiously shaking it in front of his face. "You *know* it's hers! Those kidnappers— they have her! We need to find them as soon as we can—"

"And we will," Laxus said darkly. His eyes were shadowed, dangerous, calm, like the eye of a hurricane. "We will," he repeated. "And when we do, we will show them just what Fairy Tail does when you hurt our *nakama*."

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Upon arrival in the resort, the group quickly made their way to their room, which apparently was the biggest in the entire resort. It seemed to be as well, having two large queen beds with luxurious blankets and a large daybed against the beautifully painted walls, one full bathroom including a separate shower, and a medium-sized fridge next to a mirrored closet. The Thunder Legion quickly threw their bags in the closet and gathered around the table. On there, they set a map riddled with circles and markings, and the bloodied clothes and key ring — *Lucy's* key ring, Laxus noted with a heavy heart upon smelling her scent, very old and faded, on the keys.

With a marker in hand, Laxus drew a circle on the map. "Cedar Springs is here. As you can see, we're not far from where Lucy was last seen... seven weeks ago." The room was enveloped in a chilling silence as Laxus and his team came across a horrible realization. "Seven weeks ago," he repeated, his face paling. How could he not have realized until now...?

"Seven weeks ago," Freed said slowly, "the children arrived at a village after escaping from an undisclosed, unknown location."

"And seven weeks ago," Ever continued, "Lucy's scent was found by Laxus in Beanstalk Village, a town not far off from here."

"Seven weeks ago, Lucy managed to escape to Beanstalk Village, but she hasn't been seen or heard from since then," Bickslow finished.

"Which means that the kidnappers chased after her and managed to recapture her," Ever whispered, utterly horrified. "That's seven more weeks with them."

"We'll find her," Laxus said, breaking the heavy silence. "We *will* find her, and we *will* bring her back." He picked up Lucy's key ring, his hand impressively steady, and gave it to Freed. "Freed, I want you to decipher what these runes mean and see if you can remove them. Bickslow, Evergreen,"—He turned to the two—"I want you both to go to the mayor and ask him where the village the two captives were found in. If you can set up a lacrima communication connection between here and there, do it." He pulled out a lacrima. "I'll stay here and talk to Gramps about what we have so far." The others nodded, quickly dispersing to follow his orders.

Laxus settled on the couch, Freed not far from him as he scanned and examined carefully the runes on the keys and key ring. Holding the lacrima close to his face, Laxus established a connection in his lacrima and called his grandfather. Makarov's wrinkled face popped up on the screen, and upon seeing his beloved grandson's face, he grinned widely. "Laxus, my son!" he boomed. "Have you finished your mission so quickly?"

Laxus shook his head. "No, but it's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Makarov frowned at Laxus' grave tone, immediately on alert. "What is it? Has something happened?"

"Gramps, do you remember why I took this mission in the first place?"

Makarov's eyes widened, and he leaned forward expectantly. "You found a new lead regarding Lucy?" he breathed.

"Yes. We think we might know where she is." Makarov gasped, tears appearing in the corners of his eyes. Laxus began to tell him the background of their mission and about the two escapees currently in a coma in the local hospital. "As of right now, Evergreen and Bickslow are asking the mayor about the location of the village where the two were found. We're planning on going there early tomorrow morning." Laxus adjusted himself, allowing Makarov to see Freed examining the keys and runes.

"Is that...?"

"Lucy's key ring," Laxus completed, voice cold and devoid of any emotion. Makarov immediately knew what his grandson was doing, knowing that the boy was trying his best to remain objective and calm, to separate his feelings with cold, hard logic despite the trying circumstances. It was what made the boy such a fitting leader. "Yes, it's hers, right down to the last detail. There are runes written across it, but we're not sure if it's magic-cancelling."

Freed looked up at that, his face blank, and he walked towards where Laxus sat. He held up Lucy's keys, which jingled almost sadly against each other, swinging side to side like strange fruit on a branch. "The runes *are* magic-cancelling," he confirmed. "But it also is one half of a two-part rune set." He traced some of the runes. "The ones right here are the runes meant to be put on a mage's magical items, and the other set is meant to be on the mage's body."

"The thing is, these particular runes are specialized. They're meant for Celestial Mages specifically, if the some of the runic incantations are anything to go by. Whoever made this runic set is highly intelligent and ingenious because they're original. Unique. I've never quite seen anything like them." Laxus stared at him, and Freed elaborated, "Rune magic, a type of Letter Magic, requires specific words for a specific spell. All spells in Letter Magic has a base that can be built upon, and that base is needed in order for a spell to work. It's because of this that Rune magic can only be used in certain situations. Very rarely, if ever, does runic magic allow its user to create his own spells."

"So," Laxus said, "Rune magic already has an established list of spells to know?"

Freed nodded. "Exactly. Of course, I'm not saying it's impossible for a rune mage to create their own spell, but it's likely that a similar spell already exists. It's a waste for the user to exert so much of their magic in creating a new spell when a similar one already exists. These runic sets, however," Freed ran a hand across the runes, shaking his head in wonder. "The sets don't have a base that I am familiar with, nor do they follow any of the rules Rune magic has. It's clear that not only has the mage completely mastered Rune magic, but is currently re-writing Rune magic as a whole. It's unlike anything I've ever seen, and frankly, it scares me."

Makarov mulled in the information Freed gave him. Rune magic functioned on an established set of rules; to break them is impossible because, simply put, the rules was what *made* Rune magic in the first place. And if a mage managed to completely recreate the rules Rune magic was based on... that didn't bode well. The rules were what kept Rune magic from becoming... unruly, for a lack of a better word.

Rubbing a hand over his face, Makarov asked quietly, "So, what are the sets for, Freed?"

"Their purpose?" Freed sighed. "You won't like it." At their solemn but sure expressions, he continued, "As you know, if a Celestial Spirit is strong enough, he or she can pass through a Spirit gate themselves without any help from their master."

"Yes, Loke does that all the time." Makarov's eyes widened. "Wait, are you saying—"

"Yes. If a Spirit passes through a Gate willingly, either Lucy's life force or magical stamina depletes. Either way, whether it's Lucy's life force or magical reserves, it'll cause immense pain. Somehow, the writer not only managed to completely bind another mage's magic singlehandedly by these runes, but deplete it as well." He looked haunted. "Rune magic is not supposed to do that," he whispered to himself, not intending for either Dreyar to hear him.

"*That's* why Loke hasn't responded to any of our calls," Makarov said, face white. "Because he's worried it'll affect Lucy. Even if the runes are not written on his own key, all Celestial Spirit keys are connected to their master and his or her magic once a contract has been made. The runes on Lucy's body could harm her as a result of Loke's magic being connected to hers."

Lexus gritted his teeth. "Damn it!" the blond man growled.

Makarov turned to his grandson sadly, knowing how much it was breaking him inside to hear anything about Lucy and the theories that surrounded her disappearance. "I hope you find her, my children. Would you like me to send any reinforcements?"

Lexus shook his head. "No, it's fine, Gramps. I'll call you once we have more information." With that, he cut off the connection, leaving Makarov to stare at his reflection despondently.

Grabbing Loke's key that he kept stashed away in his desk for protection, Makarov squeezed his eyes shut, whispering, "Loke, we have a promising lead. I think we'll be able to find Lucy soon." He pressed his forehead against his desk, squeezing the key held tightly in his fist. "Just be patient."

The key only glowed weakly in return.

Why is it that I have a propensity of completely ignoring canon for my own benefit? I swear...

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

WARNING: EXPLICIT DESCRIPTIONS OF GORE AND INJURIES.

"Nothing," Ever hissed. "Five fucking days of searching, and *nothing*!" Sparks accumulated in her hand, and she threw it angrily against a tree, which exploded with a loud *bang*! Bits of bark and sparks flew from where the tree had stood just five seconds before, and her teammates just watched her quietly, fully understanding her frustration. Bickslow's babies flew around him, just as agitated as their master. Freed sat on a rock, his bouncing leg belying his cool and collected countenance.

Lexus sighed, in his hands the shirt the mayor gave them. "I couldn't smell anything," he said, leaning against a tree, "or, rather, there's just too many scents on this damn thing. It reeks too much of dirtied blood and alcohol and *chemicals*." His nose wrinkled. The lingering chemicals had been enough to give him a migraine that nearly knocked him to the floor. Sighing, he continued, "I'm not able to pick up any distinct scents, not one belonging to a person, anyways. It doesn't help that the rain washed away any remaining scents from the village I could've picked up on." He rubbed his nose in frustration, which rarely ever failed him, utterly annoyed and defeated. This shirt, along with Lucy's keys, were pretty much the only leads they had in finding Lucy.

Suddenly, Lexus perked up, turning towards the town center, and Ever, Bix, and Freed looked at him curiously. "Lexus-sama?"

They caught sight of one of the townspeople barreling towards them past the thick trees and shrubbery, eyes wide with excitement. "They woke up! The children woke up!" she cried happily. "Come, the mayor is calling you to meet them. You must hurry." The Thunder Legion wasted no time in following her, arriving at the hospital in a matter of minutes. Though thoroughly winded, it did nothing to stop them as they raced to the rooms that held the escapees and the two main leads to steer them in Lucy's direction.

Inside, a flurry of nurses attempted to hold the two twisting bodies down, the screams from the patients nearly blowing out Lexus' eardrums. "Stop, please! We have to hurry!"

"Let us go! *Now*!"

"Calm down!" one of the nurses instructed, not at all harshly as she tried her best to keep the older girl restrained. "We don't want to hurt you. Calm down. Deep breaths, okay? Please?" As if it were a magic word, the two bodies stopped thrashing about, opting instead to quietly cry.

"You have to find her," the girl begged after several seconds, looking at the team of nurses with wide, pleading eyes.

The boy sniffed, tear tracks running down his face. "Please. They'll kill her."

Ice gripped Laxus' heart at what the boy said. "Where is she?" The two looked up at him and immediately cowered away upon seeing his menacing expression and build. Laxus forced himself to relax, to appear nonthreatening, but when that didn't work, he raised his black shirt and pointed to the guild mark on his rib cage.

The two gasped, obviously recognizing the mark, but it did nothing to assuage Laxus' fears even as they immediately relaxed. "You can trust us. We're part of her family, the Fairy Tail guild, and we've scoured the entirety of Earthland for her." Laxus took a few seconds to catch his breath, to cool down his temper, but his next words, shaken and desperate, reflected his fear.

"Where is she?"

The boy began to weep, forcing himself off the bed despite the nurses' protests. He stumbled towards Laxus, his small frame shivering before throwing himself to the ground on his knees before Laxus' feet. The Lightning Dragon Slayer grimaced, feeling very uncomfortable, and he looked around, looking everywhere but at the sobbing boy. A sickly hand gently pulled at Laxus' coat, and he finally looked down at the pitiful hazel eyes of the young boy who couldn't have been any older than eight.

"She found a way to escape," the boy said. "She'd been doing it ever since they locked her up in the basement, but she did it. All of us, everyone in that basement, were able to leave, but we were all separated. Marnie and I were able to get to a nearby village, but I don't know where Lucy-nee went."

He started to cry again, and Laxus took pity on the boy, bending down to scoop him up in his arms. "I think they caught her," he cried. "They're gonna kill her." Laxus transferred the young boy into Ever's arms, who immediately began to cajole him.

Ever rubbed comforting circles on the boy's back, quietly murmuring words of comfort in his ears. "Do you know where they'll take her?"

The young boy looked at the girl, Marnie, who nodded firmly. "Yes," Marnie said confidently despite her scratchy throat. "We'll take you there."

---

The house looked unassuming at first. It was perched underneath a huge mountain, one that had taken nearly a day and a half's journey to get to, and to a passing traveler's glance, it would only be a quaint, calm, two-story house that hadn't been housed for years. But upon closer inspection, it was obvious that the house was no ordinary house.

The house was literally attached against the mountain face and something about it screamed full of magic to magic-wielders such as themselves.

Lexus signaled to his team, silently telling them to surround the house. Evergreen executed the first blow, blowing the house into smithereens with her Fairy magic. Screams and curses were heard before a blast of black pillar of Shadow magic hurtled towards their way. Bickslow, Freed and Evergreen advanced towards the smoked remains of the house, and Lexus gathered his lightning in his hands, aiming the bolts towards escaping mages.

"Lexus-sama!" Freed called, currently fighting a cloaked man with his sword. "Find Lucy-san! We've got them." Lexus nodded shortly, running past the smoke and the sounds of fighting, magic, and swords clanging.

Where a wall should have been was a huge hole that was no doubt the mountain's face, and Lexus stepped into it. He held his hand up, allowing a ball of lightning bolts to float upwards in order to light up the darkness. It was still dim, but with his Dragon Slayer senses, he was able to see the outlines of metal doors embedded into stone. His nose crinkled as the smell of feces, ammonia, dried blood, and rotting flesh hit him, and he physically gagged, nearly falling to his knees and regurgitating the food in his stomach.

"Shit," he hissed, the toxic smell burning his eyes. His vision was fuzzy from the tears filling his eyes, and he had to stand there for several seconds, blinking them away "What the fuck is that smell?" He began to open doors, some of which held large, medical-looking equipment and other doors holding empty jail cells.

"Lucy?" he called, stomach rolling as the stench grew more potent. Soon, his lightning revealed a darkened staircase, and Lexus had to use his coat to prevent himself from getting knocked unconscious with the obnoxious fumes. "Lucy, it's Lexus. Lucy?" He took a deep breath, immediately regretting it when he was yet again bludgeoned by the disgusting, putrid scent of rotting flesh. "Fucking hell," he whispered. "Lucy, fuck...."

*'Please, please, please don't be dead,'* he thought desperately, the very idea threatening to send him flying off unhinged.

He slowly descended down the stairs, his fingers pinching his nostrils to prevent himself from getting overwhelmed. "Lucy!" he called again, voice muffled from his coat. Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs, Lexus extended his hand out, the ball of lightning expanding outwards in an attempt to lighten the whole room. The basement, however, was much larger than it seemed, as the light did nothing to illuminate it.

His footsteps echoed across the basement, the pitter-patter of water expounding every second it took for him to explore the basement. The room was cold, the stoned floors wet with mildew, and the concrete walls were cracked and falling apart. There were some chains stuck on the walls, and Lexus had to look away at the amount of dried blood and flesh found in one side of the room.

The entire room stunk, like shit and every disgusting smell imaginable, and he released a small hiss of disgust when he stepped on something particularly icky. His curled lip that had raised upon stepping on the unknown fluid immediately dropped when he heard a soft whimper. His heart stopped. Fuck, he knew that voice.

"Lucy?"

He swung his arm around, the light from the lightning hitting and revealing the dark secrets of the basement. He froze when he saw a small, rotting corpse— no doubt the source of the disgusting odor, and he tamped down the rising pity and bile— and his hand trembled when he saw a pale foot, skeletal and bloodied, at the dimmed edges of where the light had barely reached. His throat dried, and his heart threatened to burst out of his chest, but he pressed on, dismissing his churning stomach.

"Oh my g—holy *fuck!*" he hissed, losing all feeling in his legs as he saw her, having to lean on one of the walls in support. "Fuck, no." Laxus' eyes burned, blurring everything in his line of vision. "God, Lucy, what did they *do* to you?" Laxus' voice cracked as he tried his best to keep his composure. His Dragon roared angrily, raging to come out and *kill*, but now was not the time to lose control.

She looked like a sack of bones, her skin and practically nonexistent muscles barely holding together her skeleton upright. Her arms were wrapped delicately around her legs, both of which were riddled with unhealed wounds— some of which still dripped blood— and scars, pocked dents, bruises, and what looked suspiciously like untreated burns. Her head was bent and resting against her arms, her blonde hair so dirty and grimy, it no longer looked like the beautiful shade of liquid sun Laxus had always liked to call it. Her skin was so gray and pale and translucent, he could literally see her veins and arteries snaking into a twisted pattern underneath.

How was she even *alive*?

Laxus knelt down in front of her, and he wanted so desperately to touch her, to comfort her with his touch, but he feared her reaction should he do that. Instead, he settled for calling her name again. "Lucy?"

Her reaction was instantaneous. She whimpered, curling into herself into a tighter ball, her rugged, uneven nails digging into her skin as her arms tightened on her legs. She rocked back and forth, her hoarse voice chanting, "No. Please. No. Please. Please. Didn't do it. No. Please. Not again. No." Lucy trembled, scooting closer to the wall. "Kill me. Kill me. Kill me."

Rage and potent fury raced through Laxus' veins, his muscles and magic sparking dangerously as his body and Dragon sang for the destruction of those whoever did this to her, but he fought to keep anger out of his voice. Now was not the time to distress the girl. "Blondie," he said gruffly, and Lucy stiffened. "Hey, it's me. Laxus."

"No." Lucy's voice was hard with conviction. "Not real. Not real. Lucy, s'not real. Only fake. Fake. Fake," she slurred, shaking her head sluggishly.

He ignored her mutterings, continuing with a stronger voice, "It *is* me. Laxus Dreyar, son of Ivan Dreyar, my bastard of a traitor father, and grandson of Makarov Dreyar, the Third Guild Master of Fairy Tail, the guild *you* joined and *you* belong to." At the guild's name, Lucy began to shake her head frantically, repeating her previous chants in an increasingly intense tone of voice as she gripped her head between her hands.

"Nononononono—"

"Lucy." His voice caught when Lucy immediately shut down, shivering and desperate to escape him. "*Blondie*. It's me. I'm *real*." His earnest tone had Lucy frozen before she slowly looked up. His jaw tightened once again upon seeing her ghastly and beaten face, but he kept his composure. Now was not the time.

"La-Lexus?" she whispered in her raspy, raspy voice, holding out her trembling hand. Laxus nodded, but made no further movements as his eyes followed her hand until it touched his face. Lucy released a sob, quickly withdrawing her hand and covering her mouth in shock. "Lexus?"

Laxus nodded again. "Yes. It's me, Blondie." Lucy burst out crying, shaking her head. "We're finally here to help you." Lucy sobbed harder, and unable to hold himself back, Laxus gently cradled her in his arms, his hands gently brushing through her matted, uneven hair. "I'm so sorry," he whispered, placing a chaste, tender kiss on her temple, frowning when he felt the unnatural heat under his lips. "I'm so sorry it took so long."

He held her there, rocking her in his arms, murmuring soft, incoherent words that were meant to calm her down as he tried not to break down with her. "Let's go. You're finally leaving. You're safe. You're safe." And he carried her back up, back to the surface where the sun shone and the air was fresh.

And away from the traumas that had tortured Lucy in the basement for far too long.

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The human trafficking ring that had gone on secretly in Cedar Springs and surrounding cities for an entire decade was finally put to a stop once and for all. Victims and survivors came together, both old and young, joining together in their celebrations and relief that it was over. The perpetrators of the ring themselves were taken and detained by the Rune Knights, beaten and worst for wear, singed and utterly battered after the Thunder Legion and Laxus threw their loathsome asses around mercilessly.

All of the ring's records they had of people sold and bought were confiscated to be surveyed thoroughly, and investigations over alleged smaller trafficking rings were started. Victims that had escaped from the basement Lucy had been found in were reunited with their families.

Lucy was given superficial treatment in the Cedar Springs hospital, as they did not have the suitable equipment to properly treat the full extent of her injuries. The mayor and townsfolk were all thankful and paid them generously for their efforts, even beginning plans to erect statues of them in gratitude.

The boy that had been hospitalized and apparently had been with Lucy for the entirety of his stay in the basement not once removed himself by her side, often seen quietly talking to her even when the sun was down and the moon high up in the sky. The Thunder Legion and local authorities had wanted to know what, exactly, had happened in the sixteen months of Lucy's kidnapping, but Laxus insisted that it was best for only him and Makarov to take care of gathering the sensitive details.

Lexus had contacted his grandfather, debriefing him with all the details of the mission, and the two came to an agreement that it would be best to meet in the hospital in Crocus, where both the medical staff and facilities were better equipped to aid Lucy more. As for the guild, Makarov would reveal that Lexus and the Thunder Legion had found Lucy, but are to stay inside the guild while waiting for their arrival under explicit directions. He made sure to have Erza, Lisanna, and Wendy enforce the rule, trusting them to be the most patient ones in the guild who would not run after Lucy under his directions.

The journey to Crocus was agonizingly slow, but an elite team of medics from Cedar Springs Hospital was sent with the group to ensure Lucy's stability. Coming along with them was the little boy, whose name was apparently Nasir, who had been sold by his parents, both of whom were addicts and abusive, for a couple pouches of coins. After hearing his story, the Thunder Legion was more than happy to bring him along with them, especially Ever, who quickly gained the boy's trust and attention for the majority of the train ride.

A team of paramedics from the Crocus City Hospital met them the moment the train pulled into the train station, their movements swift but careful as they transferred Lucy into a teleporting vehicle, even reluctantly allowing Nasir to come along after seeing the wild, desperate look in his eyes. One of the newer staff assured the team of mages not to worry, as no time would be wasted nor would any harm reach Lucy. Their personnel was fast and had a strict no-nonsense policy, one that most, if not all, adhered to.

The two staff members that had stayed escorted the four mages to the surgical waiting room, where Makarov was found, pacing the floor, agitated. Upon seeing the team walk into the waiting room, he made his way over, face twitching as he attempted to maintain a calm facade. "Gramps," Lexus greeted quietly. "How's the guild?"

Makarov exhaled, rubbing his forehead tiredly. "Understandably worried and anxious. Erza had to knock out Natsu before he could go on a rampage and destroy everything he sees." He pursed his lips. "The others took the news much better, but they're all hurting. Hurting, but relieved. As of right now, Erza's taking control of the guild, and Mira came with me; she's getting some food from the cafeteria for all of us."

He took in his grandson's and his teammates'— who were sitting on the waiting room chairs, bearing similar stances of defeat— appearances, their clothes ruffled and countenances drooping from fatigue, but otherwise fine and alright. "You found Lucy," Makarov said softly as a few tears escaped his eyes. "How is she?" Those three words spoke nothing of the deep concern he felt for the blonde he saw as his own, but what other words could he say? He had to keep a collected head in this situation, if not to reassure his own children, but for himself as well.

Lexus winced, remembering the battered state her body was in. "She's alive," he finally said. "That's all that matters." He looked at his grandfather, who looked back up at him with questioning eyes. "I found her in the basement of the ring's base. She... she didn't look good, Gramps." Lexus' voice was little over a whisper.

"When I was looking for her in the base, there were some rooms... Gramps, I think they were..." The words caught in his throat, and he struggled to get them out. "I think they

were *experimenting* with her." Distantly, he heard Ever stifle her cry and the soft whispers and halfhearted jokes of Freed and Bickslow as they attempted to comfort her.

Makarov tightened his fists as his heart cried out in anguish for the Celestial Mage, his beloved, precious child. "And for so many months...." Both grandfather and grandson lapsed into silence, unable to form any other words.

At the sound of a door being opened, the group of mages looked up to see a surprised Mira holding several bags of Styrofoam and containers. Freed quickly stood to help his girlfriend, relieving her of her load as he bent down to kiss her sweetly on her lips. "You're here," Mira said once the food was settled on the table, sounding overwhelmed. She looked to Laxus, eyebrows creased. "Lucy...?" she whispered, voice quivering with emotion.

"She's here. She's alive." At that, Mirajane sank down as if she lost all feeling in her legs, Freed cradling her in his arms as she sobbed into his chest. Laxus looked away, gritting his teeth. He looked instead to the operating room doors, silently waiting for the doctor with news of Lucy's condition.

Minutes passed into hours, and the mages began to feel restless. Laxus was pacing back and forth, glancing every now and then at the clock, slowly getting more and more agitated as the seconds ticked by. Why was it taking so damn long?

Freed and Mira were cuddled together, Mira's tears long spent as she slept fitfully in Freed's arms. Bickslow was quietly playing with his babies, all of whom were just as restless as he was. Ever had fallen asleep, a blanket draped over her, courtesy of Laxus and co. Makarov was watching his grandson pace, deep in thought as he thought over what their next plan of action was.

Then, to the great relief of the restless mages, the door to the operating room opened, immediately awakening Mira and Evergreen, and a tall, redheaded female wearing a white lab coat walked over to them, gently holding on to the hand of a tired Nasir. Upon seeing Ever, Nasir let go of the doctor's hand and bounded to the Fairy mage, who scooped him up in an affectionate embrace. Mira took one look at the child's innocent face and melted, cooing and smiling at him kindly.

Makarov and Laxus smiled softly at the sight of the Thunder Legion and Mira fawning over the child when a hand tapped at their shoulders. They turned to the doctor, hearts sinking at the serious expression on her face. "Are you the family of Miss Lucy Heartfilia?"

Makarov nodded. "Yes. I am her guild master, and this is my grandson Laxus, my protege and my successor."

The doctor released an inaudible sigh, flipping through her papers as her eyes moved across them. "Miss Lucy Heartfilia had suffered intensive injuries, both external and internal, ones so bad that we had to perform an emergency surgery. She coded on the table, but we were able to resurrect and stabilize her. She's better now, but she's in an indefinite coma. She's stable, and if she survives the night, she'll be good. But the fact remains...."

The doctor shook her head. "Her body had gone through a horrifying ordeal, but her mind took the brunt of it. While her body would be able to heal after some time, we're unsure how much her mind would." She chanced a glance at the child that had refused to leave Lucy alone, and had he not been in there to call out her name when Lucy coded, it was very possible that the blonde Celestial mage would not have lived.

The doctor looked back to Makarov and Laxus, continuing, "Her magical reserves have depleted considerably as well. It's not permanent, but it would take a while for her magic to function properly again."

Makarov shut his eyes. "What injuries has she suffered?" he asked, bracing himself.

The doctor bit her lip, but she acquiesced. "Extensive bruising and scars, sepsis from her wounds that resulted in her lung and kidney failures, brain damage, broken ulna, digits, ribs, and cheekbones, tetanus, a severe concussion, burns of various degrees throughout her body, and..." She took another deep breath. "...and numerous injuries and contusions to the vagina and uterus."

The room was plunged into devastated silence. The Thunder Legion and Mira stared at the doctor in horror, Nasir trembling in Evergreen's hold, his face buried at the crook of her neck as he clung to her desperately. The doctor shifted, feeling pity and sorrow for the mages well up in her gut. "What?" a low voice growled out, and everyone turned to the tense Lightning Dragon Slayer. "What did you just say?" His fists were clenched at his sides, and the muscles of his arms trembled dangerously as he fought to keep his cool.

Makarov cut in, placing a hand on his grandson's arm, "Laxus—"

The Lightning Dragon Slayer shook it off, his breathing getting faster and more intense. "No," he said, advancing dangerously on the doctor. Placing his hands on her shoulders, Laxus shook her roughly, and with a surprised yell at his behavior, his teammates scrambled to get him off.

"Laxus, stop!"

"Let go of her!"

"Laxus-sama, please, calm down!"

Bickslow pulled Laxus away from the unsettled doctor, shooting her an apologetic look as she walked away, shaken, and squeezed the Lightning mage's shoulders rather harshly, causing him to wince. "Laxus, calm down," Bickslow urged. "You're scaring Nasir."

"She— Lucy..." Laxus trembled again, the air suddenly heavy and charged, and the little hairs on their arms and necks raised. Once more, Bickslow squeezed Laxus' shoulders, and the charged air slowly abated, the occupants in the room involuntarily releasing a breath of relief.

"I know. I know," Bickslow said, his heart hurting for his normally-fearless leader and friend. God, if that had happened to Lisanna... Fuck it, he'd kill them all with his bare hands, prison

be damned.

Bickslow looked up at his guildmates, who had anguished expressions on their faces. Lucy was the last person to ever deserve this. She was always the light of Fairy Tail, always brightening their days with her radiant smile and endearing laughter, touching their hearts with her infinite, boundless kindness and compassion. But after what she had gone through, after all the damage and anguish those bastards inflicted on her...

Would she ever be the same way again?

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

This may be the last time I write this warning because simply put, the nature of this fic from beginning to end is DARK and HEAVY and ANGSTY. It is and will be FULL of potential triggers. These include but are not limited to (as I am still in the process of writing this story and might change certain plot points):

Anxiety, self-harm, depression, suicidal thoughts, disassociation, PTSD, torture, explicit violence and gore, and rape

Please do not continue this fic if any one of these themes affect you negatively. YOU AND YOUR MENTAL HEALTH ARE MUCH MORE IMPORTANT ABOVE ALL ELSE. Remember that.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Fairy Tail guild was getting restless.

It had been five days since Makarov and Mira had left for Crocus, leaving them with the explosive news that Lucy had been found and *she was alive*, but Erza had instructed that they all stay at Magnolia.

*"It pains me to say this, but we have to stay here. We cannot do anything in Crocus but wish for Lucy's health, and, as much as it pains me to say, we can do that here. We will be nothing else but inconveniences if we all go to Crocus and leave the guild unattended. But take comfort in this: Lucy is found. She is alive."*

Erza's words had done little to assuage their unease, but it was enough to get them to stay. And so, for a full week since, Fairy Tail had no choice but to return to their everyday activities, to pick up smaller quests for money while waiting for more news of Lucy. But the updates never came other than the frequent but vague '*she's alive*' and '*she's fine*', and everyone was getting antsy. Everyone wanted to know what was happening, to know more about Lucy's condition, and once again, the guild felt powerless to help a vital member of their own nakama.

Levy swallowed past the lump in her throat, and the food she was staring at began to swim across her vision, and *it was getting so hard to breathe—*

*"...imp! Shrimp!"* A firm hand gripped her shoulders tightly, and Levy was slammed back into the present. Her hands, shaky, came up to her face, and she stared blankly at the wetness that covered her fingers. *She was crying. She didn't deserve to cry.*

"Look at me." Someone grasped her chin, and Levy quickly found herself staring into Gajeel's dark, worried eyes. They softened ever so slightly, and he continued in a gentler tone, "You're doing it again."

Levy's lip quivered, and Gajeel's thumb ghosted over her jaw soothingly. "I should've—"

Something hardened in Gajeel's eyes, and the hand on her jaw dropped to his side. "Levy. No. Stop. You couldn't have done anything, especially with your condition."

She gripped the edge of the table, trying and failing to banish her anger away, and she glared fiercely at Gajeel. "Excuse me?" she hissed out.

Gajeel rubbed his forehead, annoyed at himself for his callous words and only worsening the situation. He sighed, resigned. "That's not what I meant," he said quickly. "What I mean is—"

"No," Levy cut him off harshly, and her hands clenched into fists. "I think you meant *exactly* what you said." Levy seethed. How *dare* he? "Oh poor little Levy, unable to help her best friend. Too weak to have helped anyways. Hell, barely a month in, and she got herself in an accident and got confined to bed rest while the rest of her guild mates did everything they could to help their missing *nakama*." Her voice was hysterical now, and it was a wonder that no one but her and Gajeel had yet to notice. "Yeah, you're right, I didn't—no, I *couldn't* do anything to help with the search. But at least *I* was recovering from my injuries, Gajeel. What's your excuse?"

Gajeel reared back, and Levy could see the exact moment walls slammed down over his face. Regret quickly replaced the anger that had filled her seconds ago, and suddenly, *she just felt so tired*. She was so tired. She didn't know what to feel. She didn't know what to think. She didn't know when to stop.

She just felt so goddamn tired.

The two stayed in tense silence for what seemed like hours until Gajeel reached for her hand. "I feel that way too, Shrimp," he said, and he sounded like what she felt—like the world had given them too much to bear and they were on the verge of breaking. "Everyone feels that way."

"I just don't know what to do. I'm just thinking of things that I could've done better—like not get into that *stupid* accident—of things that I could've done to get Lucy back faster, and I know thinking of the what if's aren't helping, but God, Gajeel, *it just won't stop*. I- I just... I don't know. *I don't know*." Gajeel didn't say anything in return, but he wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and she leaned in, pressing her face into his chest.

They'd stayed like that for a while—taking comfort in each other's presence, being each other's pillar to lean on—when Erza's steady voice floated across the guild. "Levy? Levy, can you come up here for a moment? I need to talk to you for a second."

"Alright, Erza. I'll be there soon." Erza gave a terse nod and disappeared as quickly as she came. Levy began to reluctantly detangle herself from Gajeel's arms, and she couldn't help the dark red that painted her cheeks. She chanced a quick look at Gajeel and was stunned at

the hint of pink on his cheeks before he quickly turned away. "Hurry up, Shrimp," he said huskily before coughing lightly. Raising an eyebrow as he turned back to her, he continued in his usual drawl, "You're needed once again." She gave him a tentative smile before hurrying to the Master's office that Erza had temporarily claimed as hers.

Knocking lightly at the door, she heard a muffled, "Come in," and froze when she saw Mira's upset face projected upon a blank wall. Erza turned her head towards the Script mage and shot her a wobbly smile, waving her hand to sit next to her.

Settling down on the chair, Levy shot a small smile at Mira. "Hey Mira."

"Hi Levy." Tucking a strand of silver hair behind her ear, Mira asked, "How are you feeling?"

Reflexively, Levy's hand hovered her midsection, where months ago it once bore multiple, angry red slashes, a reminder of her recklessness. Swallowing, she shook her head and willed the memories away. "I'm okay," she said quickly. "How are you? How's everyone? How's—" The words stuttered in her throat before she pushed through, "How's Lucy?"

Mira ran a hand through her hair. "She still hasn't woken up." Levy looked away from her friend's sad gaze. She knew that Mira was avoiding giving her the answer she'd actually wanted, and Levy once again felt the odd but familiar wave of helplessness and anger that threatened to overwhelm her.

"You know, Levy," Erza cut in, her face wiped clear of the sadness that had occupied it when Levy walked in, "we were just talking about your knowledge in Script and Rune magic."

Levy's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, not understanding what it had to do with the situation at hand. "What about it?"

Erza nodded at Mira, who turned around and bent out of view, and Levy could hear the distinct sounds of cloth being rifled through and plastic crinkling. A few seconds later, Mira popped back into view, this time holding up a familiar but battered set of keys, swaying slightly from the momentum. Levy's breath hitched, and she leaned forward, bringing her hand over her mouth. Catching the stunned look on Levy's face, Mira nodded gravely. "Freed said that one of the survivors had this in his possession."

"There's something off about them," Levy observed, eyes flicking up and down, frowning. Yes, something was obviously off, but what? It was dull, and a little worse for wear, but there was something else, something more... chilling the more she looked at them.

Mira shifted, positioning the keys closer so both Erza and Levy could pinpoint what seemed different about the keys. "That's because there's runes written all over them."

"*Runes*? Why would there runes on Lucy's—" She immediately cut herself off when the realization hit, and a heavy stone settled in Levy's stomach. "They're binding," she said hollowly. "The runes—they were used to bind Lucy's magic. To bind access to her keys."

"That's basically what Freed said," Mira whispered, confirming what Levy feared.

Erza's head whipped between the two, a look of horror clear upon her face. *Magic was not meant to be bound for very long.* Doing so could deal some serious damage on a mage's magical core and mentality; it would be akin to losing a limb or a sense, a part of one's self. Then, it occurred to her. "What about Loke?" she piped up, gaining the other two's attention. "Loke's key? Natsu found it early on the search for Lucy. There's no runes on his key."

"I'm guessing whoever wrote those runes wrote them on the keys when they found out Lucy dropped his key?" Levy wondered before quickly shaking her head. "No. No, that doesn't make sense. Loke would've come here to warn us immediately once we had possession of his key."

"So why didn't he?"

"*Because,*" Mira said, "the runes are a two-part set."

"A two-part set?" Levy repeated, stunned. "That takes a large amount of magic *and* some serious ingenuity."

"Yeah well..." Mira huffed, rubbing her head in consternation. "Master and Freed think that whoever wrote the runes on this not only mastered Rune magic but is currently rewriting Rune magic as a whole."

"*What?!*" Levy shrieked, causing both of her friends to jump. "That's not possible! Rune magic is *structured*, and the most anyone's been to make changes in Rune magic is *adding* upon it. But *rewriting* Rune magic itself? You'd be seriously messing with one of the oldest established forms of magic!"

"Again," Mirajane said, "that's basically what Master and Freed told me. That's why Freed's struggling with reversing the runes' effects; he doesn't even know where to start, except only to get the basic gist of what the runes were meant for." Her eyes settled on to Levy, dark and serious. "He wants your help. Said that you were the one to rely on when it comes to knowledge on languages, especially the Runic system. He thinks you'd be able to crack the code."

Levy smiled softly and something within her, dark and broken over the self-blame she placed close to her heart, soothed ever so slightly. "Thank you, Mira."

Mira sent her a brilliant smile before turning back to the keys in her hand, holding it nearer to the lacrima so Levy could observe the runes more closely. "Freed says that he can read some of the runes and get the gist of the spell, but other than that he's stumped."

"I can see why," Levy muttered. "Rune magic's been consistent for centuries, but it does have its roots in an ancient language, back when Rune magic was in its early stage and way more chaotic than it is now. The way the runes are written is echoing early Rune magic spell work..." She trailed off, noticing the glazed looks on Mira and Erza's faces and bit her bottom lip, attempting and failing to hide an amused smirk. At their glares, Levy sheepishly smiled and held up her hands in a peace offering. "Grammar, basically," she said. "Ancient grammar. How the runes were written would either maximize or minimize the potential of the magic,

often with destructive results, which is why there's rules now set in place for modern Rune magic."

"Like that helps," Erza muttered under her breath, and once again, Levy had to stifle a laugh to avoid getting hit by Erza.

Mira apparently heard what Erza said because a wide and completely amused grin appeared on her face before she turned serious. "So you're saying that whoever wrote these runes crafted the binding spell on his own volition?"

"I think so?" Levy said, scratching her head. "Honestly, I can't be too sure because the runes aren't consistent."

Erza lifted her hands to her temples and roughly massaged it. "And I thought the grammar part was bad," she said, defeated. "What do you mean by *that*?"

Levy looked confused. "The grammar?"

"No. The different runes part."

"Ohhhh." Levy nodded. "I see. Well, I mean, they're not just using the Runic alphabet. In some parts, the rune symbols are something else entirely."

"Mind explaining it for someone who's not a Rune mage?" There was an annoyed edge to her words, a clear sign that Erza was slowly losing her patience.

This time, Levy did let out a laugh. "You know how the Rune magic script looks like, right?"

"Yes. What's your point?"

"That doesn't look like *that*." Levy pointed to specific runes.

"Oh my..." Erza grumbled, and Mira and Levy both burst out laughing.

"Sorry, sorry," Levy said, giggling slightly. "Maybe I shouldn't explain this right now. I think it'll only serve to give you a headache." Erza gave her a pointed look, as if to say, '*You THINK?*' Turning to Mira, Levy said, "I think we should wait until you guys get back so Freed and I can work together on it a little more closely. Frankly, it's kinda confusing for me too."

Mira nodded. "All right," she said softly, placing the keys out of sight. A conflicted expression flitted across her face, as if warring herself with what to do next. Hesitantly, she spoke, "How's the guild? How's everyone coping there?"

Levy and Erza exchanged looks before Erza released a soft sigh. "The atmosphere has been downcast for the past week."

Mira didn't take her eyes off of Erza. "And you?" the white-haired mage asked. "Natsu? Gray? Levy, you too. All four of you were the closest to Lucy, and I imagine..."

"Natsu..." Erza couldn't hold back her wince and rubbed the back of her neck. "He's taking it the hardest out of all of us, Mira. He really wants Lucy to be back." That was an understatement. He had virtually been unreachable, and the only updates they'd gotten about the Fire Dragon Slayer were through Happy and the erratic visits the Dragon Slayer payed the guild every now and then.

Levy's lips quivered. "All of us just want Lucy to come home." Turning her pleading eyes to Mira, Levy implored, "Mira, please tell us how Lucy's doing. When are you guys coming home? When is *she*?"

Erza, seemingly able to read something on Mira's face that Levy couldn't quite catch, leaned forward, eyes blazing, "Tell us the truth, Mira. We are all mature adults here; we will not destroy ourselves in our grief. We just want to know how our *nakama* is doing."

Defiance briefly flashed on Mira's face, but just as quickly as it appeared, it went away. Mira's shoulders slumped, and she looked downcast. "Okay," she said softly, running a hand through her hair. "But you might not like it."

A humorless smile appeared on Erza's face. "Whether it be silence or bad news, Mira, we will never like what the situation will give us." Mira nodded at Erza's remark before taking a deep breath.

"Lucy's... she's in a medically-induced coma. The doctor's said that it might have adverse effects on her body, especially since she's already so weak, but they didn't have much choice. Said that it was better than having the swelling in her brain worsen." Mira paused, clearly overwhelmed. "I tell myself that she's found, that she's there right before my eyes, but guys, every time I see her, I just think what we could've done better."

Erza's lip quivered minutely before she wiped at her red-rimmed eyes. "We couldn't have done anything better," Erza whispered. "That ring was like the shadows. They had their fingers dipped in all corners of Fiore, but *no one was aware*. If not even the authorities knew of the ring, how could we?"

Levy stared at Erza before she asked, "Wait. Hold on. What ring?" She watched as Erza and Mira exchanged heavy looks. "Guys, please. *What* ring?" Levy's brain was short-circuiting, racking her memories for any mention of a *ring* in the past few days.

There was none.

The only news that Mira, Makarov, and Erza gave her and the guild was that Lucy was found, that she was alive, and currently in Crocus receiving medical treatment. Nothing remotely about criminal activity, or an orchestrated ring.

Mira lifted a shaking hand to her mouth, trying and failing in suppressing a heaving sob. "Levy... Levy, I'm so sorry..."

Levy was full-on panicking. "*What ring?*" she shrieked, tears falling from her eyes. "*What ring?!*" She stood up in her demands, glaring at the other two girls.

Erza reached over and gently grasped Levy's shoulders. With her other hand, Erza urged Levy to look at her square in the eyes. "Levy. *Levy*. Look at me. *Breathe*. We will tell you, but first I want you to breathe and *listen*." Levy choked back a sob before nodding, her eyes never leaving Erza's. When Levy's sobs subsided into smaller hiccups, Erza sent her an encouraging and proud look before nodding at Mira.

Taking a deep breath, Mira said, "Do you know what Cedar Springs is, Levy?"

Her heart dropped to her stomach, and she had to swallow thickly to say, "Yes. I do." Swallowing again, she whispered, "A-are you telling me...?" Mira nodded stonily, and the world tilted on its axis. The next second, Levy found herself in Erza's arms, tears from the redhead falling onto Levy's own blue hair.

"She was stuck there, Mira!" Levy wept when she finally found her voice. "For more than a year! With those... those *monsters*!"

Erza only hugged her tighter, whispering into Levy's hair, "I know, Levy." Erza made eye contact with Mira, whose own face was twisted with pain and sorrow.

"I know."

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Mira shakily placed the orb onto the table and gripped the edge, willing herself to not break down right then and there. But Levy's sobs and Erza's shuttered gaze couldn't escape her memories, and soon, she found herself racked with shivers.

She thought back to Lucy's broken form on the bed, and once again, Mira plunged into the darker thoughts she'd desperately tried to keep locked away.

How could Fairy Tail have failed the only member who refused to give up on their guild? She'd been right *there*, in Cedar Springs, in plain sight, a fucking house near the hills. Why had it taken them so damn long?

"Mira?"

She was snapped from her angry thoughts by her boyfriend's worried voice. "F-Freed?" His eyes softened before he pulled her into his arms, shushing her gently and running his fingers through her silver hair. With her head on his shoulders, Mira took a few moments to clear her mind.

"It's okay to cry," Freed said after several minutes of silence. "No one will judge."

"I'm so tired of crying," Mira whispered. In the several months of Lucy's disappearance, Mira had kept a facade of strength and resilience as a way to encourage her other guild mates. Every couple of months, she, Lisanna, and Elfman would team up to contribute to the search for their Celestial mage, but it seemed to Mira that the best position for her was to be that pillar of strength everyone could lean on.

And yet, in those moments at the dead of night, when she was alone to her own thoughts, she'd broken and raged at the world, giving in to her guilt and sorrow, thinking of her lost friend.

She was so tired of feeling helpless, of crying, and yet the tears wouldn't stop.

"I don't know what to do." No one knew what to do, that much Mira knew at least. She certainly wasn't any special in that regard, but that was all she could focus on: being *helpless*.

His fingers still stroking her hair, Freed finally said, "What did Levy say about the runes on Lucy's keys?"

Mira sighed quietly. "Basically the same thing you said," she said softly. "But she wants to know when we can come back to Magnolia so she can take a closer look at the keys." Looking up at him, she asked, "Did Master ever say anything?"

Freed pursed his lips. "I don't know any more news that you," he said reluctantly. "I can ask the nurses, though, if you wish."

Mira smiled slightly. "I would like that," she whispered before leaning up to kiss his cheek. She giggled at the rosy blush that covered Freed's cheeks before she shifted out of his arms, allowing him to get up.

"I'll be back soon," he murmured, dipping down to press a chaste kiss to her lips.

"Okay. I'll be in Lucy's room." She watched as Freed walked down the hallway towards the nurse's station, and she quietly slipped into Lucy's personal room.

Seeing as Fairy Tail was a guild lauded for its powerful but righteous mages, Crocus Hospital had been more than happy to lend Lucy a personal room, with a reduced price. They'd taken it, relieved, as one of the benefits of the room was privacy from prying eyes, especially from nosy reporters that ever since Lucy's disappearance had consistently hounded the members for news over Lucy.

Inside the room, she wasn't surprised to see Laxus next to Lucy's bed, his fingers outstretched but not touching her skin. Mira quietly closed the door behind her, leaning against the wall as she watched the normally-stoic Lightning mage stare at Lucy helplessly. Her heart broke. She had suspected for a few years before that Laxus had harbored something for the Celestial mage, something that had been confirmed when she had overheard him and Bickslow argue that fateful day. To see your beloved like that, barely hanging on the brittle thread of life, was a suffering too terrible to name.

"I didn't recognize her," Laxus spoke up, startling Mira. She had assumed that the blond man was too wrapped up in his worry for Lucy for him to notice her. "When I saw her for the first time since last year, I thought it was another girl. There just was no way." He gingerly grasped Lucy's hand as if it could break with the slightest touch. "But it was." He looked up at Mira, his eyes revealing the anguish he felt. "She wasn't wearing any clothes. She was so pale, so thin. *There were so many scars and wounds*. She didn't look like Lucy Heartfilia. She looked like a skeleton. Dead.

"Did you know that there was a body— small, like a child's— next to her? *Right next to her*. It was already liquefying. And the *smell*. It was enough to knock someone out." Laxus stared at the wall blankly, remembering vividly the disgusting, putrid smell emanating from it, its smallness not escaping his notice. "I think it's what broke her. She wanted to die, Mirajane. She asked me to kill her. She asked *me* to kill *her*. *Blondie*. She's never given up like this before." Mira didn't say anything. She couldn't say anything, the devastation and utter shock welling inside her constricting her throat. What could she even say to that? To the knowledge that one of the most faithful and resilient members of their family had been broken to that extent, to where she'd wanted her own life to end?

*Lucy*. The one who valued life above all else.

Mira closed her eyes, willing herself to calm down. The details surrounding Lucy's rescue had been kept between Laxus, the Raijinshuu, and the Master; Mira herself had only been given the bare details, like the capturing of the human trafficking ring and Lucy's condition. Hearing Laxus' description of what had actually happened in the ring's headquarters made her realize that perhaps in this situation, ignorance was a favor she'd been granted by the others who'd seen the devastation first-hand.

Sitting down on the chair near the small daybed, where a lump of blankets covered the surface, Mira watched as Laxus watched Lucy in a mixture of worry and devotion. He'd come so far from his rebellious days, so far from the anger and bitterness, and she'd watched — along with the rest of Fairy Tail— as he grew more comfortable in expressing his emotions, in letting people in within his steely walls, in becoming an integral and vital part of the Fairy Tail family.

Him slowly falling in love with Lucy had given Mira the chance to see what a fraction of what truly lay underneath all the walls and barriers Laxus had built around himself.

*'No one should ever have their love tested like this,'* Mira thought.

A sputter sounded from the small couch at the corner of the room, and Mira and Laxus jumped, their heads snapping towards the blanket-laden couch. A small smile tugged at Laxus' face. "Is that Nasir?" Mira asked, her mouth twitching when she saw the small tuft of black hair and little toe poking out from underneath the shifting blankets. Laxus nodded, and Mirajane stepped forward, lightly brushing the boy's hair back and placing a kiss on his forehead.

"The kid never leaves Blondie's side. So protective for such a small boy."

Laxus remembered the boy's suspicious look he'd discreetly cast at Bickslow when they were both visiting Lucy. The Seith mage had noticed it too, and he had found the boy's mettle entertaining. Of course, with the help of his babies, Bickslow eventually gained Nasir's trust, and with Nasir's blessing, Bickslow was finally allowed to see Lucy, much to Laxus' amusement. Secretly, he wondered why the boy was so protective of Lucy, but then again, how was he to say anything? One indication of the blonde's distress, and Laxus was willing to drop anything and everything for her.

"After all he went through with Lucy, I can't blame him," he muttered.

Mira glanced at Laxus, curious. "Was he with Lucy from the beginning?"

Laxus tilted his head. "Maybe. Maybe not," he said. "I'm not too sure though. Nasir hasn't really said too much about it, but I don't think it's a good idea to ask about it, either."

Mira nodded, agreeing with Laxus. "Whatever they went through is too traumatizing for him to relive, especially when it's all so fresh," she whispered and looked down at the peaceful look on Nasir's face, her heart weeping at the scar that ran down from his right temple to his nose.

He was just a little boy.

He couldn't have been any older than eight. *He was just so young*, and already he'd gone through things adults her age have only *heard* of.

She watched with affectionate eyes as the boy began to shift a bit more frequently under her fingers, and after a few seconds, she watched as his closed lids opened to reveal beautiful hazel eyes. His eyes rounded with fear before he calmed down just as quickly, seeing that it was only Mirajane, and sent her a sleepy smile. Her heart melted on the spot. "Hi, Nasir," she whispered, pressing another soft kiss to his forehead. She giggled when the boy's face flushed a dark red and looked away quickly, avoiding her eyes.

"H-hello," he muttered, only burying himself deeper into the blankets to hide his red face. His eyes flicked to Lucy's bed and blinked languidly at Laxus' form. "Laxus-nii? You're still here?"

Laxus rolled his eyes, walking over to the boy and ruffling his hair. "What else would I do?" he asked gruffly. "Someone has to stay here to make sure you don't wreak havoc on those poor nurses again."

The boy pouted and huffed, "It was one time!"

Mira giggled at their interaction and was about to say something when the door opened. Nasir, Laxus, and Mira's heads snapped towards the door, and Mira was surprised to see Makarov walk behind Freed. She thought that the Master was still busy with several errands to fulfill, as she and the others had rarely seen the Master around the hospital since they'd arrived at Crocus.

Freed and Makarov smiled at the three. "We have good news," Freed said breathlessly, a wide grin threatening to split his face in two.

Makarov stepped forward, his eyes bright and shining as he looked on his beloved children. "They're discharging Lucy in a couple days."

Mira's eyes widened, and she exchanged a look of disbelief with Laxus. "What?" Laxus whispered, staring at his grandfather like he'd just pulled down the moon and gave it to him as a gift.

Makarov smiled, a happy tear falling from his eyes as he said, "Lucy's coming home."

## Chapter End Notes

Ugh, y'all it's been so long :-') But I'm finally back after like half a year. Updates will be sporadic at best from now on because I literally just finished summer classes a few days ago and fall semester starts in less than two weeks, but once again, I'm not giving up on this fic y'all.

Thank you all for the support you've given me, from bookmarks to kudos to reviews. They've all been noticed and appreciated <3 Y'all are the best and thank you so much once again :D

So, about Levy— I was totally not planning on giving her an injury LOL but it just happened. I'm not planning on giving anymore background on it as it wasn't even part of my original plan, plus it's not that important of a plot point in my eyes. However, it is good character development... ish, if I play my cards right.

On a side note, can y'all spot the very small Hamilton reference? I know it's been a while since Hamilton first began, but I still live for that shit <3

Random question, but should I get a Tumblr? 🙄

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

Warning: Graphic scenes at the end

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**Edited on: 7 Dec 2019**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lexus watched as Nasir walked out of the building, grasping onto Ever's hand with a ferocity that belied his nervousness. Exchanging a quick glance with Ever, who gave him a piercing, warning look, Lexus forced a smile on his face. "Hey, kiddo," he said, kneeling down to give him a fist bump. Nasir smiled up at him, his smaller fist coming up to slightly touch Lexus'. "Excited to go to the bazaar? It's a bit early in the morning, so there shouldn't be too much people."

Nasir perked up considerably at the mention of the bazaar, which he'd always wanted to go to since he first heard about it, and nodded his head vigorously. "Yeah! But can we get some food? I'm real hungry..."

"Of course, kid. Why don't you go ahead and look for where you want to eat, I need to talk with Ever-nee about something first." Nasir visibly hesitated, and Lexus hurried to add, "We'll be right behind you, kid. We won't let anything happen to you."

Nasir nodded slowly, a small smile slowly spreading across his face when Ever gave him a reassuring smile. "Okay," he said quietly before running off.

Ever and Lexus watched as Nasir was at a far enough distance where he couldn't hear them, but close enough for them to keep an eye on him, before starting to walk. "So," Lexus said, "how was it?"

"Good and bad," she said softly. "He still has nightmares, and it's obvious that he hasn't been sleeping well, but at least he's able to speak with the staff he's familiar with. I didn't have to cut in as much as before. He's also doing much better in crowds— being in Fairy Tail helped a lot— so today should be easier than the last time we took him out." Ever paused, her eyes saddened. "Oh, Lexus, Nasir... he sees so much, and he's so young. He drew what he sees in his dreams, and it's just—" Her jaw flexed as she tried to find her words before shaking her head.

"His parents are fucking assholes," she hissed vehemently. "How the fuck could they sell their own son for a *bag of money*? Nasir, he's so sweet, and it's just— I can't even fathom how anyone can do that to such a wonderful kid!"

"But most of all, I hate *them*." Her eyes clashed with Laxus' stoic ones, poorly hiding the thirst for blood lurking beneath. "Laxus, please tell me Master's been able to convince the Knights."

Laxus gritted his teeth, a sharp exhale expelling from his nose. "No," he said. "The Knights didn't want us involved whatsoever. Said that we'd just hold them back."

Ever scoffed. "Fucking pricks," she grumbled. "Had it not been for us, they would have never taken down a large part of underground crimes in Fiore."

"Tell me about it," he muttered, elbowing Ever when he noticed Nasir make their way towards them.

Like instant magic, the anger in Ever's face melted away into adoration and affection when she knelt, Nasir flying into her arms. "Hey there, little one," she said, mussing Nasir's already messy hair. "Did you get what you want?"

Nasir turned a bright red before shaking his head. "I wanna get some dingo first!"

Ever bit her lip, obviously trying not to laugh. "It's dango, sweetheart."

"That's what I said!"

Chuckling, Ever pinched his cheeks. "It was close enough," she said as she stood up. Dusting her skirt, she turned to Laxus. "Alright, boys, I'm afraid I have to leave now. A whole lot of jewels are waiting for me down south." Her eyes twinkled.

Nasir pouted. "Can't you stay?" he asked quietly, his fingers tightly squeezing Ever's hand.

"I can't," Ever said, a mischievous twinkle appearing in her eyes, "because I think you're the only one here able to babysit Laxus-nii."

Laxus' mouth dropped in indignation. "Oi, what's that supposed to mean?" he huffed, glaring at a laughing Ever.

"I'm kidding." She bent down to kiss Nasir's cheeks before sending Laxus a look. "Take good care of him, Laxus," she whispered, eyes narrowed into slits, promising vengeance if the blond managed to fuck up.

Laxus held up his hands. "Alright, mama bear. Don't worry, I've got this. If I can lead Fairy Tail while Gramps is away, I can take care of Nasir. Won't be too much of a difference anyways..."

Ever bit her lips, obviously amused. "We'll see. Oh, and Nasir? If Laxus-nii here is being too much of a jerk, just tell me or Mira-nee and we'll make sure to scold him and send him to time-out."

Laxus just gave her a dry look, deciding not to say anything for the meantime, letting Ever smother Nasir one more time before leaving. Once she left, Laxus glanced down at Nasir, who was peering up at him with wide brown eyes.

Unbidden, his heart melted at the spot.

"You ready, kid?"

Nasir grinned a toothy grin, revealing a cracked front tooth and rather sharp incisors. "Aye, aye cap'n!" he chirped, saluting Laxus in an odd one-armed salute. "What's a basa?" Nasir asked as they began to walk towards the city center.

"Bazaar," Laxus corrected, allowing Nasir to tug him along. "It's where we can get lots of stuff, like street food, produce, rugs, magic items. There's two every week— one today, one Sunday— and Mira always gets the ingredients for our food there if she has time."

"Really? Then why can't she come with us?"

Laxus chuckled. "Well, it's Wednesday, and Mira's the one to open and close up the guild. On weekends, our days start a little bit later, so she makes sure to buy ingredients for the entire week then in the mornings."

"I should go with her to help!"

Laxus gave him a lopsided grin. "I'm sure she'd like that."

A comfortable silence lapsed between the two, and soon, the space between the buildings began to widen, and Laxus could see large, colorful tarp peek through. He nudged Nasir. "There it is," he said with a jerk of his chin. "The Biweekly Magnolia Bazaar!"

Nasir's eyes widened into saucers as he took in the calm bustle of the bazaar as people huddled around stands. The shouts of vendors advertising their products mingled with playful, live music as spicy, smoky scents of cooked food wafted through the air. "Whoa," he whispered. "'S so *pretty*!"

Laxus chuckled, watching as Nasir began to bounce on his heels. "Oh go on," he said, "I know you want to go explore." Laxus nearly choked on his own spit when Nasir threw himself at him, his short, thin arms attempting to wrap around the blond's torso in a tight hug.

"Thanks, Lax-nii," he said before running off to one of the closer stands.

Taken aback at the contact that Nasir had initiated— Nasir really was making quick progress, he mused— Laxus could only laugh in disbelief before he followed after the boy, who was staring at the glass figurines on display quite a distance away, his hand often reaching up to tug at his headscarf, hiding the scar that took up half his face. The vendor was giving Nasir a welcoming smile, but was obviously puzzled at the kid's distance and the headscarf that wrapped around Nasir's head. Though not an uncommon style seen in the streets of Western Bosco and in remote parts of Southeastern Fiore, it was rarer to see people wear thick, wool headscarves in the more humid climates of urbanized cities in Southern Fiore, Magnolia being one of them.

Coming up behind him, Laxus gently ushered Nasir closer to the tent. "What are you looking at, Nasir?" he asked, going down on one knee to get a closer look at the glass figurines, each

of them stunning in detail and carefully painted with bright colors.

"I dunno, but they're pretty," Nasir whispered, tugging at his ear.

"They're 1500 to 2500 jewels each," the vendor piped up, smiling gently at Nasir who quickly looked away.

"Do you want one?" Laxus asked the boy.

Nasir shook his head. "No, s'okay." He moved to leave, but paused, his face pulled in uncertainty as his eyes flicked quickly from Laxus to the vendor to the fountain, which stood at the center of the bazaar. Finally, after several seconds of silence, Nasir finally looked up to make eye contact with the vendor and said in a subdued, quavering voice, "Th-thank you, s-sir." His head bowed down in shyness, trying to hide behind his headscarf.

Meanwhile, Laxus grinned, knowing that Ever and Mira would jump for joy at Nasir's bravery, and took Nasir's hand, acknowledging the vendor with a brief but thankful nod. "Good job, kiddo!" he said once they were a bit further from the glass-figurine stand. "Ever-nee and Mira-nee would be so proud."

Nasir didn't reply or react, instead looking down at his feet and despondently kicking at the dirt. Laxus sighed quietly to himself, feeling horrible. It hadn't even been an hour with the kid, and already, Laxus had royally fucked up. He wondered why Mira and Ever entrusted him with Nasir, when it was so obvious that he wasn't very adept with kids, much less kids suffering intense trauma like Nasir was.

Deciding it wouldn't do for Nasir to linger on negative emotions, Laxus gently guided the boy into a more secluded, more private place, kneeling down and facing the boy with what he hoped was an open and encouraging expression. "What is it?" he probed gently.

Nasir refused to meet Laxus' eyes, but he revealed, "'S hard to speak to people I dunno."

"I know," Laxus said quietly. From what he'd seen since coming back to Magnolia and Ever's reports from the therapists, Nasir had a hard time interacting with people he didn't know. But, he knew that Nasir was improving significantly. "Step by step, though. You're doing great, kid. We just need to work on it more yeah?"

"Yeah," Nasir muttered, still looking despondent.

Laxus cursed the earth and heavens, himself, and Mira and Ever. He was terrible at comforting others—the two knew that and still forced him to take Nasir around after a therapy session—but he forced himself to shrug it off. Right now, though Laxus had no idea what to do, he knew that what Nasir needed wasn't Laxus pitying himself.

"Alrighty kid," he said dramatically, standing so quickly it nearly gave him vertigo. "This wouldn't do! Mira and Ever would fucking murder me—" As the words tumbled out of his mouth, Laxus's eyes widened comically, and he glanced at Nasir, who was staring back at him with wide eyes. "*Holy fucking shit, please don't tell Mira and Ever.*"

Nasir just stared at him blankly before a slow, very very evil smile gradually slithered its way onto his face. Lexus made a mental note to separate Nasir and Bickslow in fear of the two conniving together one day at the expense of his pride and self-esteem.

"You just cursed," Nasir said, still grinning the smile that reminded Lexus eerily of Bickslow.

"Yes, but..." Lexus paused, thinking of a way to bribe Nasir and distract him. "Listen, kid, Ever and Mira can't hear about this. Please? A favor for Laxus-nii?"

Nasir stared at him before shaking his head. "I want food," he said in finality, staring Lexus down.

"Food," Lexus repeated flatly.

"Yup!"

Lexus suppressed a sigh. Of course he wanted food. Seven out of ten times Lexus saw Nasir at the guild, the boy was eating. The other three times, he was busy wrapping the entire guild around his pinky. "Alright," he finally conceded in defeat, realizing that he was no exception from his other guildmates. "Food it is."

"Yay!" Nasir cheered, clapping his hands excitedly.

"Where do you wanna eat, then?"

"You should choose, Lax-nii! You're treatin' me, after all!"

Lexus could only think of one: his favorite spot, one only locals in Magnolia knew about. "How about that spicy food place near the river? It has the best cheesy fire chicken."

Nasir's eyes narrowed. "Even better than Mira-nee's?"

Oh fuck, that was a trap; it was pretty much an unspoken law in the guild that nothing beat Mira's cooking. The kid had been hanging around with Bickslow way too much. "All right, maybe not better than Mira's," Lexus relented, "but the food's still pretty good."

Nasir tapped a finger on his chin, deep in thought, before nodding decidedly. "All right," he said, grabbing one of Lexus' hands, "let's get fire chicken!" and began dragging the fearsome Dragon Slayer around the bazaar. "And then maybe after that, we can get some *EEK-lares* that Mira-nee always makes for me! Ooh, and can we get some ice cream? I like mine with lotsa gummies and *moquee* and..."

Lexus sighed to himself, feeling a headache forming between his eyes despite the subtle tugging on his lips. This was going to be a long day.

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Mira looked up when the guild doors opened and slammed shut and in walked a very elated Nasir and a very disgruntled Lexus. She watched as Nasir ran into Ever's arms, and failing to hold in a laugh, she poured Lexus a drink when he dragged himself to the bar, looking very

much like he wanted nothing else but to go back to his place and sleep for one hundred years. "Long day?" she teased and was met with a cold glare. "How was Nasir?"

"A nuisance. Adorable, but a nuisance. Talked my ear off for hours and ate through an entire month's worth of jewels," he mumbled affectionately, shaking his head. Mira could swear that she saw a hint of a smile on his face, and it made her smile in turn. She and Ever knew it; Nasir may be a handful sometimes, but his curiosity and adorableness had a cathartic effect to those around him.

Grabbing the drink Mira gave him, Laxus said gruffly, "Thanks." He took a few sips, eyes flicking across the guild before he frowned. "Hold up. Where's Erza and the birdbrained duo?"

The amusement that had struck Mira earlier immediately flew away, and she turned back to cleaning the bar. Silently, she cursed the fact that Laxus was so damn observant. "With Levy. They decided to visit the hospital," she said and watched as Laxus' hand tightened into a fist. She suppressed a sigh, wishing that they hadn't gone into that subject so quickly. Of all the people here, Laxus deserved a break from all the stress and pain.

The transition from Crocus to Magnolia had not been an easy move. Once Makarov had gotten the news of Lucy's discharge, he'd immediately made plans to go back to Magnolia.

*"She's being discharged from Crocus, yes, but they still want to keep tabs on her back at Magnolia Hospital,"* the Master had said in a lacrima call to Erza.

Within a few hours, he'd arranged a train ride back to their hometown, with Mira, Freed and Bickslow deciding to go with him to help inform the guild about Lucy and to start working on ways to reverse the effects of the runes on Lucy's keys. Ever had decided to stay a day longer to take care of Nasir and ready him for the journey ahead.

Laxus had stayed to help transfer Lucy to Magnolia.

Her transfer back to the city had been nearly three weeks ago, and while the guild was allowed to visit, the amount of visitors allowed were five max.

While Laxus decided to step back from the hospital to give the rest of the guild a chance to see Lucy, it had not been easy on him, and the strong and powerful man had merely become a half-shadow of who he had been. He was constantly on edge, tired, and more aloof, a chilling echo of the Laxus that had been crippled from his shame over his actions against the guild.

Glancing at the empty glass in his hands, Mira held up a bottle of booze and asked, "Want some more?"

Laxus huffed, dragging the glass forward, and Mira obliged. "Need an entire ocean to feel better," he grumbled, nursing the glass before throwing back the entire contents. Mira winced because damn, that was the strongest alcohol she had. Even Natsu had to pause from drinking it every now and then.

"Where's Freed? At this time, he would've been over here giving you moon eyes." He attempted to copy the expression his love-struck friend so often made around Mirajane, but failed. Miserably.

Mira rolled her eyes at his attempt, but it didn't stop her from turning a pretty shade of pink. "He's with the Master. They're trying to crack the runes on Lucy's keys."

Lexus perked up, his hand loosening around the glass shot. Leaning forward, he demanded, "Did they say anything about it? Any progress on the runes? Maybe the magic signature of the mage who placed them there?" A look of hope flickered across his face before it disappeared just as quickly, the mask of stone Lexus had perfected ever since he was young back in place.

"No, unfortunately. Freed showed Levy the keys when they first arrived here, but even she was confused. Said something about the runes 'not being complete and not quite right,'" Mira said quietly as she wiped off the last of the dust on the bar and moved on to the mountain of plates that needed to be washed. "She's been spending time at the hospital for the past couple weeks to look at the runes on Lucy's body. Wanted to get a fuller, more rounded understanding of the Runic spell. They know what the runes are for, but it's been hard for them to find a way to get rid of them, especially since they've really only got the keys to look at."

It was weird to have two of the smartest people in the guild be stumped at one of the oldest and more known forms of magic. Frankly, it worried Mira. How powerful could the mage have been to write a new form of Rune magic, a kind of magic she'd long thought to be structured and inflexible? Most of all, how could the mage have just... *disappeared*? She knew that the search for the leader of the trafficking ring, who they suspected to be the one to have written the runes in the first place, was still ongoing, but from what she knew of the finer details given to her by Freed and the Master, it was not going well.

Lexus closed his eyes shut at the news. "Oh fuck, the runes. I forgot about the runes on her body," he whispered, rubbing his forehead. "Fuck, how could I have forgotten about that?" He'd been the one to find Lucy, been the one to carry her out into the sun, been the one who stayed with her in Cedar Springs and Crocus. Not once had he remembered seeing the runes Lucy's body had held. He didn't even bother *checking*.

What the fuck was wrong with him to have forgotten such an important detail? A detail that had literally been *right in front of him* the entire time?

Mira leaned forward, placing a comforting hand on Lexus's forearm. "You were running around helping Master getting the Rune Knights to allow Fairy Tail clearance for the ring investigation, fending off nosy reporters asking about Lucy, helping Ever with Nasir, taking care of Nasir, and looking into finding Lucy a more private place to live in." She gave him a stern look, but her voice was soft. "You deserve a break every now and then, Lexus."

The bark of laughter that ripped from his throat was dark and unforgiving. "Can't afford one. She's waited for us for over a year. The least we can do is work a little harder instead of sitting around on our asses doing nothing."

Mira nearly dropped the plate was holding, and she trembled at his words, trying so hard not to break apart from the sudden wave of guilt that swept over her. "That's not fair, Laxus," she whispered and flinched when Laxus shook his head, slammed the glass in his hands on the table, and pushed away from the bar. She simply watched him go with a weary heart.

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*'I don't wanna go.'*

Erza squeezed her eyes shut, the mantra unwittingly repeating and repeating in her head. She didn't want to go because she was a coward. She wasn't quite ready to face the fact that she and everyone else had failed Lucy Heartfilia. She wasn't ready to see Lucy Heartfilia, the woman Erza saw as her own sister, broken and unresponsive in a hospital bed. She wasn't ready. She didn't want to go.

Still, she had to. If not for herself, then for Lucy.

Quietly, Erza steeled herself. Her quaking knees stopped shaking. The white-knuckled grip on the vase of flowers relaxed. An empty, cooling calm enveloped her. She was Titania. Undefeated. Fearsome. She, Titania, can do this.

*But who was Titania in the face of her loved ones?*

"Erza."

Levy's gentle voice snapped Erza from her dangerous thoughts. The petite blue-haired mage smiled tiredly at her before beckoning her into the elevator. She smiled apologetically, her eyes darting at the growing throngs of people stopping to stare at the frozen Titania, whose shaking grip on the glass vase was something they thought they'd never see. "Come on, we can't monopolize the elevator for so long."

Right, of course.

Erza stepped forward, stopping in front of Gray and to the right of Natsu. The two frenemies were unnaturally silent and serious, and Levy had to awkwardly lean around the Ice mage to scan a small, shiny card against a black box and press the top button.

"Master and Laxus had to pay extra for the private room," Levy explained quietly, pocketing the card once the elevator doors slid shut. "That's why I have to scan it, for extra security."

"Good," Gray said, his voice gravelly. He glowered at the elevator doors, likely thinking about the endless barrage of reporters they'd encountered for the past year and the influx of them once word of Lucy's arrival at Crocus Hospital spread across Magnolia. "Those reporters were a fucking pain in the ass to fight through."

"Language, Gray," Erza chastised, out of habit. Gray merely huffed in response, sending his close friend a look.

"He has a point though," Levy said, cracking a small smile. "I swear, any moment longer with them, and I would have sent them to kingdom come, laws be damned."

Erza suppressed a snort, sympathizing with Levy and Gray. Reporters had been a leech on the back for Fairy Tail members ever since the nationwide search for Lucy commenced a year ago and later doubled their efforts once Lucy had been transferred to Magnolia Hospital. A day in, and Erza had heard that the commotion caused by the reporters and visiting guild members prompted Makarov and the hospital to transfer Lucy to a more private setting within the week of her arrival.

Besides her, she felt Natsu shuffle quietly, and Erza glanced at the frozen Fire Dragon Slayer. Her heart went out to him. Dark circles bagged down his eyes, and he never seemed to stand still, nervous dread thick around his person, bothering even Happy, who nestled in Natsu's hair like a small chick. Erza opened her mouth to reassure Natsu, to say that he was not alone in his suffering and guilt when the elevator dinged and the doors whooshed open.

"We're here." Levy's voice was hushed, solemn, and whatever words Erza was planning to say to Natsu faltered on her lips and withered into nothing. Without another word, the four mages stepped out.

The private floor only had four pods, three rooms each and only one nurse's station. The lights were low, and for once, the entire floor was silent, save for the quiet murmurings of the nurses and the occasional calls that came through. Levy silently led the Team Natsu past the nurse's desk, flashing them the card she'd used earlier, and walked into room 602.

Erza stopped in her tracks, the door the only thing in her vision.

Distantly, she noted Gray barely stopping in time from bumping into her, the barest hint of air ruffling the hairs on her arms. The quiver in her hands returned. Her knees locked up. She could feel every second tick, every quiet beep that came from the room.

Fuck.

She wasn't ready.

A steady grip on her right shoulder buoyed her back to the moment. "We know, Erza," a quiet, husky voice said, and Erza turned her head towards a stoic Natsu, her eyes meeting a tired but smiling Happy. Gray sidled up to her left side, placing a cool, reassuring hand on her left shoulder, ever a comforting pillar she could lean on. Tears filled her eyes.

They were a team.

All five of them.

Erza stepped into the room, her boys close behind her, and her world divided into seconds.

For the first second, the distinct aroma of flowers hit her, a reassurance in an otherwise sterile and isolated building. The next, she took note of the cheerful balloons, then the stuffed animals and plastic hearts. The third second, she heard the monotonous beeping of the monitor. The fourth second, Erza took note of Levy moving furniture before settling into a plastic chair, turning slightly towards the door where they stood to give them a reassuring smile.

Finally, Erza took note of the still figure on the bed. Time stood still and held its breath.

*Lucy.*

The vase shattered.

The figure on the bed was wrapped in pristine white, not a speck of yellow or bright gold. It was still, quiet. So quiet and meek. Was that even Lucy? Erza took a shaky step forward.

This couldn't be Lucy. That specter of silence could not be Lucy Heartfilia. No, it couldn't be.

Erza stretched her hand out, hesitantly grabbing onto the small, bandaged hand on the figure's stomach. Cradling it softly with love and care, her fingers deftly began to unwind the bandages, ignoring Levy's alarmed, "Erza, what are you doing?"

Frankly, she didn't really know herself.

Finally, the last of the bandages fell apart, and Erza couldn't help the sharp breath shock stole from her throat. Behind her, her friends did the same.

What should have been the pink mark of Fairy Tail was instead layers upon layers of pale, ridged scars and damaged skin, creating a crude symbol on her hand reminiscent of a cattle brand.

Off to the side, Erza vaguely heard Levy breathe, "Oh my god," in shock, voice shaking and weak. She heard Happy whimpering, trying and failing to muffle his sobs. Flippantly, Erza wondered if Natsu and Gray were even in the room; she'd yet to hear a response from them.

"What the hell happened?" At Gray's frigid voice, a chill spilled down Erza's spine, spreading out in uncomfortable waves. "Why the fuck— what *the fuck* is that?" Tense, angry silence met his words, and Erza didn't have it in her to look up. Instead, her eyes stayed riveted at the back of Lucy's hand.

She didn't know. *She didn't know.*

Then, Erza heard the quiet stride of someone behind her, stopping once by her side. Tanned, muscular hands reached forward, replacing Erza's own slender ones from Lucy's, and finally, the redhead looked up. Natsu was staring blankly at his best friend's hand, but Erza knew. She knew...

"Natsu," she said quietly, but she dared not touch him.

She knew Natsu Dragneel, and right now, when it came to Lucy Heartfilia, he was dynamite too dangerous to touch.

The muscles of Natsu's jaw jumped, and suddenly, the blank slate in his eyes shattered, giving way to irate anguish. He wanted explanations, justice, and most of all, **blood**, and yet his grip on Lucy's hand remained gentle. His green eyes met Gray's, and he ground out through gritted teeth, "They took away her mark. They took it away and replaced it with their own."

They took away from her any remainder of Fairy Tail.

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*She was in a dark room, trembling from the shivers that wracked her body. White hot pain lanced through her body, but at least it didn't hurt as much as it had before. She sighed softly, bearing the pain that plagued her because at least it wasn't Nasir or the others suffering. No, they were safe and away from harm.*

*Unlike her.*

*Lucy shivered, her head dropping as she cried in despair. Iciness crept up her skin and seeped into her bones, but thankfully numbed the pain that now seemed to be deeply embedded into her muscles and body. She simply laid there for what seemed like hours, wanting nothing more than to give up.*

*Then, she heard the footsteps.*

*Her eyes flew open, widening in terror as they grew closer. "D-don't—" she stuttered. Hands touched her forearms, and Lucy screamed, flying into a rage.*

*She had had enough.*

*Her hands outstretched like talons, she launched herself at the person. Curling her fingers around the person's throat, she squeezed as hard as she could, angered and mad with the pain they had caused her. Her ears only picked up muffled noises of a struggle, like the altercation was in a lacrima set, the audio covered with cotton. But she knew it was them. Who else would it be?*

*The person, now at her mercy, finally exhaled its last breath. Now all Lucy could hear was her strangled breathing, and she leaned against the wall. She opened her eyes, and at first, she saw the ceiling. Then she looked down at her hands, still wrapped around the throat.*

*Her eyes widened.*

*She screamed and screamed and screamed.*

*Her hands let go of the throat, and the body of the small boy tumbled into the ground, his mouth and eyes wide, forever frozen in a picture of shock. Lucy scuttled away from the body, her eyes focused on it even when she distantly noticed a familiar pair of legs appear, the white, flared pants and gold-trimmed cloak ringing despair within her.*

*"No. No. Not again."*

*Hands pulled at her scalp, forcing her to look up. Natsu's face hovered over her, a vicious snarl twisting his face. "See what you did? You cold-blooded murderer."*

*"I— I didn't mean to. I thought... I thought they were coming back Natsu, you have to believe me."*

*But the pink-haired mage continued ruthlessly, "And you call yourself a Fairy Tail mage? We're ashamed of you, Lucy. You think what you did is something we accept?" He pointed to the decomposing body of the only companion she had. The only companion she had killed. "You killed him! An innocent child!"*

*Lucy shook back and forth, her head mechanically shaking left to right. "I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to."*

*Natsu's face twisted in anger, and his fists lit up with his fire, and Lucy cowered away. "You deserve to die." He leapt towards her.*

*"NOOO!" Lucy shrieked, grabbing the closest object at her feet. She held it, thick and metallic, to protect herself, and a few seconds later, she heard a breathless gasp as something warm splattered on her face. She opened her eyes to meet the pale face of her blue-haired friend. "L-Levy?" Lucy whispered. "What are you—" She cut herself off when she finally looked down at her hands, dripping with new, warm blood stemming from Levy's torso. "Oh no. Please no."*

*Her hands released the pipe in her hands, Levy collapsing onto the ground with the metal still in her torso, and Lucy desperately rubbed the blood off her hands and onto her shirt. "Just a dream," Lucy mumbled. "Not real. Not real." Her whispers turned into heaving sobs as she stared into her friend's glassy eyes.*

*Lucy whimpered again and scuttled back, her bare back hitting the cold stone of the dungeon's walls. "I didn't kill her. Not a murderer." But as she stared into Levy's eyes, her body hanging from the pipe back and forth, back and forth, like strange fruit on a tree, the decomposing body of the child lying underneath her, Lucy felt sick again.*

*She was a murderer.*

*A murderer. That's what you are. That's what I am.*

*Suddenly, Levy's body twitched, and Lucy screamed. The blue-haired girl's head lifted, her eyes empty. Dead. She held up a hand. "L-Lucy. Why?" Levy grasped the metal protruding from her stomach. "Why did you kill me?"*

*"Levy, I—I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."*

*"Lucy."*

*"No, no, no. I didn't mean to. Please."*

*"Lucy!"*

*The blonde continued to shake her head, her fingers gripping her hair, her scalp burning as she pulled and pulled at her hair. "I'm so sorry."*

*"Lucy look at me!"*

*"I killed you! I killed you...." The blonde wrapped around torso, begging herself to wake up. It had to be a dream, right? Levy wasn't dead? She didn't kill her? She wasn't a killer like they said she was?*

*Right?*

*"Lucy."*

God, it hurt so much.

*"Lucy!"*

Why does it hurt so much?

*"LUCY!"*

*"Get them out! Now!"*

*"They're not listening, doc!"*

*"Just—just focus on restraining her, dammit!"*

"Stop! What are you doing to her?" a deep male voice demanded. Other voices rose up in distressed agreement, but Lucy couldn't identify them. There were too many. Too unfamiliar. Too painful. Too much.

*Why won't it end?*

*"Guys, stop, they're trying to help her! Calm down!" Levy?*

Lucy's eyes snapped open in shock, roving as they attempted to spot the blue-haired girl's face amongst the sea of blurs of whites and grays and blacks and the other myriad of colors. She had killed Levy, hadn't she? Why was she there?

*Why was she alive?*

Lucy's breath hitched.

A familiar face hovered over her vision, his vibrant pink hair still stuck up in all directions, dark bags weighing down jade-green eyes scrunched in worry. "Luce?" it whispered, but all Lucy could see was the same face, twisted in disgust, the planes of his handsome face shadowed ominously by the fire encasing his arms.

And so, Lucy screamed.

Approx. Word Count: 5800

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It's been nearly 3 months, ahh! Halfway through the semester, and I'm already dying lol help meeee. Your reviews, however, give me life ♥ Thank you!

I give thee my love ♥ ♥ ♥

ANYWAYS, y'all, writing this was so hard, especially trying to build Nasir's character. Speaking of, how do y'all feel about Nasir? Like him? Hate him? Neutral? :0

And Lucy's awake! ... but is that good or bad?

How y'all feeling?! I won't update for a while, at least not until late-December or late-January (I KNOW THAT'S A LONG TIMEEEE) but I wanted to focus on classes. Plus, I don't want to force myself and start hating this story so I figured I'll just write here and there when the muse hits (which is usually when I'm trying to do homework lol. My muse is largely part of the reason why I procrastinate).

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE UPDATED IN FEBRUARY I'M SO SORRY

But I hope the length makes up for it? :3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A migraine was starting to build behind Levy's eyes, the runes from the pictures before her and Freed starting to swim and fluctuate, and she shut them in frustration, her hands coming up to her temples. "This is getting nowhere," she grumbled, crossing her arms. "There's literally no pattern, and we've barely even translated an *eighth* of these symbols!" She angrily shook the pictures she'd been studying, frustrated beyond belief.

Freed sighed. He and Levy had been agonizing over the runes for *days* now, well into three weeks. With the breadth of knowledge shared between him and the blue-haired bookworm, Freed had hoped that they would at least have made some progress with the runes and the counter-spell to their effects. However, that was not the case, and the two could only come up with theories to the spell in question and nothing actually substantial for their goal.

"Let's start from the beginning, the very basics of what we know," Freed said, suppressing a sigh. Like Levy, he was getting very frustrated over the lack of progress.

Levy agreed. Holding up her thumb, she began, "One, the Rune scripts are what's telling us that the spell is magic-binding, meant only for Celestial mages by the runes we know, and are used a lot in both parts of the rune-set."

"Two," Freed continued, "they're used in such a way that implies that the mage or mages not only utilized existing Runic spells, but also had the intelligence and magical capability to create new base spells unheard of in any Letter magic we know of— at least, here, in Fiore."

Levy nodded, still very interested and grudgingly amazed by the ingenuity behind them, even though it struck fear in her heart. "The mage used magic-binding Runic bases, but also created new ones to fit the Celestial magic of the Zodiacs as well. Not only that, they used the new Runic bases they created as a way to utilize other forms of Letter magic. We still don't know how they did that."

Shaking the displeasure from her voice, Levy refocused, continuing, "Which leads to number three— several types of Letter magic scripts have been used throughout the spell set."

"Jutsu Shiki, Dark Ecriture, and Rune magic scripts, among a few others that aren't from Fiore," Freed listed, his eyes picking out the clusters of scripts that littered Lucy's keys and skin in no apparent pattern.

"Rune magic scripts being the most used all throughout," Levy added offhandedly. "As for the other unknown scripts, we don't know much about them, besides that they're not actually used here in Fiore and are more common in magics found in north, northwestern Earth Land, specifically in Seven and *maybe* Bosco." She paused then, looking at Freed. "We should definitely look into that more."

"Bosconian magical records should be easy to find, but for Seven? It would be very difficult to find books about magic and magic history. There's little to no records here in Fiore about magics usage in Seven, and any flow of information between Fiore and Seven, both recent and within the past few decades, exists solely with the government. Plus, any records older than 50 years would be too dated because magic usage evolves."

"Damn it. Think Master or Laxus might be able to ask Queen Hisui for any information or records on magic in Seven?"

"Perhaps, but even as Allies to the Crown, we might not be able to gain much of anything. The situation with Seven is highly sensitive and confidential, and Queen Hisui must remain impartial to quell her council and court. As such, she won't be able to disclose classified government intelligence to us if the Council refuses."

"We'll still try," Levy said, nodding resolutely. "We shouldn't leave any trail unchecked, even if it seems like we'll go nowhere there."

A ghost of a smile appeared on Freed's face; the leader of Raijinshuu was obviously impressed by Levy's mettle. Having seen Levy struggle in the time Lucy was missing, even from a distance, to see her so strong and determined once more in this moment lightened and resolved Freed's own pessimistic viewpoint.

"Alright, we'll look into Letter magic systems in Seven and Bosco," he said, taking a mental note to ask Master for that one favor before turning back to the Runes question. "So different kinds of Letter magic scripts, some of them prominent here in Fiore, others prominent in Bosco and Seven. Could it be several people behind the spell's creation, then? It would explain the magnitude of the spell, as well as the different kinds of Letter systems inscribed on Lucy-san's keys and skin."

Levy shook her head. "No. There's no way. At least, I don't think so. The runes..." The words trailed off as she tried to organize her thoughts. "When I first visited Lucy, I didn't feel the magic potency like I did with the keys when I first saw them in person. I thought the runes on her body were defunct, not functioning, but once Lucy woke up..."

She shivered, her mind flitting back to the chaos of that day, Lucy's screams echoing angrily in her ears, before snapping back to the present. "When Lucy woke up, it was like the runes on her skin just *activated*. They felt the same, those energies, like they all came from one source, one person."

She remembered that vividly. Like what she told Freed, when Lucy woke up screaming, Levy'd felt prickling on her skin— Letter Magic, her mind cataloged much later— as the tiny hairs on her arms stood taut. It was just like the feeling that washed over her when Mira

handed her Lucy's dirty and worn keys the day she, Freed, the Master, and Bickslow come back from Crocus.

Freed nodded absently, his fingers ghosting over Lucy's keys with care and delicacy. He took note of the familiar shapes the written runes on Lucy's skin had with the ones on the keys. The likelihood of the spell being created by one person was high. "So it may really be that there's only one mind behind the spell set—one person who created and wrote these runes. Which makes things much simpler and more difficult all the same."

Simpler in that it was only one person they had to catch; harder because that person was more than just adept at their magic. A literal genius, one who took careful steps, leaving no trail of crumbs, and paid close attention to detail would be someone who could easily evade authorities' grasps.

They'd done it once; they could do it again.

"Several different kinds of magic compiled into one, all done by one mind," Levy whispered. "Just the thought of that is *terrifying*." She looked up when she heard Freed take in a sharp breath from her side. "Freed?" Levy asked, noticing that he was staring at something in the table. "Freed, what is...?" Her voice trickled off in shock when she saw what Freed was staring at.

There, next to the other Zodiac keys and the pictures of the runes on Lucy's skin, Loke's key quietly sat, glowing weakly in response.

"Oh my god," Levy breathed, taking a step back. "Loke...? How is that possible?"

Freed stared at the key, spooked, before his eyes glanced at the other Zodiac keys. It dawned on him then. "There's no runes on his key," he said, nearly slapping himself.

"Levy, *there are no runes on his key*."

"But it doesn't make sense!" Levy said hysterically. "How is he able to communicate through his key when he can't even pass through here? His magic is connected to Lucy's magic, and Lucy's magic is currently being suppressed the hell out of because of those damn runes!"

"Exactly!" Freed said, clapping his hands together. "*That's* why he can communicate! It's *passive*, using the key or object. He's not using any of his actual magic right now, he's just communicating through his key, an object that acts as a conduit between worlds, instead of passing through the Gates! Levy, passing through the Gates requires that Loke tap into Lucy's magic as well because it's *active* use of magic, not passive." Turning to the key, he asked, "Right, Loke? When you manipulate your key, are you using any of your magic or of Lucy's?"

The key glowed again, and Freed excitedly looked at Levy, who was still staring at the key with wide eyes. "Okay, okay," she said, shaking herself from her stupor. "So that's possible. That means— what? We can communicate with Loke—"

"Ask him questions," Freed finished, his spine straightening. Levy gestured for him to start. "Loke-san, is it alright with you if we ask you questions from the very beginning?"

"Blink once for yes, two for no," Levy supplied, and the both of them watched with bated breath as Loke's key glowed once.

*Yes.*

Levy and Freed exchanged triumphant grins. "Do you know where Lucy was first captured?" *Yes.* "Was it in Hargeon?" They key blinked twice— *No.*

"Then Magnolia?" Levy whispered, her stomach dropping when the key glowed once weakly, almost despondently. From the corner of her eye, she saw Freed run a hand through his hair, the single action betraying his agitation. Though they all had suspected early on that Lucy had been captured near Magnolia, if not in the city itself, it still hurt to have those suspicions confirmed. After all, Magnolia was Fairy Tail's turf, and they hadn't even *realized* Lucy was kidnapped until a month after.

"Loke-san," Freed spoke up, his voice gentle, "I don't mean to be accusing, but is there a reason why you couldn't pass through the Gates in the beginning to help Lucy-san with escaping?" When there was no response from Loke, taking it as either confusion or an inability to reply, Freed rephrased his line of questioning. "When Miss Lucy was first captured, were there any runes on her body that could have prevented you from passing through the Gates within the first month?"

*Yes.*

"So," Freed said softly, voice calm despite the circumstances, "the runes have been on Lucy's body since the beginning."

"That doesn't make sense though," Levy said, the fierce scowl on her face surprising Freed. "The runes that we actually understood heavily implied that they were meant for a two-part set, meaning that there *had* to have been runes on the keys beforehand or around the same time the runes were drawn on to Lucy's body. But Loke, there are no runes on yours when we found you. It doesn't make sense."

Freed absorbed the valid point Levy had, his mind whirling through numerous possibilities. He closed his eyes. "Maybe the mage modified what he wrote later on."

Levy stared at him. "How would that even be possible?" she asked. "You can't just *erase* runes you write on someone's body. Freed, those runes were practically *scars* on Lucy's skin." Levy's eyes welled with tears. "That means that the mage used a sharp object to *cut* them into her skin. You can't reverse that."

Freed looked grim. "I don't know," he admitted, his agitation bleeding into the words he forced out of his mouth. They were getting answers straight from possibly the only witness besides Lucy herself, and yet, they were gaining more questions than answers.

Whoever the mage behind the runes was, they were much, *much* stronger and intelligent than what Levy and Freed originally pegged them to be. What had started out as a quest to get more answers and a possible solution was leading them to a darker path of despair.

"Great," Levy mumbled under her breath, voicing Freed's own worry and annoyance. "More questions. Just what we needed." Rubbing her forehead, she exhaled sharply, forcing herself to move past her frustration.

*'Bigger picture, Levy,'* she thought to herself.

"Loke," she said, addressing the key, "after Lucy dropped your key in Hargeon, did you feel a substantial change in your connection with Lucy? A change in your magic or maybe the contract?" There was no response, and Levy thought of a way to put context to her question.

So, she asked, "Loke, you're able to feel Lucy's magic through the contract she has with you, right?" *Yes.* "So after Lucy dropped you off, did you feel that connection being suppressed or change?" There were a couple moments of no response, before the key glowed once, weakly, as if unsure.

Levy turned to Freed. "That must have been when the mage revised the spell and added them to the other keys," she explained to him. "Loke, were you able to know the approximate time it took in between Lucy dropping you in Hargeon to the change in your connection with Lucy?"

*No.*

"Damn," Levy muttered, scratching her head. Though she couldn't think of anything to do with that information yet, it still would've been nice to know to fill in the blanks of Lucy's capture.

"Wait," Freed said, holding up his hand before Levy could continue, "Loke, just to clarify... after Lucy dropped your key in Hargeon, when you felt the connection between you and Lucy change. What, exactly, is that change? Was it like something *suppressing* the magic contract, or was it the magic for the contract that changed? Blink once for the former, twice for the latter."

Two blinks.

"Wait, *what?*" Levy exclaimed. "Her magic *changed*, not just suppressed?" The key weakly glowed once. "That's not good. That's *really* not good," she repeated, her eyes wide as she looked at Freed, his own expression mirroring her distress. "Before, we thought that the runes were just suppressing Lucy's magic, like the mage erected some form of barrier or shield around it so she won't be able to access it. But like you said, Loke, they're also *hacking* into Lucy's magic and twisting and modifying it to do their bidding, and Freed, my god, what do we *do?*"

Freed just stared at her despondently, his fingernails digging into the wooden table. Bit by bit, their hope for solving the mystery of the runes dwindled as more and more questions popped up. "I truly do not know, Levy," he whispered, ashamed.

Levy released a shuddering breath, closing her eyes. Turning back to the key, she asked Loke, "Do you know if that change is permanent?"

No response.

Freed clarified, "You don't know?" The key glowed sadly in response.

"We need to tell the Master as soon as possible. Every single development, even if—" Levy began, but Freed held up his hand.

"Wait," Freed said, his eyes suddenly gaining new light. "That change to Lucy's magic, Loke-san. Was it an internal change in Lucy's magic itself or as if the change happened because of an outside force?" Levy shot him a confused look, so Freed clarified, "Did an external, outside force facilitate that change, rather. Once for the former, twice for the latter."

The key blinked twice.

"An outside force?" Levy pondered out loud. "What, like another person's magic?" Once the word's were out of her mouth and floated around the air for a few moments, Levy's eyes widened, and her hands flew up to her mouth, understanding dawning in her eyes.

Freed nodded at her silent question, and when Loke's key glowed once in response to Levy's exclamation, Freed continued with his questioning, "So, just to clarify Loke, that magic is the reason to the change in Lucy's magic and the reason why you can't come here to Earthland? The *magic* behind the runes, I mean."

*Yes.*

"Freed—"

Holding up his hand, Freed kept his eyes glued to the key. "Can you feel that magic, Loke? As in, actually able to distinguish it from Lucy's magic?"

*Yes.*

"Which means that you can feel the magic signature?"

*Yes.*

"And thus, you're able to distinguish, to *feel* and know the mage behind that magic, yes?"

*Yes.*

"The next question is a bit of a stretch, but it's imperative that we know." Taking a deep breath, Freed launched into the question. "Tell me, Loke— whoever wrote these runes and whoever kidnapped Miss Lucy: are they the same person?"

*Yes.*

Hope slowly blooming in her chest, Levy could only watch in stupefied silence as Freed practically began to bounce on his heels at the revelation, leaning forward as his eyes bored into Loke's key. "So," Freed said, almost triumphantly, "are you telling me that you know and can identify whoever captured Miss Lucy from the beginning of her disappearance?"

The key glowed once.

Yes.

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Makarov was just about ready to tear what remained of his hair from his scalp.

Here he was, forced to do mandatory monthly paperwork, while one of his beloved children laid helpless on a hospital bed, finally *awake*, with her captors refusing to cooperate with authorities. He should be out there, doing more to help progress the case that was slowly becoming stagnant with little to no developments, and yet here he was, stuck behind his damn desk, doing meaningless *paperwork* required of all guild masters to complete.

Still, he believed in his grandson, who he'd sent out in his place, knowing that Laxus would only be driven mad if he were to do the paperwork instead of Makarov.

Makarov rubbed his forehead, his mind thinking back to two days ago, when news of Lucy waking up hit him out of nowhere. Makarov had already sent Laxus on his way to aiding the Rune Knights in their last stretch of tunnels investigation nearly half a day before he'd received word about Lucy, and he knew that Laxus wouldn't be back for a few days at the most. By then, quite some time would have already passed since Lucy's awakening, and Makarov knew that Laxus would throw a fit once he realized that he hadn't been there for Lucy when she woke up.

Sighing, he refocused his mind back to the paper he was halfway finished in filling out when the door slammed open. Makarov jumped, scrambling to fix the tipping jar of ink, and breathed a sigh of relief when he caught it just in time. Turning to the doorway with a scowl on his face, ready to rip into whoever disturbed him with a few choice words, Makarov caught sight of his grandson leaning against the doorway, a large smirk on the young blond's face.

"S'up gramps," he said, holding his hand up in greeting, that wretched smirk only widening when the blond caught sight of the mess of papers on Makarov's desk.

Makarov rolled his eyes. "I'm half-tempted to force you to finish these papers for me, young man." He smiled in triumph when the wicked smirk on Laxus' face was immediately wiped away at his words.

Laxus crossed his arms. "You wouldn't dare," he grumbled before pushing himself off from the doorway and stepped into Makarov's office, closing the door behind him.

Turning back to the papers, Makarov dipped his quill in ink and continued to write, mentally warring himself when he should mention that Lucy was finally out of her coma. Deciding it was best to be briefed, Makarov asked Laxus as casually as he could, "So how was it?"

Lexus sighed, rubbing his face. "The tunnels just ended out of nowhere," he said, plopping onto the chair across Makarov's desk. "There's a barrier against the wall, which prevented us from continuing, but we couldn't penetrate it at all. Couldn't even get a crack in it." His jaw clenched, remembering the ominous glow of the runes remaining constant as the Rune Knights tried counter-spell after counter-spell.

"Gramps, that barrier— it's got its base in Rune magic."

Makarov's movements froze at the statement before he slowly looked up at the blond. "What?" he said, hearing the implication behind Lexus' words but not able to believe it.

"I think whoever made that barrier was the same person who carved that spell on Lucy and her keys." *Oh shit*, Makarov thought, lips pursing.

"That barrier is still active?"

"Yeah, and it's really strong. One of the strongest the Rune Knights ever encountered, they'd said." Then, Lexus took a deep breath. "But Gramps, that's not the worst part."

Makarov stared at Lexus, noting his tense shoulders and stony expression. Setting the quill down, his eyes uncharacteristically serious, Makarov quietly said, "Lexus, tell me everything."

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## ***Two Days Prior***

### ***In the Outskirts of Cedar Springs***

Lexus crackled into existence near a boulder, surprising a small group standing nearby. Holding up his hand as a peace gesture, he began to look around, searching for the telltale robes of the Rune Knights leading the team. Catching sight of three prominent Knights standing underneath a large cedar tree, surrounded by a many others.

Walking up to them, he waved in greeting. The tallest officer caught sight of him immediately and sighed. "Took you long enough," she said gruffly, crossing her arms in annoyance.

Lexus shrugged, the epitome of blase coolness. "You called for me a bit late, with a location quite a distance away from the closest train station," he said, unable to keep the bite from his voice. "So, I just flew the rest of the way here instead." And what a distance it was. It was enough to hold off using his magic for maybe a day until it was back in shape. Really, it was a miracle he was still standing.

An older male with silvery hair wearing a white coat with the insignia of the Fioran government looked up and started to walk towards the large, bulking mage. The man handed Lexus a pill and a small water bottle. "That should help with fatigue," he said before sticking his hand out. "The name's Xander Li, senior Tactics adviser to the Security Council."

Popping the pill into his mouth, Laxus nodded his thanks, shaking Xander's hand and thankful Xander at least seemed easy enough to work with. After all, out of all the people gathered here, all prominent no doubt, Xander was the only one who'd bothered to help. "Laxus Dreyar," he said. "Lightning Dragon Slayer, grandson to Makarov Dreyar, master of the guild Fairy Tail."

If Xander was impressed, he didn't show it. In fact, despite his pleasant countenance and soothing voice, he didn't show much emotion at all. "Will Master Dreyar be coming as well?"

"Unfortunately, no. But now"—Laxus turned to the Knights officers—"we should probably get going. Wouldn't want to waste *more* time, after all." Unable to help himself, Laxus' eyebrow rose, sent pointedly to the woman who'd caustically greeted him earlier.

Normally, he would've had the grace to keep his usual stoic demeanor and avoid petty disputes. However, being back at Cedar Springs was enough to set Laxus on edge and thus, really petty, his lower magic reserves notwithstanding. Though the town itself was beautiful with kind and generous people, Cedar Springs reminded him of what Lucy had had to endure, along with several other innocents—men, women, children. Just the thought of it sent an unpleasant crawling sensation on his skin.

And yet, here he was now, traipsing in the tunnels and hallways that had held Lucy captive for more than a year. It wasn't as dreary as when he'd first stepped foot there, and there were several light sources the Rune Knights had set up during past investigations of the underground tunnels. However, the lights did nothing to assuage that crawling, itchy feeling that covered his body like moss on a tree. If anything, it'd worsened it, the dancing shadows cast by the flickering light giving another dimension of eerie to the tunnels.

"So," Laxus said casually to distract himself as they walked through the damned tunnels, "why did you want to work with my Gramps with this? You seemed pretty adamant that Fairy Tail stay out of Rune Knight investigation when we first found the ring about a month back."

Xander Li and another woman with dark frizzy hair next to him turned to Laxus, exchanging quick glances. They seemed to mentally communicate before the woman gave a terse nod, walking forward a bit faster and leaving Xander and Laxus to their own devices. "An egregious error on their part," Xander acknowledged, gaining the attention of one of the Rune Knights, who gave Xander a discreet, dirty look.

Noticing it, Xander's eyebrows rose challengingly in the Knight's direction. "Am I wrong, lieutenant?" he said coldly, and the budding respect Laxus felt for the man quickly turned into admiration.

He rather liked Xander, Laxus mused.

The tips of the Rune Knight's ears turned red as he shook his head quickly. "No sir," he said gruffly, turning back to his previous discussion with another person in the group.

Xander pursed his lips, but didn't comment any further. Returning his attention to Laxus, he said, "I apologize on the Rune Knight's behalf. Had Officer Doranbolt and a few other Magic Council members not intervened, perhaps Fairy Tail would have not been allowed part of

investigations. I, with a few others in both the Security Council and Queen Hisui's own council, naturally agreed with their request."

Lexus was stunned. Despite their commonality in magic, the Magic Council— more specifically the Rune Knights— often refused having guilds interfere and join in their investigations, and to have not just one but what seemed like quite a few Magic Council members vouch for them was hard for him to wrap his head around. Which was why Lexus asked, "But *why*?"

The walls that had intrinsically been around Xander's eyes lowered a bit, and he gave Lexus an unfathomably understanding look. "You are Fairy Tail," he said simply, "a guild well-known across Fiore for the loyalty and love members share with each other. With a force behind us like that, how can we not succeed?" He gave Lexus a sideways look, something akin to amusement glinting in his wise eyes. "Officially, adding Fairy Tail to the investigation is to increase numbers and resources. But in reality? Take it as a thank you for all that you've done for Fiore and its citizens. Without you, we would've never found the biggest underground ring plaguing Fiore for a while now."

Lexus found himself speechless, a myriad of emotions threatening to burst through. After the Rainjinshuu's capture of the human trafficking ring, Lexus had been frustrated and angered beyond belief when he'd found out that the Rune Knights had essentially cut Fairy Tail off from helping with the human kidnapping cases. He'd wanted to do something, dammit, especially when it was made clear that Lucy's original kidnapper had managed to escape and that none of the ring perpetrators had yet to crack on that person's location.

Even with the little to no progress the Rune Knights had made with the perps, Lexus and Makarov had been unable to convince the Knights to allow them to interrogate the criminal captives.

Perhaps now that Fairy Tail was now officially part of investigations, Lexus could finally confront the criminals who'd hurt Lucy and Nasir and all the others across Fiore.

There was a companionable silence between the two men before Lexus finally broke it. "Where are we going then?"

The dark-haired woman who'd been with Xander, apparently hearing Lexus' question, hung back and eventually matched the two men's pace at their side. "The Knights have been investigating these tunnels ever since taking down the nationwide human trafficking underground. It's been about three weeks," the woman informed Lexus.

"Wait, it's been that long, and they're *still* not finished surveying it?" Lexus was *not* happy, to say the least.

"In their defense," the woman said neutrally, "their primary focus was to reconcile victims with families and to trace victims potentially smuggled out of Fiore, which, luckily, many have been found and well on their way to reintegration into society. Anyways, this task had not been simple, and there is still much to complete in that regard. As such, they could only devote a few teams in exploring these tunnels."

"However," Xander continued, shooting the dark-haired woman a subtle, withering look, "considering that these tunnels seemed endless, it was poor oversight on their part in excluding Fairy Tail from this investigation. After all, Fairy Tail has the manpower *and* the drive to complete this investigation quickly."

"Thank you," Laxus exhaled, tempted to throw his arms up. That had been the main argument he and Gramps had made to the reticent Rune Knights, that Fairy Tail would be able to offer them aid to areas where numbers were lacking. Unfortunately, the Knights had seemed to take offense and were thus even more adamant in their refusal.

"Truthfully, we haven't found many clues in these hallways once it was cleared of all victims. Just a few objects and tech created by the ones we have captive," the woman said. "But after Doranbolt's and Xander's efforts to rally the Council into employing Fairy Tail's help, we figured that including you and Master Dreyar with investigating the last stretches of these tunnels was a good way to start." She tilted her head, eyes meeting Laxus' own. "Once finished, the Rune Knights agreed—"

"Albeit reluctantly," Xander cut in, smirking at the woman.

It was her turn to shoot Xander an irritated look, but she continued as if Xander hadn't cut off, "They agreed to include you in interrogating the ringleaders."

A dark thrill shot down Laxus' spine. "Finally," he said, fists clenching at his side. He'd been waiting for that day since the Rune Knights had taken them into custody. "Gramps told me the criminals refused to talk."

Xander and the dark-haired woman exchanged looks, once again communicating in a way that passed over Laxus' head. "It has the Knights flummoxed," the woman admitted. "Frankly put, pain seems to, er... *excite* them instead of forcing them to comply to the Knight's interrogation. And, well, pain is an important factor in extraction methods our teams are used to."

Laxus grimaced, catching her drift. "Lovely."

A look of disgust passed over Xander's face. "We know that you've expressed an interest in joining the interrogation team," he said after a few moments. "However, some of the best intelligence extractors had wanted to try their hand before including you and Master Makarov in interrogation. Which is why we've put you here for the meantime."

"I wouldn't worry about waiting," the woman said. "The tunnels investigations teams would be here for three days at most. After that, once we've cleared the red tape, Fairy Tail would officially be placed with the interrogation teams. Give it about a week once the tunnels are finished."

Laxus made a strangled sound at the back of his throat. "I hate bureaucracy," he mumbled, earning dark snorts from the other two.

"Believe me, we know," the woman said before cocking her head to the side. "Oh, I don't think I've introduced myself, Mr. Dreyar. My name is Jana Virtanen, Defensive Magic

specialist in the Fioran Security Council." Laxus swallowed his shock and awe as he shook her hand.

Jana Virtanen was a brilliant person and an even more brilliant mage. She'd been a high contender for one of the Ten Wizard Saints, with whispers of her becoming the Fifth God of Ishgar, but for some unknown reason, had refused any titles tied to her name and turned to work in the Security Council. Still, her magical prowess was practically legendary yet shrouded in mystery.

Glancing at both Jana and Xander, both some of the most powerful people he'd ever met—and he'd met his fair share of powerful people, both mages and non-mages alike—for the first time in a long time, Laxus Dreyar felt small and insignificant. Still, he was nothing if annoyingly stubborn as Gramps so often would say, so he said as confidently as he could, "Laxus Dreyar, grandson and protegee of Master Makarov Dreyar of Fairy Tail."

Jana gave him a smirk, a mischievous light appearing in her dark blue eyes that surprised Laxus. For a woman in such a high and important seat in the Fioran government, she'd seemed so... *normal*, and, well, awesome. "Well then, Mr. Laxus Dreyar," she drawled,

"Welcome to the team."

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Laxus was starting to get annoyed. As the hours passed and day turned into night, and the group encountered more and more forks in the tunnels, the numbers slowly dwindled as people split up into teams. Sometimes, teams would come back to join others when they'd reached dead ends; sometimes they didn't, most likely since they'd yet to reach an end.

It was giving him a headache keeping track. Glancing at Xander and Jana, who were mapping out the tunnels in notebooks they kept in their coat pockets, he marveled over the fact that they didn't seem confused at all.

He'd been with them the entire time, and they'd drawn a map of the entire underground tunnels based on the accounts of the other teams. It was admirable, truly.

As the hours dragged on, more and more people began rejoining them once more, individual teams convening with Jana and Xander, giving them detailed accounts of their findings. When the group regained its previous numbers walking in, Xander cleared his throat, and a hush fell over the group. "All right, men—"

"And women!" Jana called out, earning a few whoops and laughs from other members.

Xander rolled his eyes before acknowledging, "And women, I apologize. Team, we're now at the final stretch of these tunnels."

Somewhere to his side, Laxus heard someone mumble, "Fucking finally."

"I know it's been a long few weeks of investigating these tunnels," Xander said. "Once we are finished and return to HQ, every one of you will be subjected to a memory probe of the past few weeks' investigation. Understood?"

"Yes sir!"

"Good. Now let's continue, team."

When Xander returned to his and Jana's side, Laxus asked him, "Will I have to be probed as well?"

Xander shook his head. "No. You've only been here for about 40 hours, and Jana and I have been at your side the entire time." He paused. "However, expect a call once these investigations are finished. You would need to be briefed about the captives and progress made by the interrogations teams."

Laxus' eyes widened. "So soon?" he said, surprised. "You told me that it would take a couple weeks after the tunnel investigations."

Jana and Xander exchanged pointed looks until Xander shook his head at Jana and raised his eyebrows at the blond. "Are you questioning my orders, Mr. Dreyar?"

Laxus' jaw stayed open for a second before he straightened, teeth clicking together as he regained his composure. "No sir," he said quickly. "I'll anticipate the call as soon as possible."

Xander nodded, satisfied. "Good," he said.

Jana elbowed Xander at the side. "Looks like you've still got it, Commander Xander."

"I know, I'm the best," was Xander's response, and Jana rolled her eyes skyward.

Laxus watched the exchange with curious eyes, debating with himself if he should ask what was on his mind. Although Laxus already felt a kinship for the two seniors-in-rank, he hadn't known them for long. He might be overstepping boundaries.

Still, he was about to open his mouth to ask, curiosity getting the better of him, when the commotion from the front and a shout gained their attention.

"Commander Li!"

All amusement fled Xander's eyes, retreating behind the walls, and he turned to the panting Rune Knight who called his name. "Private Lauder," he greeted the Knight, "what seems to be the problem?"

The Knight quickly saluted Xander before launching into an explanation, "We reached the end of the tunnels. However, it's not actually the end of them."

When it became clear that the private wouldn't say more, Xander said irritably, "Explain yourself, Private."

As Xander spoke, Laxus noticed another Rune Knight catch up to Lauder, eyes blown wide in panic. "What Private Lauder means, sir," she began, "is that a Runic barrier is preventing us from continuing our investigation."

From where he was standing, Laxus couldn't see Xander's expression, but he saw the private flinch and the other Rune Knight stiffen from fear.

"Show me."

By now, the others in the group were making their way towards the front, and when Xander stormed forward with the two who'd alerted him, they began to disperse to allow their commander to continue ahead.

With a quick look at Jana, Laxus followed.

His jaw dropped when he saw it.

Up ahead, a wall of swirling silver loomed over the gathering people, giving off a dim light that gave Laxus the chills. Upon closer inspection though...

Laxus sharply drew in a breath, his heart stuttering and the hairs prickling on his arms.

There, upon the opaque, murky silver glow of magic were angry, purple runes.

Runes that inexplicably reminded him of the ones on Lucy's keys and skin.

Laxus heard Xander and Jana command the mages in the group, and soon, flashes of magic lit up the entire hallway. Counter-spells to Runic barrier spells, along with others Laxus wasn't quite as familiar with. All trying to take down the barrier that prevented them from continuing their investigation.

All of them failing.

"Dammit!" he heard Jana curse, her fist hitting the magic barrier angrily. It held strong, not reacting in the slightest, no ripples extending from where her fist hit. That was when Laxus realized just how strong that barrier was.

Runic counter-spells only reversed the effects of existing runic spells. As such, any modification to the Runic spell would require a slightly different counter-spell as well.

That wouldn't attest to the spell's raw strength, but, rather, the mage's ingenuity and knowledge of Runic magic.

However, what most if not all Runic barrier spells held in common was that the barrier would still react to touch. After all, it would need to in order to prevent things from passing through, people or wild animals especially. Laxus always likened it to a stiff, mesh trap. Refusing to budge and allow anything through, but still vibrating and flexible to those trapped inside.

But to have no effect, no reaction to a direct hit? That was raw fucking *power*.

Laxus stepped forward, his hand reaching up to touch the Runes. The silver magic beneath was murky, but Laxus could still see through it, could still see the continuation of the hallway and the darkness within. Not for the first time on this mission, it gave Laxus the chills, and he wondered what was so important on the other side.

"Why is there even a barrier here?" Laxus wondered, turning to Xander, who was staring at the barrier, visibly troubled.

"I think I know why," the man said, shaking his head, face pale. "This isn't good. In fact, it's devastating, and a threat to the security of the entire kingdom of Fiore. How have we not encountered this before?!" Turning to one of the Rune Knights officers, Xander told him, "Inform Queen Hisui and the FBSU of this at once! I need soldiers here, *now*. If this barrier falls, the kingdom of Fiore might find herself infiltrated and under attack within weeks at best, hours at worst!"

The command took Laxus by surprise, and he watched in stunned fascination as a flurry of activity erupted between the Rune Knights, three higher-ranking officers immediately walking to the sidelines and pulling out comm devices and Jana, stoic and cold, moved to the side, scribbling frantically into a small notebook. "Xander, what is happening?"

The man's face was unreadable, his voice crisp and succinct. "The Fioran border is one of the most secure places in all of Earthland. Miles and miles of indestructible Ischyron, more than two feet thick, reinforced with magical barriers stretched across the entire border. Daily, guarded by hundreds upon thousands of well-trained soldiers, mages and hand-to-hand combatants alike, all experts in various defense stratagems. It's a place that shows our military prowess, while promoting neutrality and cementing our stance on defensive peace to the international community."

Laxus nodded, well-aware and well-versed about the security measures of the Northeastern Fioran border. He'd read up about it when he was a young teen obsessed with power, often scorning the commendation and respect Fiore received for its defense policies. To the younger him, these measures had not been enough and not worthy of praise, as he'd believed that Fiore should have been devoted to more offensive tactics.

Still, Laxus wondered where Xander was going with this.

Xander continued, "That border is our first line of defense in a state of war, defense that has been sustained for decades now. Without it, if destroyed, Fiore is vulnerable to hostile foreign forces. Truthfully, however, we haven't been too worried. Throughout the decades, it has been under attack by few foreign powers, and yet has to fall."

Xander turned to Laxus, grave-faced. "We've always focused our attention on the ground," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "That's what we've eventually come to expect really: attacks and infiltration through either the sea or on land. We'd never even *fathomed* underground methods. Hadn't found the need to, for the most part. Which leads us to this problem." He gestured to the glowing barrier. "That barrier right there is a threat to Fiore's security," he said, echoing his previous words.

"But why?" Laxus pressed. He'd had an inkling, but he prayed it was wrong.

Xander's eyes hardened into flint at his question. His next words sent chills down Laxus' spine.

"Because right now, this barrier is the only thing separating Fiore from the country of Seven. And it's one that has not been erected by Fioran authorization."

*It's one that was raised by an unknown mage— an operative most likely from Seven.*

## Chapter End Notes

So ends Arc 1, and into Arc 2. I hope y'all enjoyed it!

Past few months have been insane, and I hope y'all are safe and content. Hang in there, guys. Take care always, I believe in you xx

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